

Hechsher Tzedek: The Sanctity of the Food We Eat

KOACH Shabbat 5768/2007

בראשית פרק א פסוק כט

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים הִנֵּה נֹתְתִי לָכֶם אֶת כָּל עֵשֶׂב זֶרַע זֶרַע אֲשֶׁר עַל פְּנֵי כָל הָאָרֶץ וְאֶת כָּל הָעֵץ אֲשֶׁר בּוֹ פְרִי עֵץ זֶרַע זֶרַע לָכֶם יִהְיֶה לְאֹכְלָהּ:

Genesis 1:29

God said, See, I give you every seed-bearing plant that is upon all the earth, and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit; they shall be yours for food.

ויקרא פרק יא

דִּבְרוּ אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר זֹאת הַחֲיָה אֲשֶׁר תֹּאכְלוּ מִכָּל הַבְּהֵמָה אֲשֶׁר עַל הָאָרֶץ: כָּל מִפְרֶסֶת פְּרֶסֶת וְשִׁסְעַת שִׁסְעַת מְעַלֵּת גֵּרָה בַּבְּהֵמָה אֹתָהּ תֹּאכְלוּ:

Leviticus 11:2-3

These are the creatures that you may eat from among all the land animals: any animal that has true hoofs, with clefts through the hoofs, and that chews the cud such you may eat.

דברים פרק יב

רַק בְּכָל אֹתוֹת נִפְשָׁךְ תִּזְבַּח וְאֹכְלֶת בָּשָׂר כְּבִרְכַת יְקֹנֶךָ אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר נָתַן לְךָ בְּכָל שְׁעָרֶיךָ הַטָּמֵא וְהַטְּהוֹר יֹאכְלוּ כַצְּבִי וְכֹאֵיל: רַק הַדָּם לֹא תֹאכְלוּ עַל הָאָרֶץ תִּשְׁפְּכוּ כַמַּיִם:

Deuteronomy 12:15-16

But whenever you desire, you may slaughter and eat meat in any of your settlements, according to the blessing that the Lord your God has given you....But you must not partake of the blood; you shall pour it out on the ground like water.

שמות פרק כג פסוק יט
לֹא תִבְשֵׁל גְּדִי בְחֵלֶב אִמּוֹ:

Exodus 23:19

You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk.

Harold Kushner: *To Life! A Celebration of Jewish Being and Thinking*

There is nothing intrinsically wicked about eating pork or lobster, and there is nothing intrinsically moral about eating cheese or chicken instead. But what the Jewish way of life does by imposing rules on our eating, sleeping, and working habits is to take the most common and mundane activities and invest them with deeper meaning, turning every one of them into an occasion for obeying (or disobeying) God. If a gentile walks into a fast-food establishment and orders a cheeseburger, he is just having lunch. But if a Jew does the same thing, he is making a theological statement. He is declaring that he does not accept the rules of the Jewish dietary system as binding upon him. But heeded or violated, the rules lift the act of having lunch out of the ordinary and make it a religious matter. If you can do that to the process of eating, you have done something important.

דברים פרק כד

לא תעשק שכיר עני ואביון מאחיך או מגרך אשר בארצך בשעריך:
ביומו תתן שכרו ולא תבוא עליו השמש כי עני הוא ואליו הוא נשא את נפשו ולא יקרא עליך אל
יקוק והיה בך חטא:

Deuteronomy 24:14-15

Do not oppress the hired laborer who is poor and needy, whether he is one of your people or one of the sojourners in your land within your gates. Give him his wages in the daytime, and do not let the sun set on them, for he is poor, and his life depends on them, lest he cry out to God about you, for this will be counted as a sin for you.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת בבא מציעא דף קיב עמוד א

ואידך הווא מיבעי ליה לכדתניא: +דברים כ"ד+ ואליו הוא נשא את נפשו, מפני מה עלה זה בכבש ונתלה באילן ומסר את עצמו למיתה - לא על שכרו? דבר אחר: ואליו הוא נשא את נפשו - כל הכובש שכר שכיר כאילו נוטל נפשו ממנו.

Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 112a:

"His life depends on them (Deuteronomy 24:15). Why does he climb a ladder or hang from a tree or risk death? Is it not for his wages? Another interpretation-- His life depends on them indicates that anyone who denies a hired laborer his wages, it is as though he takes his life from him."

משנה מסכת בבא מציעא פרק ז משנה א

השוכר את הפועלים ואמר להם להשכים ולהעריב מקום שנהגו שלא להשכים ושלא להעריב אינו רשאי לכופן מקום שנהגו לזון יזון לספק במתיקה יספק הכל כמנהג המדינה מעשה ברבי יוחנן בן מתיא שאמר לבנו צא שכור לנו פועלים הלך ופסק להם מזונות וכשבא אצל אביו אמר לו בני אפילו אם אתה עושה להם כסעודת שלמה בשעתו לא יצאת ידי חובתך עמהן שהן בני אברהם יצחק ויעקב אלא עד שלא יתחילו במלאכה צא ואמור להם על מנת שאין לכם עלי אלא פת וקטנית בלבד רבן שמעון בן גמליאל אומר לא היה צריך לומר הכל כמנהג המדינה:

Mishnah, Bava Metzia 7:1

One who hires workers and instructs them to begin work early and to stay late in a place in which it is not the custom to begin work early and to stay late, the employer may not force them to do so. In a place in which it is the custom to feed the workers, he must do so. In a place in which it is the custom to distribute sweets, he must do so. Everything goes according to the custom of the land.

There was an incident concerning Rabbi Yochanan ben Matya, who told his son, "Go, hire us workers." His son went and promised them food [without specifying what kind, or how much]. When he returned, his father said to him, "My son! Even if you gave them a feast like that of King Solomon, you would not have fulfilled your obligation toward them, for they are the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. However, as they have not yet begun to work, go back and say to them that their employment is conditional on their not demanding more than bread and vegetables." Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel said, "It is not necessary to make such a stipulation. Everything goes according to the custom of the place."

תלמוד בבלי מסכת בבא מציעא דף פג עמוד א

פשיטא! לא צריכא, דטפא להו אאגרייהו. מהו דתימא, אמר להו: הא דטפאי לכו אאגרייכו - אדעתא דמקדמיתו ומחשכיתו בהדאי, קא משמע לן דאמרו ליה: האי דטפת לן - אדעתא דעבדינן לך עבידתא שפירתא.

Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 83a:

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 he 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."

Saul Berman: from *Labor on the Bima*, a publication of the National Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice

The rabbis are here teaching us a profound lesson. The most demeaning form of oppression of a laborer is to assign to him meaningless work. The most ruthless form of abuse of a laborer is to have him engage in an activity which serves no productive purpose and, therefore, prevents him from having any pride in his achievement.

The measure of proper treatment of labor is not simply the physical rigors to which the employee is exposed. The employer has a responsibility to preserve the dignity of the employee through assuring that he or she can achieve a sense of meaning in the labor which she performs.