



## Minimum Wage Jewish Text Resources

Prepared by Rabbi David L. Reiner

### Talking Points:

- The current minimum wage in New York State is \$7.25 per hour. A person who works 40 hours per week, 52 weeks per year at minimum wage will earn \$15,080 per year (\$290 per week). The 2012 Poverty Guideline (used by the Federal Government to determine eligibility of families for Federal programs such as Medicaid, Supplemental Nutritional Aid Program (“Food Stamps”), and subsidized school meals) for a family of three is \$19,090, meaning that a family of three with one income earner (i.e. a single parent with two children) will be earning only 79% of the poverty level. If you have two dependants and work full-time for minimum wage, you will remain well below the poverty line.  
***In simpler terms, can you imagine supporting a family in New York State on fifteen thousand dollars a year?***
- The last increase to state minimum wage in New York State took effect on July 24, 2009, more than three years ago. In the same time period, the Federal Consumer Price Index (which measures the national average of the annual increases/decreases in costs of living) has risen about 8%. ***The minimum wage has not kept pace with the rate of inflation (the cost-of-living) meaning that workers earning minimum wage are able to purchase less with the same amount of money.***
- As of January 1, 2012, several neighboring states have higher minimum wages (CT: \$8.25; MA: \$8.00; VT: \$8.46) and there is also a proposal in New Jersey to increase minimum wage, meaning that minimum wage workers could leave New York to find work in neighboring states. An increase in the New York minimum wage would benefit about one million people and would put money into the pockets of low-wage workers and increase demand for goods and services as well as decrease the need for government subsidies. ***An increase in the minimum wage will help workers keep pace with inflation, will benefit the economy by increasing the demand for goods and services, and will bring minimum wage workers with families closer to the “poverty line.”***

### Jewish Texts:

*D’varim/Deuteronomy 24:14-15*

יד לא-תַעֲשֶׂק שְׂכִיר, עָנִי וְאֶבְיוֹן, מֵאַחִיד, אוּ מִגֵּרָךְ אֲשֶׁר בְּאַרְצְךָ בְּשַׁעֲרֶיךָ.  
טו בְּיוֹמוֹ תִּתֵּן שְׂכָרוֹ וְלֹא-תָבוֹא עָלָיו הַשְּׂמֶשׁ, כִּי עָנִי הוּא, וְאֵלָיו, הוּא נֹשֵׂא  
אֶת-נַפְשׁוֹ; וְלֹא-יִקְרָא עָלֶיךָ אֶל-יְהוָה, וְהָיָה בְּךָ חֶטָּא.

You shall not abuse a needy and destitute laborer, whether a fellow countryman or a stranger in one of the communities of your land. You must pay him his wages on the same day, before the

sun sets, for he is needy and urgently depends upon it; else he will cry to God against you and you will incur guilt.

*The Torah emphasizes our responsibility to treat all workers well and to not oppress the laborer. Earning less money than it costs to live is a form of oppression. The oppressed worker is powerless to change their lot in life and their only recourse is to cry out to God.*

**Babylonian Talmud, Baba Metzia 112a**

כל הכובש שכר שכיר כאילו נוטל נפשו ממנו

Whoever withholds an employee's wages, it is as though he has taken the person's life.

*Paying an employee less than the full value of their work denies their livelihood. A low minimum wage inhibits the earning ability and livelihood of employees*

**Babylonian Talmud, Baba Metzia 83a**

רבה בר בר חנן תברו ליה הנהו שקולאי חביתא דחמרא. שקל לגלימייהו,  
אתו אמרו לרב. אמר ליה: הב להו גלימייהו. - אמר ליה: דינא הכי? - אמר ליה:  
אין, (משלי ב') למען תלך בדרך טובים. יהיב להו גלימייהו. אמרו ליה: עניי אנן,  
וטרחינן כולה יומא, וכפינן, ולית לן מידי. אמר ליה: זיל הב אגרייהו. - אמר ליה:  
דינא הכי? - אמר ליה: אין, (משלי ב') וארחות צדיקים תשמר.

We need [this example in the Mishnah specifying that local custom undermines an employer's stipulation that workers begin early and stay late] for the case in which the employer raises the workers' wages. In the case in which the employer says to them, 'I raised your wages in order that you would begin work early and stay late,' they may reply, 'You raised our wages in order that we would do better work.'

*A minimum wage that better reflects the costs of living will enable workers to do better work.*

**God in Search of Man (Abraham Joshua Heschel, p. 63)**

We say 'Blessed be Thou, O Eternal our God, Ruler of the Universe, who brings forth bread from the earth.' Empirically speaking, would it not be more correct to give credit to the farmer, the merchant and the baker? [Rather] we bless God who makes possible both nature and civilization.

*Why do we thank God instead of the merchant and the baker? How might we better appreciate those who labor hard in order to create our food?*

**Jewish Ethics of Employee Treatment and Communal Responsibility (Dani Passow, p. 18)**

This conception of the relationship among all Jews [one of *arevut*, of guarantorship] suggests that one should refrain from patronizing a restaurant that does not meet ethical standards of employee treatment. If the employer is ethically bound to pay minimum wage, overtime, and treat the employee fairly then, as *arevim*, guarantors, at the very least we shouldn't actively support the employer's violation of these rights. Perhaps we should even take measures, such as boycott or protests, to stop the employer. The Sefer Chassidim elucidates this principle:

"Were it not for arevut...one would only examine another's actions to the extent necessary to set up precautions against influencing them to sin, but wouldn't attempt to help the other root out their own evil actions." *Arevut* thus means that all Jews are responsible for each other's morality. If this is the case for strangers, how much more so does it apply to the managers and owners of restaurants we patronize.

*How can we act upon the need to raise the minimum wage? We could boycott establishments that do not pay workers more than a minimum wage. Instead, we should find ways to raise the minimum wage.*