Our current political discourse often considers poverty as a moral issue — but perversely as a moral failure of the poor. Jewish texts, in contrast, tend to frame poverty as a failure of those who hold more power within economic structures: employers, landlords, and policy-makers. How might we reorient our economy so it becomes more values-based?

I. POVERTY, WORK, AND VIRTUE

A. Deuteronomy 24:15

Give [the impoverished worker] his wage in his day and don’t let the sun go down on it — for he is poor and lifts his soul up for it. Otherwise, he will cry to The ETERNAL and it will be accounted to you as a sin.

B. Commentary of R. Jacob ben Asher, Tur HaAroch (14th c. Castillian), on Deuteronomy 24:15

For he is poor. Most people hiring themselves out for a day at a time are poor, and depend on every penny they have earned with their labor on that day. By trusting that particular employer to pay them on time, they are, metaphorically speaking, entrusting the employer with their lives, as they depend on that prompt payment to satisfy their most basic requirements. He might die from hunger during that night if he had not been paid and become able to buy food with that money.

If one’s life, or one’s soul, depends on their wage, how does that affect your understanding of religious morality? What would it look like for this worldview to be reflected in public policy?
II. THE RIGHT TO ORGANIZE

A1. Babylonian Talmud, Bava Batra 8b
It is permitted for residents of a city to fix the measures, prices and wages as they see fit, and to enforce this with fines.

A2. Rabbi Shlomo ben Avraham ibn Aderet, T’shuwot HaRashba, 4:185, 5:125 (13th c. Spain)
[Since residents of a city may set wages — see Bava Batra 8b, above —] every association organized for one purpose is to be considered a ‘city’ even if only members of one occupation — their decisions are binding...

B. Tosefta on Bava Metzia ch. 11
24: Textile workers and dyers may decide that all material brought into the town be processed collectively. 25: Bakers may establish their work shifts, and donkey drivers may say, “To whomever [in this collective] a donkey dies, we will replace it for him.” If it dies through negligence, they are not required to replace it.

Why do you think our sages of blessed memory are concerned with the workings of the labor market? Where do they place the authority to make workplace decisions? Does this surprise you? Do you see a moral underpinning at the root of these discussions?

C. Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 38a
The Sages taught: The House of Garmu were expert in the preparation of the showbread [which was ritually displayed for a week in the Temple], and they did not want to teach [the skill to others]. The Sages [fired them and] sent for and brought [replacement] workers from Alexandria in Egypt. They knew how to bake like [House of Garmu], but they did not know how to remove [the bread from the oven] like they did.... [The way that the Alexandrians bake,] their bread becomes moldy, and [in the case of the House of Garmu,] their bread does not become moldy.

When the Sages heard of the matter, they said: Whatever the Holy Blessed One created was for God’s honor, as it is stated [Isaiah 43:7]: “Everyone who is called by My name, I have created for My glory” — let the House of Garmu return to their station. The Sages sent for them, but they did not come. They doubled their wages and they came. Each day they had been taking [wages of] 12 maneh, and today — 24 maneh. Rabbi Yehuda says: Each day, 24, and today — 48.

Who exercises power at the beginning of this text? How does it shift by the end? What mechanisms are used to shift power?

The House of Garmu did labor that was used in a ritual context. Does this strengthen or weaken the application of this text in a secular context?

A maneh is 100 dinarii (plural of dinar, a Roman currency), and the regular daily wage of a day laborer was 1 dinar; thus, the house of Garmu is earning spectacularly high wages. (Some scholars suggest this wage was for the entire family, not per worker.)

Does this fact change any of your feeling or analysis based? How do you propose to understand of religious morality in this case? Why do you think the Sages would or wouldn’t approve of the House of Garmu’s actions in this situation?

D. Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, 20th c. US, Iggrot Moshe, Choshen Mishpat 1:59

Unions in our country have a source in Jewish law, for they are ‘tradespeople’ of a given trade, and they constitute the majority... therefore they have the right to decide not to work until they receive higher pay, and they may even force the minority who did not agree [to join the union to abide by their decision].

Does the existence of explicit religious justifications for labor unions and strikes make a difference in how you think of them? What is the implication for our secular workplaces? What about Jewish institutions like synagogues and camps?

III. HOUSING: RENT CONTROL AND LANDLORD-TENANT RELATIONS

A. Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 101b

Mishnah: If one rents a house to another during the rainy season, he is not able to evict him from the holiday of Sukkot until the holiday of Passover. And in the summer season, not without 30 days notice. And in large cities—whether summer or rainy season—he must be given a year’s notice...

Gemara: If [even] one of the 30 days fell in winter, he cannot evict him from the Festival [of Sukkot] until Passover. R. Huna said: Yet if he wishes to increase the rent, he can do so. R. Nahman objected: “This is like holding him by the ‘clusters’ to force him to give up his cloak!”

Normally we think of the Jewish calendar in terms of ritual mitzvot like erecting a sukkah or eating matzah. What do you think is significant about the rabbis marking time for housing law according to the holidays?

How do the laws in Bava Metzia compare with rent regulations in your town? If you aren’t familiar with the local rent laws, does that indicate anything to you?

Do you see a connection between the labor laws in the previous section and the housing laws in this text?

B. Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 101b, continued

Mishnah: If one rents a house to another, the landlord is obligated regarding the door, the bolt, the lock, and anything that is the work of a skilled craftsperson, but anything that is not the work of a skilled craftsperson, the tenant does it...

Gemara: Our Rabbis taught: If a person rents a house to a neighbor, the landlord must erect doors, make the windows, strengthen the ceiling, and support the joists. The tenant must provide the ladder [for ascending to the loft], build the fence around the parapet, fix a gutterspout, and plaster his roof.

What implications do you see in the Talmud’s distinction between the landlord’s responsibilities and the tenant’s?
C. Tur, Choshen Mishpat 314:1

One who rents a house to his fellow must do anything that is the work of a craftsperson, such as putting up doors and opening windows if the tenant needs light. And the Ra’avad (France, 12th c.) wrote that even if there is a lot of light, if there are windows that are stuck and whose latches won’t open, the landlord must open these….

Does the Tur’s ruling seem to you to be in line with the Talmud’s or different from it?

Have you ever been a landlord? Have you ever been a tenant? How did you manage that relationship? How do these regulations compare to your interactions?

From the original Poor People’s Campaign, “Resurrection City,” which was set up on the National Mall in May and June, 1968. It housed some 3000 people and had its own zip code, 20013. Photo by Henry Zbyszynski via Creative Commons License.

Rabbi Sharon Brous speaking at the launch of the Poor People’s Campaign in Washington, DC, May 14, 2018. Photo by Gilli Getz.