

Labor Day on the Bimah
August 31, 2013

Shabbat Shalom.

Labor Day weekend draws me to remember my first job, a minimum wage job in Milwaukee, WI, cleaning pollution off the beaches on Lake Michigan so summer vacationers could swim on warm summer afternoons. I was a teen and was paid about \$2 per hour, the minimum wage.

It wasn't a fun job, but I needed the money. I worked hard but I didn't think I was underpaid. It was a fair wage. If we were to pay someone for that job today, you would hardly expect to pay them \$2. You would expect to pay them the equivalent buying power that I had in the mid-60's.

But the stark fact is, in Maryland today, that \$2 wage would be worth over \$10 per hour. Instead, the minimum wage today in Maryland is just \$7.25 per hour, just half that for tipped workers. I wouldn't have wanted to be paid 30 percent less in the mid-60's for my summer job. I wouldn't have thought that \$1.40 an hour was fair. Yet, that is the situation with the minimum wage today.

This must change.

I am on the Board of Directors of Jews United for Justice, a local group that is organizing the regional Jewish community around social justice issues. We are part of a coalition that is behind Raise Maryland, a campaign to raise the minimum wage in Maryland to \$10.10 per hour.

I hope that Adat Shalom will get behind this cause because it is the right thing to do. Not just for teens, but for families that depend on these wages to survive.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the median age of fast-food workers is over 28. And women, who comprise two-thirds of the industry, are over 32. Teens used to be 25 percent of all fast food workers; today, only 16 percent are teens.

The legislation that we support to increase the minimum wage is a reasonable approach to lifting up low-wage workers. It would raise the level in three tiers over three years, gradually bringing the wage to \$10.10 by the middle of 2016.

That would make a big difference to a lot of families. That higher rate would boost the annual earnings for a full-time minimum wage earner to a little over \$20,000, up from just under \$15,000 now. Enough to lift a family of three out of poverty.

While we would probably consider Maryland a leader in such a progressive cause, we are actually a laggard. Through this legislation, Maryland will just be catching up – 19 states and the District of Columbia already have set the minimum wage higher than \$7.25. According to the Economic Policy Institute, raising the minimum wage will increase the pay for 472,000 working Marylanders.

Some may argue that we can't afford this higher wage – and there are reasonable arguments. We understand that there is a debate. But consider this fact: Since 2000, even before the recession, the productivity of the American worker has

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grown by nearly 25 percent. But the wages have flattened or declined for the bottom 60 percent of workers. You don't have to have a PhD to do the math.

We must respond to the fierce urgency of now. We must move past the rival issue papers and focus on a simple proposition. Would we accept a wage today that paid 30 percent less than what a person in the same job was paid 40 years ago? If we wouldn't accept that for ourselves, how can we ask that of others?

Our parasha today looks unkindly on the person who fancies himself immune, thinking "I shall be safe though I follow my own willful heart." At this time of year, when we are in the midst of the process of self-reflection that is so essential, we need to look inward to see if we think we are safe and immune.

This week, we also just listened again to the stirring words of the Rev. Martin Luther King, who famously said that the moral arc of the universe is long but bends toward justice. But, as Rabbi Fred also reminds us in his nice video sermon from the National Mall, it doesn't bend without our help.

On Wednesday, President Obama encouraged us to keep marching for justice and I hope that you will march to support an increase in the minimum wage. That you will march for workers who are the least among us. That you will march, if necessary, to Annapolis to tell our legislators that Maryland demands a fair wage.

We will be launching Raise Maryland locally on September 22. I hope you join our campaign. Shabbat Shalom.