

Dear Chavraya,

They have always been among the most vulnerable, and now even more so. Migrant farm workers are the hidden people whose hands put food on our tables. Decades ago, in a song called "Plane Wreck at Los Gatos" or "Deportee," the great American folk singer Woody Guthrie described the plight of California farm workers and asked the questions still begging to be asked: "Some of us are illegal and some are not wanted, our work contract's out and we have to move on...; they chase us like outlaws, like rustlers, like thieves...; Is this the best way we can grow our big orchards? Is this the best way we can grow our good fruit? To fall like dry leaves to rot on my topsoil, and be called by no name except deportees?"

The evil of dehumanization knows no boundaries or borders. Responding to the cry of one person, or one people, or one group is a response to all. I took that to heart this week as I got up from all there is to do here, from all there is to do everywhere amidst so much fear and heartache. I spent much of this week in southwest Florida, travelling to the dry and dusty town of Immokalee with a group of rabbis through T'ruah (<http://www.truah.org/>), a rabbinic human right organization, to meet with farm workers, organizers, and one grower. Our focus was on the tomato fields and the work of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers.

A worker-based human rights organization, the CIW is an affirmation of what is possible when people come together for the sake of a greater good. It is an inspiration that is so deeply needed today, a reminder that we will get there no matter how long the way, no matter the gun thugs or the chains, the brutality, or the hate, or the greed, no matter the set-backs encountered along the way. The CIW began organizing in southwest Florida in 1993, insisting that workers themselves needed to be at the heart of the movement. Determined to avoid the trap of hypocrisy that has tarnished too many social justice organizations, the CIW has addressed from the beginning the breadth of issues that contribute to dehumanization in the lives of farm workers, addressing human trafficking and gender-based violence, for instance, as integral to its organizing for better wages hours, and work safety.

Working initially with growers, the CIW realized that it needed to foster a partnership between workers, growers, and corporate buyers. Through the Fair Food Program, the CIW works to sign on corporate buyers who will then refuse to buy from growers who refuse to join the program. Among the participating corporate buyers are Subway, Whole Foods, Walmart, Taco Bell, and Trader Joe's. The primary campaign focus right now is Wendy's. Following a visit to the fields to see the nature of the work and the growing, we went to demonstrate at a local Wendy's. The grower we met with was the first to sign on to the Fair Food Program. It was a deeply moving meeting as he described the imperative he felt as a Jew to do what is right, having deeply engaged in study of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, determining then to do what is right.

Meeting with a retired judge who heads the Fair Foods Standards Council, she asked, "Where would you rather be right now than standing with the people

who are most vulnerable?" As we all continued to process the pain and fear felt since the election, I realized the truth in her words. We were privileged one evening to witness a meeting of CIW workers. As the discussion unfolded in Spanish, one of the staff members sat with us to translate. The meeting was primarily a text study of a CIW letter written following the election. At many points I felt tears welling as I listened to people who truly are the most vulnerable, hearing their courage, their effort to understand what is going on, their concern for their children, and their determination to keep bending the arc of the moral universe toward justice. That teaching from Rev. Martin Luther King forms the starting point of the letter, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." Seeking to ward off despair, someone read from the letter, "The quotation reminds us that, though at times it might seem that progress has grown unbearably slow or even ground to a halt, it never truly stops, and that, when viewed from a sufficient distance, the trajectory of history bends only one way — toward greater freedom and equality." From people who could so easily be paralyzed by fear, I heard a call to action that night, a call to continue the struggle, reminding each one there, including us, that together we will still see the arc of the moral universe bend toward justice: "If we as Americans are to protect the fragile progress toward ever-greater social justice that we have made across the generations, we must fight together, in a broad and inclusive movement to protect our rights — immigrant rights, women's rights, LGBTQ rights, civil rights, labor rights, our right to health care, our right to religious freedom, our right to a clean and sustainable environment, our right to a fair and equitable economy, and more — our *human* rights. If each of those sectors faces the challenge alone, we will be weak, we will be on the defensive, and we may lose ground. Together, however, *we* can define the agenda, one that fosters a vision of universal human rights, and we can win." Please see the full letter and more about the CIW at this link: <http://www.ciw-online.org/blog/2016/11/the-arc-of-the-moral-universe/>

One woman who spoke with us emphasized that the farm workers want justice, not charity. This is the essence of what *tz'dakah* is, justice not charity. When God considers in this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Vayera*, whether to tell Abraham of God's plan to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, God says that it will be for Abraham and his descendants to "keep the way of God," which we are then told *is to do righteousness and justice/la'asot tz'dakah u'mishpat*. Throughout this portion and in the Haftorah, we are called to hear that challenge and to be prepared to act, especially for the sake of children. Of Yishma'el and his mother Hagar cast away, of Isaac bound on the altar, we are called to act that none be cast away, that none be bound on the altar of zealotry. I heard in all of its immediacy one of the calls of the farm workers in response to the length of their workday, "farm workers have families too." In the Haftorah an unnamed woman pleads with the prophet Elisha to save her children who will be taken away as slaves by creditors. Reading its poignant and prophetic telling this year, I see in my mind the chilling sight of a truck we visited, now a museum, in which farm workers had been held at night in chains, locked inside without food, water, or toilets.

I went to Immokalee to show support for migrant farm workers. I returned inspired by their courage. I came to understand the judge's words in a way that framed the visit and gave it deeper purpose than I could have anticipated, "Where would you rather be right now than standing with the people who are most vulnerable?" As we all feel vulnerable in these bitter days, may we pledge to stand together and draw collective strength as the Coalition of Immokalee Workers has done, and together continue to bend the arc of the moral universe toward justice, promising to keep God's way as given to Abraham, to do *righteousness and justice/tz'dakah u'mishpat*.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor