

# Weekly Teaching

## September 1, 2017

Growing up, I often heard Tales of the “Workmen’s Circle,” and I was aware that my grandparents, and all of their respective siblings, had their cemetery plots pre-purchased in the Boston Workmen’s Circle Cemetery.

Workmen’s Circle was at one time an extremely popular Jewish organization that promoted social and economic justice, along with Jewish cultural and Yiddish education.

While the organization still exists today, it has shrunk greatly, but its legacy remains with us.

For my Bubbye z’l and Zaydye z’l, my grandparents of blessed memory, the Yiddish-speaking Workmen’s Circle was an invaluable resource to the newly-arrived Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe.

This primarily Eastern European Jewish mutual aid society helped its members adapt to their new life in America while providing life insurance, unemployment relief, healthcare, social interaction, burial assistance and general education.

Workmen’s Circle developed close ties with the Jewish socialist Bundists, and the organization advocated the idea of Yiddish cultural autonomy in sync with socialist ideals.

With the rise of Roosevelt’s New Deal, socialism transformed into liberalism, and by the 1960’s the organization began to wane.

However, when we celebrate Labor Day, I especially remember Workmen’s Circle, and the generation of our grandparents who suffered the economic depression, and the resistance to the development of Unions.

My Zaydye worked for the railroads for his entire career. His life and the life of his family dramatically changed in the aftermath of labor reform.

My father, a labor attorney, would commonly note how Unions were to be respected as a catalyst for helping to build the middle class and strengthen our democracy. He advocated this belief while legally representing a large corporation that had to routinely collectively bargain with the Unions.

Jewish workers were key activists in the American Labor movement, well-represented in Unions like: the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, the American Federation of Teachers, etc.

In the 21st century, the battles of the past cannot be forgotten. Issues of economic justice remain an important concern for us all.

We have a Jewish ideal to promote free market values while strengthening the resources for all who wish to work hard and succeed in economically improving their lives.

While the economics of the 21st century differ from the early 20th century, we still need to effectively address growing economic inequalities.

There are no easy answers to the difficult questions confronting our society, a fact that leaders on both sides of the political bell-curve would be well-served remembering.

Jewish tradition strongly supports that workers have divinely mandated rights.

The Torah explicitly commands of us:

- That we deal fairly and honestly with employees (Deut. 24:14-15)
- That we have in place the effective means by which to provide mutual aid (Deut. 22:1-4)

As we celebrate Labor Day weekend, let's all rededicate ourselves to helping to foster solidarity with all those who work, so as to create an economically fair society that continues to build a stronger future for our children and grandchildren.

Shabbat Shalom,

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