



Fair Trade Coffee: A View from Jewish Tradition



Why is supporting fair trade coffee a Jewish issue? How does Jewish tradition teach us to respond to poverty? What does our Jewish text say about treating workers?

The following texts can help guide discussions on fair trade from a Jewish perspective. Considering using these texts for study at a youth group event or during Hebrew school classes or as the basis of a social action project at your temple.

Global Citizenship: Are their limits on communal responsibility?

So God created humanity in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful, and multiply, replenish the earth, and subdue it."

Genesis 1:27

The stranger among you shall be equal unto you as the home born and you shall love him as yourself.

Leviticus 19:34

Whoever is able to protest against the transgressions of his own family and does not do so is punished for the transgressions of his family. Whoever is able to protest against the transgressions of the people of his community and does not do so is punished for the transgressions of his community. Whoever is able to protest against the transgressions of the entire world and does not do so is punished for the transgressions of the entire world.

Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 54b

Tzedakah Means Justice: The Jewish Mandate for Economic Justice

If there is a needy person among you. . .do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your kin. Rather, you must open your hand and lend whatever is sufficient.

Deuteronomy 15:7-11

One who withholds what is due to the poor affronts the Creator; one who cares for the needy honors God.

Proverbs 14:31

You are commanded to provide the needy with whatever they lack. If they lack clothing, you must clothe them. If they lack household goods, you must provide them. . .You are commanded to fulfill all of their needs, though not required to make them wealthy.

For You Were Slaves in Egypt: Fair Labor in Jewish Tradition

You shall not abuse a needy and destitute laborer, whether a fellow countryman or a stranger in one of the communities of your land."

Deuteronomy 24:10

One who withholds an employee's wages is as though he deprived him of his life.

Baba Metzia 112a

In disputes between employees and workers, the rights of the worker were given preference over those of the employer. (Baba Metzia 77a)

The Dignity of Work: A Jewish Imperative

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 sets his life on it; else he will cry to God against you and you will incur guilt.

Deuteronomy 24:12-15

R. Abba said in the name of R. Simeon ben Lakish: the person who lends money [to a poor person] is greater than the person who gives charity; and the one who throws money into a common purse [to form a partnership with the poor person] is greater than either.

B. Shabbat 63b

"There are eight levels of tzedakah, each greater than the next. The greatest level, above which there is no other, is to strengthen the name of another Jew by giving him a present or loan, or making a partnership with him, or finding him a job in order to strengthen his hand until he needs no longer [beg from] people. For it is said, "You shall strengthen the stranger and the dweller in your midst and live with him," {Leviticus XXV:35} that is to say, strengthen him until he needs no longer fall [upon the mercy of the community] or be in need.

Maimonides: Eight Degrees of Tzedakah

"If your brother becomes poor and his means fail him with you, then you shall strengthen him, be he a stranger or a settler, he shall live with you."

Leviticus 25:35

"Do not let him slip down until he falls completely, for then it will be difficult to raise him; rather, strengthen him as he begins to fall. To what is this comparable? To a burden upon a mule. While it is still on the mule, one person can hold it and set it in place. If it falls to the earth, even five people cannot set it back."

Rashi's Commentary on Leviticus 25:35