

## **Jewish-Muslim Comparative Worker Justice**

Interfaith Worker Justice (IWJ) is an organization in the United States that gathers individuals and congregations of different religions to advocate for social justice, specifically for worker justice. Worker justice is broken down into four categories: fair wages, health and safety at work, the right to organize, and immigration and racial justice (“Issues”). The tactic of this organization is to demonstrate how each individual faith advocates for worker justice to compel the faithful to work together to pursue this righteous goal. While IWJ provides a resource with brief references, the aim of this paper is to expound upon and draw comparisons between the approaches to worker justice of Judaism and Islam (“What Faith Groups Say About Worker Justice”). Both traditions advocate for labor justice for all workers regardless of their identities, express the eternal consequences for the employer, and outline the responsibilities of the workers.

One of the most important aspects of Judaism is the shared history of the community. One of the most important aspects of that shared history is being brought from slavery out of the land of Egypt. Another significant portion of their history is the time they spent in exile under the Babylonians. In both of these times, Jews were treated unfairly. Hence, there are many texts within the Jewish tradition that address justice for the worker (Jacobs). Most recently, in the past couple centuries, there have been many Jewish immigrants in the United States who were exploited because they were foreigners (Jacobs). Especially because of these recent experiences, the topic of worker justice is still socially relevant and a pressing issue for the community of Jews within the United States today.

One of the main Biblical verses that inform the Jewish understanding of worker justice is Deuteronomy 24:14-15, which states,

Do not oppress the hired laborer who is poor and needy, whether he is one of your people or one of the sojourners in your land within your gates. Give him his wages in the daytime, and do not let the sun set on them for he is poor, and his life depends on them, let he cry out to God about you, for this will be counted as a sin for you.

This passage conveys multiple significant ideas. The first is that it does not matter whether or not the worker is Jewish. The Jew has a responsibility to treat all workers according the guidelines that God set. This principle is especially significant in the context of the interfaith movement. The basis for interfaith cooperation lies when the individual believer works for justice for all workers, though he or she does it as a response to his or her own scriptures.

Another important idea is that the worker's life depends on his or her wages (Jacobs). Thus, by depriving workers' wages is equivalent to taking their lives. Since murder is prohibited in the Ten Commandments, cheating a worker out of his or her wages would also be prohibited. This applies not only to not giving the workers the pay promised, but also includes not giving the workers a fair wage for the work that they have done (Jacobs). Rabbi Israel Salanter held to this principle when he denied a factory owner kosher certification for the matzah produced. He claimed that the matzah has blood in it because of "the way [he presses his] workers and the demands [he places] on them to be more 'efficient' in their work" (Margulis). Clearly, labor exploitation is equated to physical harm, to the extent of death. This is the responsibility of the employer.

The final notable point is also echoed in Deuteronomy 5:9, "He will cry out to the Lord against and, and you will incur guilt." Employers must treat their employees fairly because if they do not, it will be counted as a sin against them. The employer will be

considered guilty before God and God will punish him or her for it (Greenspan). Too often, employers think that they can exploit workers because there is no one stopping them and they will not face any consequences. These passages remind Jews, though, that even if they are not held accountable immediately, God will not forget and God will punish them on the Day of Judgment, which is more terrifying than any worldly consequence.

On the other hand, the Jewish texts also address how the employee should behave. Specifically, the Talmud addresses obligations to the employee (Perry). Maimonides expressed that

just as the employer is enjoined not to deprive the poor worker of his hire or withhold it from him when it is due, so is the worker enjoined not to deprive the employer of the benefit of this work by idling away his time, a little here and a little there, thus wasting the whole day deceitfully.

Further, day employees, now thought of as hourly laborers, are not allowed to work night and day shifts or share their food and not eating enough food themselves, in both cases weakening their physical state and making them less capable to do the physical labor for which they are hired (Perry). Thus, just as the Jewish employer must treat his or her employees justly, the Jewish worker must work fairly.

Indeed, there are also many Qur'anic verses and hadiths that create guidelines for worker justice for Muslims. Verse 85 of the seventh Surah of the Qur'an, Al-A'raf, states that one must "fulfill the measure and weight and do not deprive people of their due and cause not corruption upon the earth after its reformation" (Kahn). In this verse, Allah is calling his followers to act justly. Not acting justly will provoke corruption around the world. One

hadith expands upon what it means to treat a worker justly (Kahn). According to the Bukhari collection of hadiths, it is reported that the Prophet said,

Your servants/workers are your brothers whom God the most High has placed under your authority. Therefore, a person who has a brother under his authority, should feed him out of that which he eats himself and should dress him with the same kind of clothes which he wears himself; he should not assign work to him which is beyond his capacity, and if you do so, then help him in his work.

This hadith clearly outlines work in accordance with social justice. Though people are put in positions of authority, both employer and employee should have the same economic status. The employer may not profit off of the work of the employee such that there creates a financial gap. Additionally, these workers are to be seen as brothers, as family.

Interpreters emphasize that the hadith does not say that the workers who are of the same faith should be treated as brothers, but any worker in the employ of a Muslim (al-Majid).

Another famous hadith extends upon this principle, saying, "You should pay the laborer his wages before his sweat dries." Since wages are the means of livelihood for the worker, they must be paid promptly and not be continually put off (Kahn). Not only should an employer not neglect to pay the employee, but also he or she should not neglect to pay on time.

The Prophet reportedly warned that there exist consequences for exploitative employees on the Day of Resurrection, the day when Allah will judge and punish those for what they have done (Kahn). The hadith states that the Prophet reported that Allah told him,

I will be an opponent to three types of people on the Day of Resurrection: one who makes a covenant in My name but proves treacherous; one who sells a free person

and eats his price; and one who employs a worker and takes full work from him but does not pay him for his labor.

Similarly to the previously mentioned Jewish text, the employer had reason to treat his or her worker fairly besides common courtesy and respectability. The way that an employer treats his or her workers has eternal consequences, namely, the unjust employer will be punished. This provides additional motivation for a follower of Allah to advocate for worker justice.

Again, like in Judaism, Islam outlines certain obligations of the employee. In the Qu'ran, it says, "fulfill your agreement, surely you will be questioned about it" (17:34). The employee is not to quit in the middle of work without completing what was previously agreed upon (Majeed). Similar to the employer, lack of fulfillment of a contract is something that will be addressed by Allah when Judgment comes. Another verse states, "those who are faithfully true to their trusts (all the duties which Allah has ordained, honesty, moral responsibility and trusts) and to their covenants... those are the inheritors" (23:8,10). Employees must have the highest morals and responsibilities with their jobs because they are not jobs assigned by other humans, but because it is the job that Allah ordained for them (Majeed).

One cannot discuss Muslim views on worker justice and neglect the situation that is occurring in the Middle East. Many countries in that region are currently infamous for poor working conditions and exploitation. Many other Muslims, though, condemn these practices and call for scholars and courts to hold these employers accountable for what they are doing (Kahn). Just like what is occurring in this situation, there exist tensions between theology and practice in every religion. Significantly, though, there are members

within that religion calling for change of the system and injustice. Many actively call and work for justice within their societies.

Within both of these faiths, the texts advocate for worker justice. When the texts condemn the exploitation of workers, both financially and physically, the ideas expressed correlate with IWJs issues of living wage and a healthy and safe environment. Moreover, three similar points can be found in the texts of both traditions. One is that worker justice is not to be extended only to members of one's own faith. Being a just employer is about the employer, it does not depend on the race, gender, or religion of the employee. This point supports the issue of immigration and racial justice that the IWJ addresses. Secondly, justice has eternal consequences. Worker justice does produce better societies, but there is something larger at stake. Both the God of Judaism and Allah of Islam will punish those who treat their workers unfairly. Finally, the workers must work with dignity. They must not cheat their employer by being lazy or unproductive. Thus, the employer does not have to worry about protecting his or her assets because he or she can trust that the workers are doing all they can in their jobs. Since the employer trusts the employees, he or she should have no reason to fear an organization of workers, which includes the final IWJ issue of the right to organization. All of these values of the IWJ exist in both the texts of Judaism and Islam. Thus, it would stand to reason that individuals and congregations of these religions that strive to follow their teachings would advocate for worker's justice in their communities and cooperate with IWJ.

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