

THE SEEDS FOR ECONOMIC JUSTICE:

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Can Jewish study influence economic justice? This was the question for a class composed of people who have not normally studied together: eight students from two rabbinical seminaries – HUC-JIR and the American Jewish University – and eight prominent business leaders from the Los Angeles community.

The Seeds for Economic Justice was an effort to find common ground between those who study the principles of ethical living from classic Jewish texts, and those who live the ethical dilemmas on a daily basis. The course began as an effort to discover from the business community whether Jewish tradition could have legitimate practical application to the situations that confront people in practice, and the belief of the two instructors that students who learn classic values ought to confront the realities of business decisions, balance sheet values, and the need to meet a payroll.

Here are some of the dilemmas explored by the class:

Dr. Aryeh Cohen (center) and the community of learners

(opposite page:) Dr. William Cutter (left) listens as a point is strongly argued by business leader Arthur Stern



JEWISH TRADITION AND THE SEARCH FOR REALISTIC GOALS

Darhei Shalom

The Barenbaums (a fictional name) own a small chain of profitable stores in western Pennsylvania. Each year they hire nearly a hundred local citizens to supplement their sales staff for Easter and recreational business. Heavy rains have created a business shortfall over the winter, and the three owners of the business (grandfather, son, and grandson) feel they may not be able to afford the extra hiring this year. (Of course there are plenty of assets, but we are considering this year's business.) Grandson, freshly out of Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, is the most cautious, but grandfather has maintained this tradition for 47 years, and is willing to take the loss in the interest of *Darhei Shalom* (the Barenbaum family's status in the community and community relations). What should they do? Would such

a family really consult with their rabbi – not about the economics of the decision, but about the effect on community spirit? From what principles might the rabbi draw his/her advice?

The Customs of the Place

The conscience of a Jewish manufacturer is troubled because she can outsource some of the work of her factory to a firm that probably hires undocumented workers. The customs of this industry are quite literally not to ask questions. Should she 'ask questions?' or follow the customs of the locale in which her business operates? What is the standing of 'The Customs of the Place'? Can she justify this outsourcing on the grounds that at least some workers will make a steady income? The *Mishnah* addresses the hiring of workers from a town that has more relaxed worker standards than the town in which the workers will be hired to work.

When do you pay more than you absolutely have to?

Do Jewish workers have a right to strike? An obligation to do so? Shall they protect the work of the less efficient or productive fellow workers? Shall owners of very profitable businesses be encouraged to pay salaries that exceed the "going rate" in like industries in one's region? And what of the fore-

man who is delegated to hire on behalf of the owner? The *Mishnah* and *Talmud* deal in some detail with the obligations of the delegated employer.

What are the obligations upon boards to pay for benefits?

Some public institutions have cut back on benefits for employees on the grounds that the economy is tight, and many businesses have reduced their benefit packages. Mr. Schwartz of the Jewish Family Service believes that the board is obligated to maintain a high standard of benefit payments; the other trustees of Family Service claim that he is being unrealistic, and the current climate is a good one in which to save the institution money. What are the issues one faces from a Jewish perspective? Is asset-based management justified when it is certainly possible for the board to raise more money? The *Mishnah*, *Mishneh Torah*, and *Talmud* are quite clear about protecting the financial stability of private business; what would the tradition say about public institutions?

These questions and more were among those examined in the seminar taught by Professors Aryeh Cohen and William Cutter. The students met weekly to consider Jewish texts and literary and rabbinic theory in depth and in Hebrew. They met once each month in plenary session with business leaders for a consideration of selected texts in English from the *Mishnah*, *Mishneh Torah*, and *Responsa*.

Sometimes, among the business people themselves, a dispute rang out: Does this ancient material really have any use for us today? Of course, it does; after all we are always in need of reminders of a tradition's highest values. Do we have ideals that supercede (or trump) accepted practice? How do I as a rabbinical leader invoke the tradition among people who will say that 'I don't know how the world really operates?' What does one say to a business person who contends that theory is simply too abstract to respond to contemporary situations in the heat of the moment? Do lawyers approach a problem differently than business people?

For their final assignments, the students took on two tasks: attendance at a union meeting

and interviews with workers in regard to the place of the union in their lives; and a final paper that was to be a grant application for a social justice program within a synagogue.

The students arrived at a number of conclusions, including that law is not the sole domain of the state, but an attempt by communities to articulate and live out stories about who we are as a society. Their social justice proposals for synagogues were diverse:



- a program in which the New Year (*Rosh HaShanah*) helps a city council to focus on their notions of an ideal city;
- a program that demonstrates that mistreatment of day workers, who are increasingly being abused, will result in a general reduction in services and quality of life for everyone;
- a program focusing on the dilemma that some congregational members are (fairly) openly taking advantage of certain statutes to underpay workers, and proposing a study group in which business people would openly discuss their business practices with each other.

In the final class, one of the business leaders urged those concerned with workers being underpaid to be bold, to stand up to people engaging in questionable business practices, and a debate ensued. But the discussion ended when Rabbi Leonard Beerman, who attended the sessions and inspired the concept of the course along with Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice, spoke for twenty minutes about his anguish in trying to harmonize his values with the realities of the marketplace in which his congregants have worked. "I live in a very nice home," he said, "but, unfortunately, it has windows and so I see the thorns and thistles that exist outside my neighborhood."

After the meeting with the union and its individual members, a student came to the realization of "what the fight was about. It isn't a fight for salary or benefits, it is a fight to be treated with dignity."

Another student pointed to a memorable statement by a classmate that involved the amounts of money large corporations spend on legal fees in order not to treat workers justly. "It is disturbing to see how easily we forget that we are talking about real human beings and not a nice theory or interesting idea. The instructors remind the students of the relevance of a famous law review article for that distinction between theory and real human beings."

Is Jewish tradition subversive to modern business practice? We learned in this course that aspects of our tradition are actually quite protective, encouraging the endurance of ownership on safe grounds as a way of insuring the stability of society – one of the early meanings of *tikkun olam*, the repairing of our world. We learned that many very hard-headed business people – citizens of prominence and possessors of great material comfort – have strived to make their workplaces more just and dignified for the worker whose voice is not so easy to hear.

At the final session, the group reflected on the fact that the course was premised on a democratic pedagogy in which expertise was respected but was not given a veto. As a result, people who had no background in classical Jewish text study were able to actively participate in and contribute to a conversation with people who had years of study experience. Similarly those with no experience of day to day business realities were able to engage CEOs in discussions of business ethics. The groups were not neatly drawn: Some of the business people had extensive text background and some of the rabbinical students had experience in business or with organized labor. The democratic classroom is a model that can also be implemented in other situations where different communities of learners want to sit together. As the Rabbis said (*Mishnah Avot 3:2*), when a group of people sit to study Torah together, the Divine Presence is amongst them. ■