

Who or What Is Essential?

Shabbat Va-et'chanan 5780

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Look who thinks he's an essential worker! Moses! As this week's Torah portion begins, Moses insists that only he can lead the Israelites into the Promised Land. God disagrees. Somebody to deliver the people to their destination? Essential. Moses, at this juncture? Not so much.ⁱ

That's hard for Moses. After all, he has done an awful lot of heavy lifting: Convincing the Israelites to let him rock the boat and seek their freedom. Confronting Pharaoh. Dealing with all the wilderness kvetching. The Golden Calf. Need I go on?

The challenge, though, will now be Joshua's: Leading an often-fractious people into battle, capturing their promised new home; and establishing a new society, transforming the children of slaves and a generation of desert-wanderers into masters of their own fate.

Essential work is often hard work. In the last several months, we've heard a great deal about essential workers. Admittedly, the term implies that others of us labor in ways that are not so important. This pandemic, though, has challenged us to consider what we need most, and what about it is critical.

We need our congregation, for example. For many of us, the embrace of our Temple family is essential to our well-being—spiritually and emotionally, if not in terms of physical sustenance. Religious services sustain us as a community. Gathering in person, as much as we miss it, is less important. We have clarified our priorities: Protecting people's health trumps meeting in person—and tonight, even livestreaming from the Sanctuary.

I, for one, take no offense at the notion that work in healthcare is “essential” in ways that my work is not. The pandemic has forced us to order the importance of labor in ways we otherwise never would. We need the folks at the grocery store, and others who ensure the food supply, more than the florist or the clothing retailer. We need teachers—exactly how, we'll discuss this week—but there should be no debate that they're essential.

Work itself is essential. This week, Rabbi Stephanie Kolin emphasized that freedom from Egyptian bondage did not bring an end to work. Indeed, in this week's portion, as we reread the commandment to observe Shabbat, Rabbi Kolin asks us not to overlook these words: “Six days shall you labor and do all your

work.”ⁱⁱ As much as we are obligated to rest on the seventh day, we are enjoined to work the other six. Whether working to earn a living, essential to our wellbeing, or laboring as volunteers to improve the world, God has given us work to do here on Earth, from the time of creation.

During a global pandemic, members of our society whose work requires them to be in close physical proximity to others endanger their health when they go to work. Teachers, as we know, are concerned about returning to the classroom and the risk of infection that may bring.

A cautionary tale comes from the meat and poultry industry, especially here in Arkansas. Earlier this month, the Centers for Disease Control reported: “Among 23 states reporting COVID-19 outbreaks in meat and poultry processing facilities, 16,233 cases in 239 facilities occurred, including 86 ... COVID-19-related deaths.”ⁱⁱⁱ Although this report was published in July, it includes numbers only from April and May. As we know here in Arkansas, the problem has only worsened.

Early in the pandemic, we knew that poor people and people of color have been disproportionately affected. To put that bluntly: Not being a white European-American has been increasingly dangerous to one’s health. The CDC report tells us that the problem has been particularly acute in the meat-packing business: “Among cases with race/ethnicity reported, 87% occurred among racial or ethnic minorities.”^{iv}

To his credit, Gov. Hutchinson has done much more than express concern about illness and death associated with the poultry industry in the Latinx and Marshallese communities, primarily in Northwest Arkansas. He strong-armed legislators to secure adequate funding to address the problem.^v

Risking one’s life at work is not new. Our Talmudic sages asked: “Why does a laborer climb a tall ramp or suspend himself from a tree or risk death?”^{vi} The answer, of course, is that this worker has no better way to make a living. Therefore, as I learned from Rabbi Kolin, our sages tell us to take seriously the Torah’s reminder that workers “lives depend” on their wages.^{vii}

We should not be surprised by an Economic Policy Institute Report finding in May that “Nearly every state governor has issued executive orders that outline industries deemed ‘essential’ during the pandemic, which typically include health care, food service, and public transportation, among others. However, despite being categorized as essential, many workers in these industries are not receiving the most basic health and safety measures to combat the spread of coronavirus. Essential workers are dying as a result.”^{viii} Adding insult to fatal injury, the Report

goes on to: “Essential workers in the food and agriculture industry have the lowest median hourly wage, at \$13.12.”^{ix} Barely life-sustaining pay for life-threatening, “essential” work.

Fortunately, the U.S. House of Representatives has proposed that our federal government—that is, all Americans, collectively—come to the aid of essential workers who ensure our health and access to food. The House-proposed “HEROES Act would establish a \$200 billion ‘Heroes’ Fund’ to provide hazard pay to some essential workers in the form of a \$13 per hour pay premium on top of the workers’ regular pay.”^x By contrast, the HEALS Act, put forward by the Senate majority, “does not provide hazard pay for essential workers.”^{xi} At least not yet.

Torah and Talmud are clear: We are obligated to assure that essential workers are offered the safest possible working conditions. To the extent that their work continues to be life-threatening, whether in health care or ensuring our nation’s food supply, these essential workers deserve compensation for the risk they are taking on behalf of us all. I do not mean to suggest that our tradition requires the adoption of any one particular piece of legislation; but each of us can do our part by calling upon our representatives, in Washington and in the Arkansas General Assembly, to see to the welfare of essential workers.

And then, let us all pray, and work, for a day when all work will be highly valued and compensated accordingly, for a day when going to work does not threaten people’s health, for a day when the justice we learn in Torah will prevail.

Amen.

ⁱ Admittedly, a loose, perhaps midrashic, reading of Deuteronomy 3:23-28.

ⁱⁱ Deuteronomy 5:13.

ⁱⁱⁱ “Update: COVID-19 Among Workers in Meat and Poultry Processing Facilities—United States, April-May, 2020,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, July 10, 2020, accessed July 31, 2020 at <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6927e2.htm>.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v John Moritz, “\$7M in virus OK’d for Northwest Arkansas,” *arkansasonline.com*, July 29, 2020, accessed July 31, 2020, at <https://arkansasonline.com/news/2020/jul/29/7m-in-virus-aid-okd-for-states-nw/?latest>.

^{vi} Bava Metzia 112a.

^{vii} Deuteronomy 24:15.

^{viii} Celine McNicholas and Margaret Poydock, “Who are essential workers?” Working Economics Blog, Economic Policy Institute, May 19, 2020, accessed July 31, 2020 at <https://www.epi.org/blog/who-are-essential-workers-a-comprehensive-look-at-their-wages-demographics-and-unionization-rates/>.

^{ix} Ibid.

^x Alicia Adamczyk, “How the HEALS Act compares to the HEROES Act, CNBC, July 30, 2020, accessed July 31, 2020 at <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/07/30/how-the-heals-ac-compares-to-the-heroes-act.html>.

^{xi} Ibid.