



FROM THE SOURCES: TEXTS ON JEWISH SOCIAL JUSTICE

Passover: Slavery, Freedom and Migration Supplementary Resource

Introduction

Passover commemorates the exodus of the Jewish people from Egypt and their freedom from slavery. At the end of the book of Genesis, Jacob and his sons face a famine in Canaan and travel to Egypt in search of food. Their outsider status in Egypt eventually makes them vulnerable to oppression and enslavement. The path of the Israelites from insecurity to migration to oppression and enslavement reoccurs throughout history. Jews have continually migrated to escape persecution or in search of better livelihoods. During Passover, we are asked to remember the experience of being a stranger—to live without the protection of citizenship, unable to claim from the government a right to freedom. The Passover *From the Sources* is designed to encourage us to use the Jewish experience of migration and slavery as a lens to understand the experience of migrant workers today, who face similar vulnerability to oppression.

Migration Today

Migration is defined as the movement of people from one area to another, both within countries (i.e. from rural to urban areas) or across borders. Today there are an estimated 190 million migrants globally.¹ The vast majority can be characterized as economic migrants—those who leave their homes to secure better livelihoods. These migrants often enter into difficult and dangerous forms of labor in their new homes, such as construction, factory work on assembly lines or low-wage farm work. Economic migrants are characterized differently than refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs)—those who flee their homes as a result of human rights violations, persecution or conflict. Most legal systems provide special protection to refugees and IDPs and overlook the rights of economic migrants. One reason for this discrepancy is that national and international laws tend to privilege civil and political rights (such as the right to life and the right to be free from persecution) over economic rights (such as the rights to food, water and livelihood). This prioritization of rights is also based on an assumption that refugees and IDPs leave home because they are forced to do so, while economic migrants make a voluntary choice to leave. However, in many contexts, economic migrants make the choice to leave under extreme and desperate conditions, such as the inability to feed or educate themselves and their families. In these cases, lack of food, water or basic medical care can be as dangerous and deadly as political persecution.

Migrant workers may also be attracted to the prospect of higher incomes in recipient countries. For instance, immigrants from today's poorest countries can raise their wages significantly when they come to the United States. These wages offer the potential to support family still at home through remittances—transfers of money sent by foreign workers to their home country. The World Bank estimates that global remittances to developing countries reached \$317 billion in 2007,² far exceeding the amount of money provided to developing countries through foreign aid. In many countries, these remittances make up a substantial amount of the Gross Domestic Product: for example, in Tajikistan 40-50 percent,³ and Haiti 25 percent.⁴

The effects of migration on a society are highly debated and controversial. For recipient communities and countries, immigration can fill holes in the local economy and increase economic growth because migrants often fill jobs that host-country citizens are unwilling to do. However, immigration can also increase pressure on social services and may

¹ World Bank, Migration and Remittances Fact Book, 2006, available at <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTPROSPECTS/Resources/334934-1199807908806/World.pdf>.

² Ibid.

³ International Monetary Fund, "IMF Lends Tajikistan \$116 Million," 22 April 2009, available at <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/survey/so/2009/CAR042209A.htm>.

⁴ International Monetary Fund, "Sending Money Home: Trends in Migrant Remittances," *Finance and Development Magazine*, December 2005, Vol. 42, No. 4, available at <http://imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2005/12/picture.htm>.

lead to tension between immigrants and local residents. Countries and communities whose citizens migrate to other places may receive an economic boost through remittances, but may also lose skilled and productive members of society.

For migrant workers, migration offers the potential to secure a better livelihood, but it can also result in discrimination, prolonged separation from family and labor exploitation. Migrant workers often face challenges and discrimination integrating into a society that views them with hostility. In addition, as major recipient countries have restricted immigration and put more effort into securing their borders, more people are attempting to migrate illegally, under dangerous conditions. Migrants may need to pay smugglers to cross a border. They may be physically threatened and forced to use unsafe forms of transport. When they arrive in a country, they are at risk of exploitation or enslavement by their traffickers. Those who are caught by police or military may be abused and/or subject to ongoing detention, often in terrible conditions. Migrant workers who enter a country illegally are often unable to access legal protection to protest exploitative working conditions, withheld wages or extremely low wages.

Taking Action

In the United States, many of us come into contact with migrant workers daily—from direct contact with people working in restaurants and providing domestic care to indirect contact such as eating tomatoes picked by migrant laborers in Florida. We can treat migrant workers with respect, pay fair wages to those we employ, and ensure that the goods we purchase and places we patronize uphold the human rights of migrant workers. For example, Uri L'Tzedek, an Orthodox social justice organization, has created a special certification to ensure that workers in the food industry receive fair pay, fair time and a safe work environment. Their seal, called the Tav HaYosher (Ethical Seal), can be found at kosher restaurants across the country. We can also support organizations like the ACLU, Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society and Domestic Workers United to extend legal protection to immigrants, regardless of their status.

Globally, American Jewish World Service supports migrant workers in several ways. First, AJWS funds organizations across the globe that work to protect the rights of migrant workers through legal assistance and help them to improve their employment and living conditions. In addition, AJWS addresses the root causes of economic migration by fostering sustainable livelihoods and development for communities around the world. AJWS grants are strengthening the capacity of grassroots organizations to advance economic and environmental sustainability, promote fair labor standards and raise the social status of women and marginalized communities.

Conclusion

The challenges migrant workers face today mirror the experience of Jews throughout history, who often fled from persecution or migrated in search of economic opportunity. Like our ancestors, migrant workers today are highly vulnerable to abuse and exploitation from governments, citizens and employers. By working to secure the rights of migrant workers, we can ensure they too have the opportunity to be free, to protect themselves and to build better lives for themselves and their families.

For more information on this and other educational resources from AJWS, please contact us at education@ajws.org. To subscribe to this resource, visit www.ajws.org/fts.

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