

Dear Chavraya,

Once, while teaching and serving as school rabbi in a Jewish day school, I witnessed a student hurl an unopened container of yogurt to the ground during an outdoor lunch. The sound and sight of the creamy splatter produced for this student the sought after glee and momentary rise in status from his assembled peers. Feeling a mix of sadness, pique, and compassion, it was clear that I needed to respond. At that moment the bell rang, students dispersed and I approached. Calling to the student, who, of course, had hoped to blend into the crowd and disappear, I motioned to return to the oozing mess. I asked some of the obvious questions about motive that adults would tend to ask, quickly realizing from his face that he could never acknowledge the real reasons, and if he could even recognize them it would be far too painful to acknowledge them. We talked briefly about *bal tashchit*, the Jewish law prohibiting wanton waste, and we talked a bit about ways of getting attention. Offering to help and hoping to encourage the boy to take responsibility, I asked him who should clean up. His response stung. I felt something splatter within me. He said quite matter-of-factly that the janitor should clean it up. This was now more than a simple lunchtime incident, more than a matter of cleaning up the sidewalk. The ante had been raised. The shattered vessel of a yogurt container opened the possibility of a teachable moment, revealing sparks of a life-lesson in moral education and human dignity.

Sadly, the intrinsic value of a human being had been lost on this student. The janitor's role was simply to clean up after others, adolescent whim to be his work order. The school janitor happened to be a person of great wisdom and spiritual depth around whom students and faculty would often gather. For all of his insecurity among peers, the student had a sense of entitlement that allowed him to see the janitor as being of lower standing. An attitude already in need of being uprooted from a young person's soul, this twisted psychic vine did not grow in a vacuum. Its seed came in all the subtle messages of a society that honors status and fosters hierarchy.

Equality in regard to labor depends on recognition of the inherent equality of every member of society. The dignity of labor depends on the dignity accorded to the laborer and to the importance of the job done by each person. Every intentional gathering of people as a community becomes a microcosm of the larger society. In a small, beautiful book called "B'nei Machshavah Tovah/Children of Good Intention," the Piaseczno Rebbe, later to become the rebbe of the Warsaw ghetto, speaks to the holy *chavraya* of the community they seek to create. Toward achieving a society whose members are equal and without hierarchy, he writes as the first principle: *our community is not a community for the sake of increasing power...; therefore, our community is not a community in which there shall be disbursed honors, l'chalek kibbudim, according to who is at the top and who comes next, and so on....*

This week's Torah portion, *Parashat Vayakhel*, contains the Torah's quintessential teaching about community. *Vayakhel* is a verb from which comes *k'hillah*, the word for community as an intentional gathering of people in common purpose. The common purpose around which the people gather in this portion and coalesce as a community is the building of the *mishkan*, the desert sanctuary.

Overflowing with words of inclusion and of being joined together, equal recognition is given in *Vayakhel* to the contributions made by each person, both in material goods and in personal labor. In an exquisitely beautiful teaching, the Izbicka rebbe underscores the equality of labor that joined all together in the building of the *mishkan* and from all of its diverse parts made the sanctuary one. His teaching offers an inspiring model toward the building of society as a holy task: *In the building of the sanctuary, all Israel were joined together in their hearts without any arrogance of one for another...; for God's presence would not rest among them if even one tent peg was lacking, therefore none were able to boast one to another at all, not even the one who made the holy ark to the one who made the courtyard tent pegs.*

These teachings of Torah come as a reminder of the sacred web of human interconnectedness. At a time when unions and the most vulnerable among us are under assault, the reading of *Parashat Vayakhel* comes at a time when its message is much needed. There are various opportunities in the coming week to act on these teachings in regard to immediate issues. On Sunday at 1:00 P.M., gathering at Brigham Circle, there is a march in support of the Immokalee farm workers, whose back-breaking labor provides most of the tomatoes we eat. For information and background, please see www.ciw-online.org and the attached flyer. To learn more about the effort in Wisconsin to curb the collective bargaining rights of public employees, please see www.workerjustice.org. You can also read an article on Jewish responses at this link:

<http://www.jta.org/news/article/2011/02/22/2743074/wisconsin-jews-react-to-senate-showdown-with-protests-and-no-comment>.

Commemorating one of the most brutal instances of disregard for the humanity of workers there is a concert of Yiddish music next Sunday, March 6th at 4:00 P.M. at Temple Israel in memory of the victims of the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire. The concert will tell the story of the 146 mostly young women and girls who died in the fire. For information, please go to: bostonjewishmusicfestival.org.

Whether it be through a school yard lesson in cleaning up after ourselves or in hearing the stories of those whose labor puts food on our tables and clothes on our backs, may we come to weave a web of human community that celebrates the dignity of every person and honors all manner of labor. So shall we build the sanctuary together, and from all of its parts make it one.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor