

# A Text Study for Shavuot in Honor of Hyatt Hotel Workers

*It is traditional to study all night on the eve of the holiday of Shavuot (June 7).*

*We are offering you this text study on economic equality and collective bargaining in honor of Hyatt hotel workers who have called for a boycott of their hotels.*

## During the seven weeks between Passover and Shavuot, rabbis, cantors and Christian clergy have interviewed Hyatt workers around the country about their working conditions.

We learned of Hyatt's business practice of replacing loyal employees with poverty wage permanent temps, of Hyatt's interference in the fundamental right of workers to organize, and of Hyatt's attempt to divide workers in union hotels from workers in non-union hotels.

Workers at union hotels told us of their success in the nearly two years it took them to persuade Hyatt to withdraw bargaining proposals that would have cut their benefits or the benefits of future employees. Workers say they could never have accomplished this alone, but attributed their success to the support of workers at other union and non-union Hyatt hotels, workers at Hilton and Starwood hotels, and their community allies who are honoring their boycotts.

The Hyatt Corporation has recently indicated its willingness to agree to a contract for union employees matching economic terms agreed to by Hilton and Starwood. But Hyatt continues to oppose the fair process agreed to by Hilton and Starwood for workers at certain non-union hotels to organize.

We believe that a more democratic and equitable industry in which workers and employers collectively determine wages and working conditions is a blessing that Hyatt should welcome with open arms. We are humbled by the commitment that union and non-union Hyatt workers have expressed for each other and their willingness to sacrifice so that they will have the power to make the hospitality industry more equitable. We pray that God may bless their solidarity and that Hyatt will agree to the standards agreed to by Hilton and Starwood.

Workers at 17 Hyatt Hotels across the United States and Canada have called for boycotts of the hotels where they work. We pledge to treat the Hyatt as *lo kasher*/not kosher for events and celebrations until it treats its workers with justice.

Wishing you a *Chag Sameach*, a happy holiday of *Shavuot*!

—Rabbi Peter Knobel, Rabbi Barbara Penzner, and Cantor Michael Davis

## Passover is the beginning of liberation while Shavuot is the forging of a society of binding mutual obligation.

In the Land of Israel, Passover and Shavuot marked the beginning of two grain harvests.

In Leviticus we learn that our people brought a sheaf of grain as the omer offering at Pesach (Leviticus 23:9). On Shavuot, the people offered two loaves of bread (Leviticus 23:17). A sheaf can be untied and its contents separated, while the ingredients in a loaf of bread are bound together.

In the book of Leviticus, the description of the festival of Shavuot is followed by the injunction to share with the needy. *When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger. I am the Lord* (Leviticus 23:22). In this way, Shavuot is tied to addressing economic inequality.

The Mishnah (Peah 5:6) emphasizes that this obligation is not charity. *He who does not allow the poor to glean or allows one and not another, or helps one of them (in the gathering), robs the poor. Concerning such a man it has been said, “Remove not the ancient landmark.”* (Proverbs 22:28)

A fundamental principle of economic justice is derived from the commandment not to move landmarks, found in Deuteronomy 19:14: *You shall not remove your neighbor’s landmarks, set up by previous generations*, and Deuteronomy 27:17 *Cursed be he who moves his fellow neighbor’s landmark*. The principle refers to the Jubilee, the practice every 50 years that addressed economic inequality by reverting property to its original owners according to the ancient borders.

The curse against removing landmarks is followed by curses against those who harm the blind, the widow, the orphan and the stranger. These represent the weakest sectors in a society. Traditions emanating from the law of *hasagat gevul*—not to remove landmarks—extend beyond the agricultural realm to our obligations to keep economic inequality in check.

## Talmud Tractate Bava Batra 8b

ורשאין בני העיר להתנות  
על המדות ועל השערים,  
ועל שכר פועלים  
ולהסיע על קיצתן.

*The people of the city are authorized to stipulate weights and measures and to set workers' wages and to establish penalties for breaking the rules.*

People's responsibility for each other includes the domain of determining fair wages.

## Tosefta Bava Metzia 11:24

ורשאין הצמרין והצבעין  
לומר כל מקח שיבוא  
לעיר נהא כולנו שותפין בו.

*The wool workers and the dyers are authorized to say, "We will all be partners in any business that comes to the city."*

The Tosefta establishes the authority of workers to govern their crafts.

## Rav Kook (oral statement) (in Tzvi Yaron. Mishnato shel haRav Kook. 164)

בארגון הפועל לשם שמירה והגנה  
על תנאי העבודה יש משום צדק  
וישר ותיקון העולם. ארגון  
הפועלים יכול בתור בא-כוח  
הפועלים לתבוע לדין גם את  
נותן העבודה וגם את הפועל  
הגורם לזה שעל-ידי עבודה בלתי  
מאורגנת מביאים נזק ומפסידים  
ממון לפועלים, כי הפועל הבלתי  
מאורגן עובד בתנאים יותר  
גרועים הן במכירי עבודה הן  
בשעות העבודה וכו', וזה עלול  
לקלקל תנאי עבודה בכלל.

*Within the workers' organization, which is formed for the purpose of guarding and protecting the work conditions, there is an aspect of righteousness and uprightness and tikkun olam (literally—repair of the world). The workers' organization may sue both the employer and the worker who causes this problem, because unorganized labor brings damage and loss of money to workers. For the unorganized worker works under worse conditions—both in regard to wages and in regard to working hours, etc. And this is likely to make working conditions worse in general.*

Rabbi Jill Jacobs has drawn attention to Rav Kook's use of the term *tikkun olam* to emphasize that Rav Kook saw collective bargaining as instrumental in repairing the balance of power between employer and employees which is necessary for the halachic system to function properly. The conclusion that Rav Kook saw collective bargaining as normative can also be drawn by noting that he wrote that *unorganized labor brings damage and loss of money to workers* instead of saying that organized labor raises wages.

## Rabbi Barry Block

*With pain, I heard the stories of seven Hyatt employees, who came to our Temple to tell me of their suffering. Subjected to a dehumanizing “points system,” housekeepers must literally run to make a quota of cleaning up to 30 rooms per shift and injuries are the unsurprising result. One housekeeper reported being told by a physician she had carpal tunnel syndrome, but a manager disagreed and she did not receive light duty. As I listened to the seven men and women telling me their stories in Spanish and English, I remarked, “You are being treated like cogs in a machine, not human beings.” But each of these women and men is created in God’s image. Like Isaiah before us, let us raise our voices against the oppression of workers, at Hyatt in San Antonio and everywhere.*

## Rabbi Asher Lopatin

*It becomes a “shanda” when the Jewish business is at the forefront of lowering the status of workers, and we, as Jews and Jewish leaders, are responsible for making sure that the Jewish world of business and commerce is one that values being a “mentsch” and treating employees with the decency and standard that society has decided. Yes, they may legally be able to outsource more or refuse to recognize “card checks”, which reflect employees desire to unionize; however, when the other major hotel chains- Starwood and Hilton – give the employees these rights and protections, Hyatt should be at the very least on par. Anything below this is not doing “what is good and straight in the eyes of God.”*

## Central Conference of American Rabbis

*Therefore, we call on the owners and leadership of Hyatt Hotels to commit to the Jewish and universal obligations to treat workers fairly and to recognize the value of their labor. We call on all Jewish institutions and individuals to support Hyatt workers in their disputes. No celebration can be truly joyous if it takes place at an institution which withholds fair wages from its most vulnerable employees.*

## Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of Conservative Judaism

*Jewish employers should allow their employees to make their own independent decisions about whether to unionize, and may not interfere in any way with organizing drives by firing or otherwise punishing involved workers, by refusing workers the option for “card check” elections, or by otherwise threatening workers who wish to unionize. When hiring low-wage workers or engaging contractors who supply low-wage workers, Jewish employers should strive to hire unionized workers when possible.*

## The Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association

*Be it further resolved that, whenever possible, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association pledges to hold all RRA conventions, programs and events in hotels that have no outstanding or ongoing labor disputes.*

## The American Conference of Cantors

*The Hyatt hotel workers have called for a boycott of certain Hyatt hotels. The American Conference of Cantors pledges in its conference business to honor the workers’ boycott and will not patronize any of those hotels until a just resolution is reached.*