

In Exodus 1:14 the Torah describes the Egyptians enslavement of the Israelites thus:

And they made their lives bitter with hard bondage, in mortar, and in brick, and in all manner of service in the field; all their service, wherein they made them serve, was with rigor.

What does the Torah mean that the Israelites were made to serve “with rigor?” According to the common understanding, this term refers to enforced work without limit, work without purpose or end – work in which a slave serves utterly at the whim of the slave master.

Notably, once they have left Egypt, the Israelites’ experience of “rigorous service” directly informs the way they are commanded to treat their own workers when they settle in their own land. According to Deuteronomy 24:14:

You shall not abuse a needy and destitute laborer, whether a fellow countryman or a stranger...else he will cry to God against you and you will incur guilt.

In other words, ensuring the safety and dignity of workers is not merely one commandment among many – it is coded into the very DNA of the Torah’s most central narrative. The birth of the people Israel is rooted in a story of exploited laborers and their eventual journey to redemption. Indeed, in a very real sense, their essential mission is repeatedly framed as a conscious disavowal of the slave masters of Egypt.

Thus, the question the Torah places before us is quite clear: what is the nature of the society we seek to create? Will it be an Egypt or a Promised Land?

- Will we ensure that workers receive basic protections under the law – or will we seek only greater exploitation in service of the bottom line?
- Will we provide laborers with the dignity of livable wages and adequate benefits – or will we only see sanctity in greater and greater shareholder profits?
- Will we allow workers the right to organize and engage their employers in collective bargaining – or will we allow workers to be intimidated into collective silence and compliance?

The answer, as ever, is up to us.

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