

Why Economic Justice Is an Existential Issue for American Jews

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In 2017, the world around us has changed markedly for the worse. It is both tempting, and in many cases accurate, to blame the onslaught of aggressive and regressive legislative acts, from the Muslim ban, deportations, limits on immigration to the United States, attacks on health-care benefits, union membership, the right to organize and collectively bargain, health and safety regulation rollbacks, to name but a few, on the president, his administration, and the Republican-led Congress.

However, when we examine the state of economic disparity in the United States, and further, the surge of anti-worker legislation in the pipeline, we have to acknowledge that much of it started pre-2017. This president and Congress were elected *because* many white people across the nation were disaffected and frustrated by the growing economic disparity in the United States, to the point where they explicitly embraced or at least chose to accept the racist nature of the campaign.

In 2016, we witnessed a candidate put forward by the top 1 percent of the country, who galvanized voters by blaming the “other” for their problems. And along with the blame, we witnessed the start of a significant rise in hate speech and crimes in the United States, with attacks on members of the Mexican, African-American, Muslim, LGBTQ, Sikh, immigrant, and Jewish communities, to name but a few. All of these communities were separately and collectively blamed for the economic and social problems affecting 90 percent of the country. The world has seen models like this before, and as Jews, we have witnessed a terrifying historic precedent in situations where economically-compromised masses chose to blame their problems on a scapegoated minority.

Jews in the United States today must recognize that they are living in a country where terrible history is repeating itself. The anti-Semitic words and actions of the white supremacists in Charlottesville, the desecration of Jewish cemeteries across the country, the divisive and demeaning language of the last election, all of this is history repeating itself. Today, the Jewish community must stand up, act up, and actively work to change the world around us or risk being responsible for watching this same world disintegrate and victimize us as it declines. Further, the Jewish community must understand and acknowledge that they cannot fight anti-Semitism in a vacuum; such an approach will fail. The only effective response is to fight anti-Semitism alongside racism, anti-LGBTQ anti-immigrant sentiment, and all of the connected issues of bigotry that have pervaded the United States discourse today.

To address the economic inequality that along with historic racism and anti-Semitism is the breeding ground for the disingenuous appeal of fascism and white supremacy in the United States, we must acknowledge the origins of the problems we face. Today, over 10 million U.S. workers put in upward of 40 hours of work each week and yet are unable to meet their families' basic needs of life; we call this demographic the "working poor." These are people who must make difficult choices of whether to adequately feed their family, pay their rent, keep their lights on, or seek medical care. For the working poor, the ideal of a living wage remains just that—an ideal, not a reality.

The contrast and divide between the top one percent and the working poor is stark. Recently, *The New York Times* [reported](#) that the richest 1 percent of U.S. households controlled 38.6 percent of the total wealth in the country, up from 36.3 percent in 2013—while the bottom 90 percent controlled only 22.8 percent.

Fighting for economic justice is an important issue for the Jewish community on a number of fronts, not least of which is that the Jewish community in our country is significantly affected by its own economic divide, with high numbers of Jews falling at or below the poverty level. According to a UJA-Federation of New York study of Jewish poverty in New York City and three suburban counties in 2011, one in four Jewish households in the city alone were living below the poverty line. The number of children in Jewish households living at or below the poverty level was 45 percent. Across the country, it is estimated that 20 percent of all Jews earn less than \$15 an hour, a threshold for the poverty line. These numbers demand immediate and significant action.

Our Jewish texts and tracts prize justice as a paramount value. A watchword of our people is "Justice, justice, you shall pursue!" For centuries, the Jewish community around the world has accepted the responsibility borne of our texts and traditions that we must not only assist the poor but empower the needy to become self-supportive and to live with dignity. Further, our texts and modern commentaries have emphasized the importance of fairness to workers because it is fundamentally the right thing to do.

"You are not to oppress the hired servant that is poor and needy, whether he be of thy brethren or a stranger, but shall give him his due wages." Those words are written in the Book of Deuteronomy. The concept of economic justice was part of the earliest of Jewish teachings.

The Jewish community would be equally well-served to follow our century-plus tradition of fierce activism for economic justice. The economic divide and related challenges facing the working poor and the bottom 90 percent of Americans today all too closely mirrors the many challenges and setbacks experienced by the hundreds of thousands of Eastern European Jewish immigrants who arrived in America between 1900 and 1914. Jewish immigrants in the early 1900s quickly discovered that the streets of their new country were not paved in gold, and the housing available typically did not include hot water or heat. They were frequently treated as unwelcome visitors, if not with direct animosity. They were offered piecework jobs, paid wages that would never support a better life, and expected to work seven-day weeks in conditions that were infamously unsafe.

It was this community who took a significant role in the growing U.S. labor movement in the early 20th century. Partly borne out of necessity, partly a continuation of a Jewish activist tradition that was started in Europe, and directly connected to the Jewish Labor Bund, the Eastern European Jewish immigrant community of workers joined the labor movement in great numbers and effected enormous change in the United States that lasted for most of the century.

In 2017, American Jewish communities are facing new challenges and new threats to their existence every day. The only way forward is to challenge the new normal, call out bigotry and discrimination as it is put forward in nationalist terms, and more importantly, provide the bottom 90 percent of our society with legislation that provides relief to the working poor in the form of a living wage, safe worksites, the right to join and organize unions, healthcare reform so that all Americans can access good healthcare at times of need, and protection from discrimination and bigotry. And, we must work to change the economic narrative which brought the United States to a place where hate speech and acts are emanating from the White House and Congress. Again, we must act collectively, as a united Jewish community.

To narrow the economic divide, Jews must advocate across a spectrum of issues, including:

- **Demand a living wage for all** . The fight for a \$15 minimum wage is a modern-day continuation of the 20th-century history of labor activism. Full-time workers should be able to live on their wages. Raising the minimum wage is one of the best routes to growing incomes and changing lives for the better, growing the economy, and changing the entire political landscape. It is also the right thing to do, and our tradition demands it.
- **Demand equitable, quality public education for all** . Allowing public schools to be under-resourced perpetuates de facto racial and economic segregation. Every public school in every locality must be supported so students graduate ready for life and the world of work. Teachers and school staff must be well-prepared and supported and accorded working conditions that are conducive to good educational outcomes. We must end our national practice of pre-selecting and condemning children to life in an underclass based on their parents' incomes, their ZIP code, their race, country of birth, or any other social factor.
- **Protect the right to union membership and to organize**. All workers deserve the dignity that comes with fair wages and benefits. Further, workers are entitled to a safe work environment. These rights were all fought for and won through the labor movement. We know that strong unions result in stronger protections for all workers, unionized and not. We must not stand by as the hard-fought rights to organize are eroded into insignificance. Ultimately, the result will be devastating to all workers, with lower wages, more injuries and deaths on the job, and punitive work schedules.
- **Demand the continuation of the Affordable Care Act up to and including a national single-payer health care system**. No one should be denied critical medical care and/or medications because of financial limitations. Access to quality and affordable healthcare is a basic human dignity that must not be denied to millions of Americans.

The Jewish community must view this period as full of both dangerous challenges and real opportunities to join together and effect change in the name of social and economic justice. Ultimately, our strength to yield real change will lie in effective base-building over individual actions. And, we must recognize that if Jews do not stand together against the widening economic divide, do not vocally condemn fascism, do not work to fix the economic problems that led to the last election's outcome, then our country's Jewish communities are guilty of actively and passively colluding with the same people who are now directly threatening our community by name.

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