

Minimum Wage Text Study

One of the challenges of leading a text study about a social justice issue is to walk the line between remaining open to learning from the texts and each other, and driving home a particular point (in this case, the importance of raising the minimum wage in Maryland). The fact that our texts are nuanced, varied, and often contradictory challenges us to look carefully at their context and intentions. It is important to acknowledge that our tradition presents multiple points of view, and that disagreement between the texts and each other is encouraged and also considered holy. At the same time, we believe firmly that there are underlying Jewish values that call us to advocate for anti-poverty policies – such raising the minimum wage – as a social justice imperative.

This text study is designed to help us identify and clarify our perspectives and opinions – as individuals and as a community – when we begin to examine a matter of economic injustice. How do we think about and relate to the concepts of wealth and poverty? How do we relate to rich and poor people? It is important to hold these questions in mind when we approach more specific policy topics, because our perspectives will affect our conclusions. Working together as a group will help us identify our usual inclinations, test them out in a supportive group, compare them to the views and values embodied in our texts and each other, and, hopefully, arrive at more nuanced conclusions.

We have compiled a series of texts and guiding questions and have added a suggested method for facilitating a discussion. To work through all the materials will take about an hour and fifteen minutes, and possibly longer if you are able to get a good conversation going. We encourage you to use your discretion in planning for your particular teaching context: you may choose to add or subtract texts, modify the questions, or facilitate the session in a somewhat different way. We have included a suggested timeframe and formats for each component, but you should certainly adapt both to best meet your preferences as a facilitator and the needs of your group.

In the following pages, the facilitator notes are marked in italics. A “hand out” version of the text study to share with discussion participants can be found at the end of this packet. Below is the suggested agenda, but again, please use these materials and the suggested facilitation guide to create your own text study that will meet the needs of your group and goals of the discussion you are hoping to foster.

- I. Preparation/Kavanah for Learning**
(15 minutes)
- II. Opening the Conversation – Views on Wealth and Work**
(15 min in pairs, 15 min group reflection)
- III. Employer and Employee – Interests and Obligations**
(15 minutes)
- IV. Moving to the Modern – The Minimum Wage in Maryland**
(15 minutes)

I. Preparation/Kavanah for Learning (15 minutes)

We begin with a story because stories are accessible, allowing us to use our imaginations to approach a topic. This story is not simple. What feels right about this story, and what troubles you? Answer the discussion questions for yourself before you lead others in a study of this story.

There are a few ways you could begin.

- *You may choose to tell the story to the whole group and have individuals do a little personal writing in response, followed by sharing.*
- *You can ask one of the participants to read the story and discuss it as a large group, or in small groups, depending on the number of people in the room.*
- *You can frame the discussion with this guiding question: How do we bring our fullest Jewish selves to respond to the issues surrounding raising the minimum wage?*

Whichever way you choose, allow yourself and the participants to take time to get into the story and their responses. The ideas that come up in the context of responding to this story will likely be worthwhile to return to in later conversations, as you make connections between personal outlook and experience, Jewish texts, and the minimum wage data.

A Story told by the Ba'al Shem Tov: The Sneer and the Sigh

There were two men who happened to leave the synagogue together each morning after prayers. One was a young Torah scholar, who received a weekly stipend from the community to support him in spending his days studying Torah. The other was a poor man with a wife and many children who earned his living as a porter. He had never had a chance to study Torah, as much as he wished to. As they left the synagogue one morning, the porter sighed as he thought about how he wished he could work under the yoke of Torah study, instead of the yoke of heavy physical burdens. Simultaneously, the scholar sneered at the porter, thinking, “how could I have anything in common with this man?” Years later, they happened to die the same day. When they faced the heavenly court, the scholar was sure that his years of Torah study would tip the scales in favor of sending him to heaven. Just as this decision was about to be proclaimed, his sneer was placed on the scale opposite his years of Torah study, and the balance shifted. Meanwhile, the porter appeared before the heavenly court, expecting a harsh judgment for spending his life carrying other people’s burdens, and never having time for Torah study or focused prayer. But the scale was outweighed by his sigh, signaling his deep desire to learn Torah.

*(Adapted from *The Light and Fire of the Ba'al Shem Tov* by Yitzchak Buxbaum)*

Questions

1. What do you have in common with the scholar? With the porter?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of being the scholar? The porter?
3. What lessons can we learn from both characters and from the story as a whole as we prepare to explore questions related to poverty, wages, and workplace relations?

II. Opening the Conversation – Views on Wealth and Work (15 min in pairs, 15 min group reflection)

The next texts continue more directly our exploration of how we engage with issues of wealth, poverty, and work. They were chosen to push us to consider our role in the economic system and confront our assumptions about work and workers.

This part works well in havruta, where pairs of learners read the texts and answer the questions together, then gather at the end as a larger group for reflections. Ask everyone in your group to choose a havruta, have the havruta partners read the story out loud to each other, and then work through the questions that follow the story.

Isaac Karo, Toldot Yitzchak, Parshat Re'eh

The reason that the poor person is poor is because the rich person is rich... The text... [of the Bible contains a verse that includes the phrase], “the poor person with you.” What need is there to...[add the phrase], “with you” [to the description of the poor person]?

[Karo answers his own question, saying:] To indicate that you are the reason that he is poor....”

(As quoted in Jill Jacob’s *There Shall Be No Needy*, p. 17, with added explanations)

Questions

1. Flesh out the worldview described in this quotation. What is Karo really saying? What are the implications of this perspective on rich and poor?
2. What does this text mean about “you”? Who is “you”? And how do you hear this text?
3. Does this text resonate with your experience of the world? Why or why not?

Vayikra Rabbah 34:8

תני ר' יהושע יותר ממה שבעל הבית עושה עם העני העני עושה עם בעל הבית שכן רות אומרת לנעמי (רות ב) שם האיש אשר עשיתי עמו היום בועז אשר עשה עמי אין כתיב כאן אלא אשר עשיתי עמו אמרה לה הרבה פעולות וטובות עשיתי עמו היום בשביל פרוסה שנתן לי

Rabbi Yehoshua taught: The poor person does more for the master of the house than the master of the house does for him/her. For thus Ruth says to Naomi [in the Book of Ruth]: “The man's name *with whom I worked* today is Boaz (Ruth 2:19).” The text does *not* say “who worked with me” but rather “with whom I worked.” By saying this, Ruth implied to Naomi: “I have done many services and favors for him today in return for the morsel of food he gave me!”

Questions

1. How do you generally understand the phrase, “with whom I worked?” How does this line up with the way it is explained in this text?
2. What are the messages or implications about workers and employers in this text?
3. How do the messages of this text compare with your experience of work and your associations with workers and employers?

III. Employer and Employee – Interests and Obligations (15 minutes)

Our tradition cares about the interests of both employers and employees. The next two texts highlight workers' and employers' obligations to each other. They were chosen to help us consider what the ideal employee/employer relationship might look like, and what conditions need to be in place in order to make these kinds of relationships possible. Note that the workers' obligations to an employer only make sense if workers can get by on what they earn from their one primary job.

This section can be facilitated in havruta or as a full group. If you break into havrutas, bring the group back together when you sense that they're ready to move on and then ask for a few comments or report-backs from each group. If you have time, you can facilitate some group conversation as people respond to the report-backs.

Employer's Obligation to Worker: Deuteronomy 24:14-15

לֹא-תַעֲשֶׂק שֹׁכֵר, עֲנִי וְאֲבִיוֹן, מֵאֲחִיד, אוּ מִגֵּרָךְ אֲשֶׁר בְּאַרְצֶךָ בְּשַׁעֲרֶיךָ

You shall not abuse a needy and destitute worker, whether your kin or a stranger in one of the communities of your land.

בְּיוֹמוֹ תִּתֶּן שֹׁכְרוֹ וְלֹא-תָבוֹא עָלָיו הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ, כִּי עֲנִי הוּא, וְאֵלָיו, הוּא נֹשֵׂא אֶת-נַפְשׁוֹ; וְלֹא-יִקְרָא עָלֶיךָ אֶל-יְהוָה, וְהָיָה בְּךָ חַטָּא

You must pay them their wages on the same day, before the sun sets, for they are needy and urgently depend on it; else they will cry to the Lord against you and you will incur guilt.

Worker's Obligation to Employer: Rambam's Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Sechirut, 13:9-11

אָבֵל אֵין הַפּוֹעֵל רֵשָׁאִי לַעֲשׂוֹת מְלֻאכְתּוֹ בַּלַּיְלָה, וְלִהְשָׁכִיר עֲצָמוֹ בַּיּוֹם, אוּ לְדוֹשׁ בְּפָרְתּוֹ עֲרֵבִית, וְלִהְשָׁכִירָה שְׁחֵרִית; וְלֹא יִהְיֶה מְרַעֵב וּמְסַגֵּף עֲצָמוֹ, וּמְאַכִּיל מְזוֹנוֹתָיו לְבָנָיו, מִפְּנֵי גִזְל מְלֻאכְתּוֹ שֶׁלְּבַעַל הַבַּיִת, שֶׁהָרִי כָשֶׁל כּוֹחוֹ וְתַחֲלַשׁ דָּעָתוֹ וְלֹא יַעֲשֶׂה מְלֻאכָה בְּכוֹ

כְּדָרָךְ שֶׁמְזַהֵר בְּעַל הַבַּיִת שֶׁלֹּא יִגְזַל שֹׁכֵר עֲנִי, וְלֹא יַעֲכֹבְנוּ--כִּי הָעֲנִי מְזַהֵר שֶׁלֹּא יִגְזַל מְלֻאכְתּוֹ בְּעַל הַבַּיִת, וְיִבְטַל מְעַט בְּכָאן וּמְעַט בְּכָאן וּמוֹצִיא כָּל הַיּוֹם בְּמֵאֲרָה, אֲלֵא חֵיב לְדַקְדֵּק עַל עֲצָמוֹ בְּזִמּוֹן מְלֻאכָה, שֶׁהָרִי הַקְּפִידוֹ חֲכָמִים עַל בְּרָכָה רַבִּיעִית שֶׁלְּבַרְכַת הַמְּזוֹן שֶׁלֹּא יִבְרָךְ אוֹתָהּ

A worker may not perform work at night and then hire himself out during the day, or work with his ox in the evening and then rent it out in the morning. Similarly, he should not starve and aggrieve himself and give his food to his sons, because this leads to stealing from the work due his employer, for his energy will be sapped and his thinking unclear, and he will not be able to perform his work

robustly.

Just as the employer is warned not to steal the wage of the poor person or to withhold it from him, the poor person is forewarned not to steal from the work due his employer and neglect his work slightly here and there, spending the entire day in deceit. Instead, he is obligated to be precise with regard to his time. The importance of such preciseness is indicated by our Sages' ruling that workers should not recite the fourth blessing of the Birkat Hamazon [grace after meals], so as not to neglect their work [by spending too much time on non-work matters].

Questions

1. What assumptions are being made by these texts about the employer and the worker?
2. How are these assumptions applicable, or not, in your experience of workplace relations and expectations today?
3. Does your perspective shift as you consider assumptions across service sectors (corporate, non-profit, retail, food service, etc.)? Across wage levels?
4. What changes (if any) do you think need to be made in our society in order for Jewish laws around labor relations to be more broadly observable?

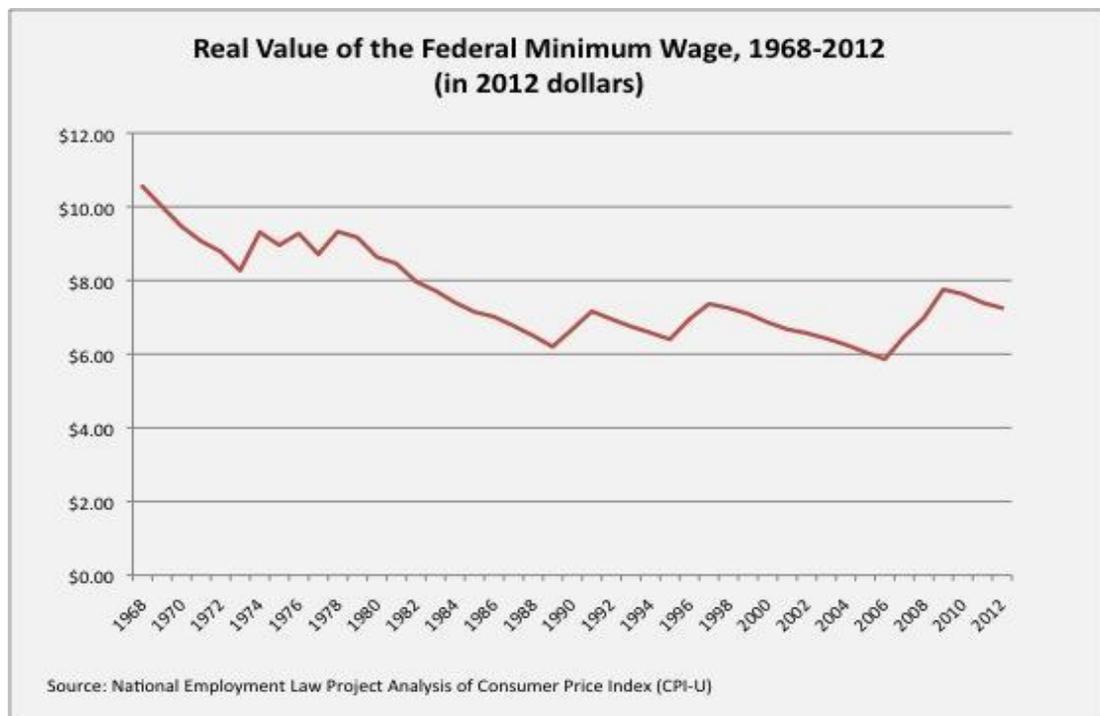
IV. Moving to the Modern – The Minimum Wage in Maryland (15 minutes)

This last section contains some data on the federal and Maryland minimum wages. These data are provided to spark a conversation about the current minimum wage and how we might apply our learning from Jewish sources to the conversation in Maryland.

You may choose to have people return to their havruta partners to interpret the data through a Jewish lens, or you may continue as a whole group, discussing the data and the graph together. If you return to partners, make sure to gather the group together for final reflections and questions.

Minimum Wage in Maryland (Data provided by Raise Maryland, RaiseMD.org)

- Maryland's minimum wage is currently just \$7.25 per hour or almost \$15,000 per year for a full-time (40 hour/week) worker.
- For tipped workers– those, like waitresses, carwash attendants, and nail salon workers, whose salaries are mostly paid in tips– the base minimum wage is \$3.63 per hour.
- If the minimum wage had kept pace with inflation over the last 40 years, it would be over \$10.70 per hour today.



Questions

1. What arguments are suggested here, both for and against raising the minimum wage?
2. How might your Jewish learning about wealth, poverty, and employer/employee relations inform your perspective on these arguments?
3. What questions are still unanswered as you consider raising the minimum wage in the context of pursuing economic justice in our country?

Text Study to Explore Minimum Wage

*How do we bring our fullest Jewish selves
to respond to the issues surrounding raising the minimum wage?*

I. Preparation/Kavanah for Learning

A Story told by the Ba'al Shem Tov: The Sneer and the Sigh

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2. Opening the Conversation – Views on Wealth and Work

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The reason that the poor person is poor is because the rich person is rich... The [Biblical] text says [i.e., refers to], “the poor person with you.” What need is there to...[add the phrase], “with you” [to the description of the poor person]? [Karo answers his own question, saying:] To indicate that you are the reason that he is poor....”

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1. Flesh out the worldview described in this quotation. What is Karo really saying? What are the implications of this perspective on rich and poor?
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Vayikra Rabbah 34:8

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3. Employer and Employee – Interests and Obligations

Employer's Obligation to Worker: **Deuteronomy 24:14-15**

לא-תעשק שכיר, עני ואביון, מאחיד, או מגרד אשר בארצך בשעריך

You shall not oppress a hired servant that is poor and needy, whether s/he is one of your siblings, or a stranger that is in your land, within your gates.

ביומו תתן שכרו ולא-תבוא עליו השמש, כי עני הוא, ואליו, הוא נשא את-נפשו; ולא-יקרא עליו אל-יהוה, והיה בד חטא

In the same day you shall give them their pay, don't let the sun go down [without paying your worker], for they are poor, and count on it: lest s/he cry against you unto God and you would be culpable.

Worker's Obligation to Employer: **Rambam's Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Sechirut, 13:9-11**

אבל אין הפועל רשאי לעשות מלאכתו בלילה, ולהשכיר עצמו ביום, או לדוש בפרתו ערבית, ולהשכירה שחרית; ולא יהיה מרעיב ומסגף עצמו, ומאכיל מזונותיו לבניו, מפני גזל מלאכתו שלבעל הבית, שהרי יכשל כוחו ותחלש דעתו ולא יעשה מלאכה בכו

כדרך שמזהר בעל הבית שלא יגזל שכר עני, ולא יעכבנו--כך העני מזהר שלא יגזל מלאכת בעל הבית, ויבטל מעט בכאן ומעט בכאן ומוציא כל היום במארה, אלא חיב לדקדק על עצמו בזמן מלאכה, שהרי הקפידו חכמים על ברכה רביעית שלברכת המזון שלא יברך אותה

A worker may not perform work at night and then hire himself out during the day, or work with his ox in the evening and then rent it out in the morning. Similarly, he should not starve and aggrieve himself and give his food to his sons, because this leads to stealing from the work due his employer, for his energy will be sapped and his thinking unclear, and he will not be able to perform his work robustly.

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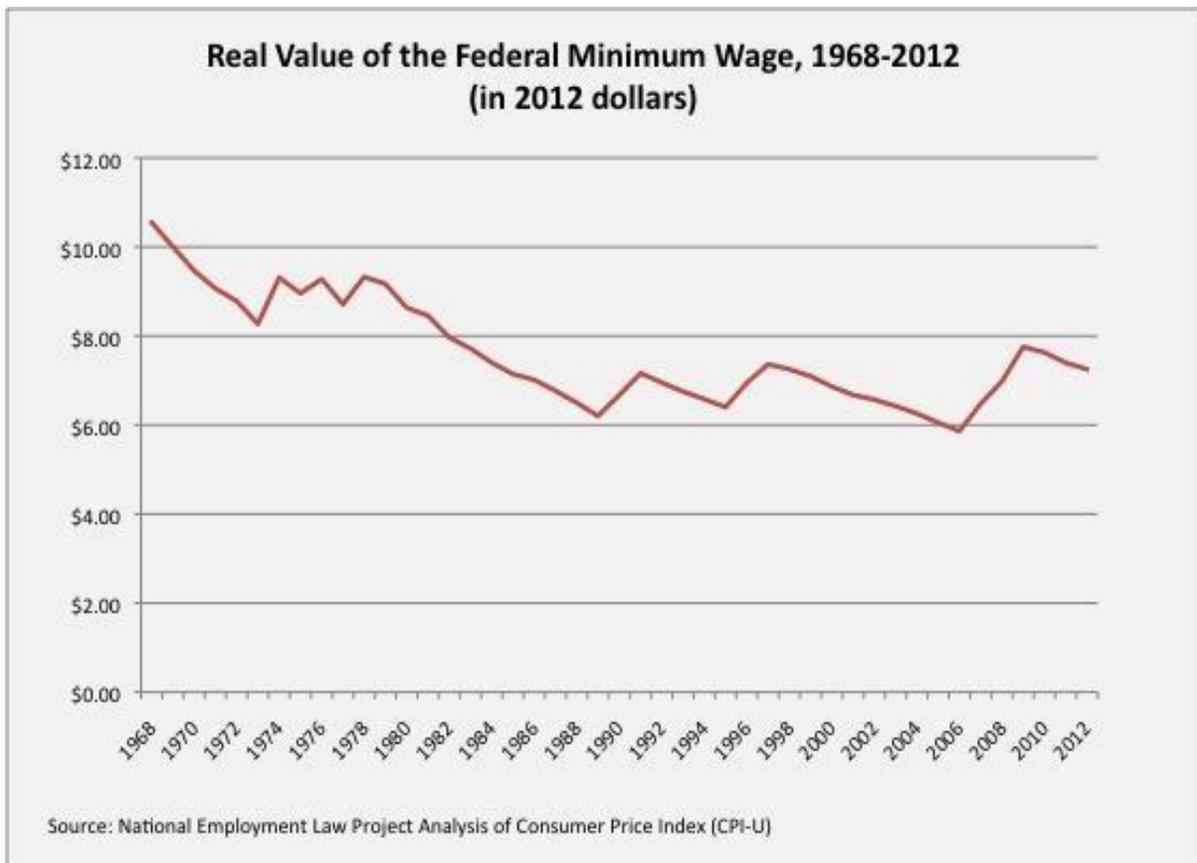
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