

FAITH FOR FAIR PAY



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Ki Tisa 5782 FTJC RGA – Fair Pay for Home Care

Over my years as a rabbinical student and as a rabbi, I have had the privilege to attend and conduct a number of funerals. They are somber and moving events. Each one is a little different. Three people or 100 people. Rain, snow, or sun. Different styles of eulogies and different range of emotions. There was the time a man gave a heartfelt tribute to the quality time he had spent with his father by pouring a can of beer into the grave.

But at least at the funerals of elderly people, one thing has been almost a constant – and that has been the presence of paid caregivers. They are often not Jewish. They have sometimes been to Jewish funerals before. They have had rich and complicated relationships with the recipients of their care, and they are filled with their own range of emotions, and memories. They are acknowledged and thanked by name. They often stand with or near the family. Sometimes with their own family too.

And the family of the deceased almost always speaks of these paid caregivers as “part of the family.” I don’t think this is just a platitude. It’s a way of expressing something true.

What is it about this connection, this bond, that makes it so special?

In our parashah this week, Moshe comes down from the mountain, “bearing the two tablets of the Pact, tablets inscribed on both their surfaces: they were inscribed on the one side and on the other. The tablets were God’s work, and the writing was God’s writing, engraved upon the tablets” (Exodus 32:15-16). According to our understanding, although all the mitzvot were given at Sinai, only ten of them were written by Hashem upon these tablets.

Of course, one of them is number five: כְּבֹד אֶת־אָבִיךָ וְאֶת־אִמֶּךָ לְמַעַן יָאָרְכוֹן יָמֶיךָ עַל הָאָדָמָה אֲשֶׁר־הָ' אֱלֹהֶיךָ נֹתֵן לָךְ – “Honor your father and your mother, that you may long endure on the land that your God Hashem is assigning to you” (Ex. 20:12).

As an obligation, it sounds both simple and impossibly vast. But the Talmud actually boils it down to a few concrete things: What is *kibud* (honoring)? מַאֲכִיל וּמַשְׁקָה מְלִבִּישׁ וּמְבַסֵּס מְבָרֵךְ וּמוֹצִיא – a person feeds [their parents] and gives to drink, and dresses and covers, and brings in and takes out (meaning, transporting them) – and all of this should be done with a pleasant face (BT Kiddushin 31b; SA YD 240:4).

All this, of course, is at a time when parents can’t do so for themselves. And the funds for doing so may come from the assets of the parents if they have assets (SA YD 240:5).

So, very concrete – also, very intimate. And the reality is, that many of us are not able to engage in all of these intimate and daily acts of care and honor, for many reasons whether geographical or emotional or practical.

And so we ask someone else to do it on our behalf. And that is totally fine!

In halachah, there is a term for this: *shelichut*, which is appointing someone else as our *shaliach*, emissary or agent. And the critical thing about this is: שלוחו של אדם כמותו – *sheluchו shel adam kemoto* – “a person’s agent is just like them” – equivalent to the person who sends them (Mishnah Berachot 5:5 and elsewhere).

Now, formally speaking, a non-Jew cannot be a *shaliach* for a mitzvah (BT Gittin 23b; SA Ch”M 188:1). This is because while both Jews and non-Jews may do something as a moral obligation, a Jew also does it because it’s a mitzvah. And a Gentile who’s not obligated to mitzvot as mitzvot, can’t have fully the same intention as the Jew who appointed them.

But at least on the level of moral obligation, we could speak about a different kind of *shelichut*, and experience shows that that’s the case.

Home health care aides are performing the most intimate—sometimes quite difficult—tasks of care and honor, that the employers aren’t able to do by themselves but feel a deep responsibility to provide. This generates powerful feelings of identification and gratitude. – At least where the relationships and working conditions between everyone involved are characterized by love and justice.

But here’s the problem. There aren’t enough people who want to do this holy work of care. New York State currently has the worst shortage of home care workers in the US. And they don’t just care for our elderly parents and grandparents. They also care for people of all ages who have a range of medical conditions or disabilities that require it. The shortage affects all of us who have relatives, friends, and loved ones who are in need of care – or who work in the care industry.

A big reason for the shortage is that the state pays home care workers (through institutions and labor agencies), a poverty wage – as little as \$13.20 per hour in many counties. Overwhelmingly these workers are women, immigrants, and people of color, who can’t support their families and depend on state assistance programs. They are leaving the sector in droves to find better paying jobs. Meanwhile, people who would prefer to be cared for at home are forced to go into institutional facilities.

Our congregation FTJC is a cosponsor of a statewide interfaith campaign called “Faith for Fair Pay,” which supports legislation that would bring up to 200,000 new workers into the industry by raising home care wages to at least \$35,000 a year on average—allowing them to care for others while also caring for their own families. As they help people to honor others, so too should they be honored.

Towards the end of our parashah, Moshe pleads with God, הוֹדַעְנִי נָא אֶת־דִּרְכְּךָ וְאֶדְעֶךָ – please, let me know Your ways, that I may know You” (33:13).

How can we know God? The prophet Yirmiyahu/Jeremiah provides one powerful answer in the voice of God: “וְדָן דִּין־עָנִי וְאֶבְיוֹן אֲז טוֹב הֲלוֹא־הִיא הַדַּעַת אֹתִי נְאֻם־ה' – Uphold the rights of the poor and impoverished; then it will be good. Is not this knowing Me?”

When I think back to those funerals, and why people refer to those home aides as part of the family, I think that’s what it’s about. They do holy work on behalf of others, in fact often alongside the family members. They feed and give to drink. They dress and clothe. They bring in and out. They know the good, the bad, and the ugly. They know the messy divinity of it all. That’s family.

Please see www.nycaringmajority.org for more information and ways to support this campaign. Thank you to the FTJC board, social action-social justice committee, and racial justice team, for working together to involve our community.