



A Tomato On The Seder Plate

Standing with Farmworkers to Prevent Modern-Day Slavery and Expand Human Rights in the Fields

Background:

The CIW and Agricultural Labor

This Pesach, as we commemorate our liberation from slavery, we draw our attention to those still in bondage. The Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) is an internationally recognized organization of farmworkers who are transforming agricultural labor in America by ending human rights abuses in the tomato fields of Florida and beyond.

As recently as the 1990s, Florida's fields were deemed "ground zero for modern slavery," but today forced labor has been eliminated for 35,000 workers laboring on farms in the CIW's Presidential Medal-winning (2015) Fair Food Program. Since 2001, the Campaign for Fair Food—led by farmworkers and supported by people of conscience across the country—has brought about historic changes, making the tomato fields "probably the best working environment in American agriculture."¹ Tens of thousands of farmworkers laboring on Fair Food Program farms in seven states and three crops are now guaranteed unparalleled rights protections, and those protections need to be extended nationwide.

Hundreds of thousands of farmworkers across the nation continue to face pervasive and severe abuses everyday, including forced labor, sexual assault, violence, and retaliation for reporting abuses. These abuses shock the conscience, but they are not inevitable. Rather, they underscore the urgency of expanding the Fair Food Program. While agricultural labor will always be hard work, when farmworkers' basic rights and humanity are recognized and protected, it can be fair work.

The Fair Food Program

The FFP, which went into effect in 2011, is a win-win-win partnership:

- Through legally binding agreements, retail food corporations commit to requiring the growers that supply their tomatoes to uphold the Fair Food Code of Conduct. They also pay a Fair Food premium for every pound of tomatoes purchased, which growers pass along to farmworkers in their paychecks. From 2011-2018 over \$30 million has been paid in Fair Food Premiums.
- Growers implement on their farms a legally binding worker-designed code of conduct, which includes zero tolerance for forced labor, wage theft, and sexual harassment; on-the-clock worker-to-worker education about their rights; guaranteed breaks; and shade structures to protect workers from the Florida sun. If growers fail to uphold the code, they can lose the ability to sell to participating corporations.
- Farmworkers are guaranteed the right to respectful and safe working conditions. They earn a significant wage increase. They also become the front-line monitors of their own rights — educated about their rights in worker-to-worker, on-the-clock trainings and equipped with multiple avenues for reporting abuse, including a 24/7 hotline. Farmworkers, the architects of this solution, now have a voice in the industry and continue to drive improvements.

In addition,

- The Fair Food Standards Council provides independent monitoring of participating farms.
- Consumers like us are key allies to the CIW and integral to expanding these rights protections to more farmworkers. The economic, investor, and public pressure we apply creates the necessary incentive for more corporations to join the Fair Food Program's proven solution for advancing human rights and social responsibility.

At Pesach, we celebrate the Fair Food movement's victories while recognizing that much work is left to be done to ensure that the human rights of all farmworkers are protected. With our own story in mind, we commit ourselves to working alongside them until they, too, can commemorate their liberation.

[1] <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/25/business/in-florida-tomato-fields-a-penny-buys-progress.html>



Insert the following text in your seder after Rabban Gamliel's explanation of the seder table's three key symbols—the shankbone, matzah, and maror:

This tomato on our seder plate, what does it mean? It represents the workers who picked it and the organizing that has changed their lives.

Farm work has always been done—to this very day—by our country's most vulnerable people, and has often resulted in labor exploitation, up to and including modern slavery. But Florida's Coalition of Immokalee Workers is changing that through their groundbreaking Fair Food Program. The partnership they have created—with the support of faith communities like T'ruah—between farmworkers, growers, and corporations has won labor protections, independent enforcement of human rights, and a recognition of the basic human dignity of farmworkers.

When we see ourselves in relationship with the people who grow our food—and poor people as powerful social change agents in their own right—we become more fully whole ourselves, as the prophet Hosea taught (10:12), "Plant righteousness for yourself, harvest the fruits of goodness," and as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms, "Recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world."

Continue in your Haggadah with "In every generation we must see ourselves as if we had personally left Egypt." Leaving Egypt is not a one-time event of the past; each generation has its own Egypts we struggle to leave.

To learn more about the CIW and Fair Food Program:

"Why Wendy's Is Facing Campus Protests (It's About the Tomatoes)," by Noam Scheiber. *The New York Times*. March 7, 2019.

I Am Not a Tractor!: How Florida Farmworkers Took On the Fast Food Giants and Won, by Susan L. Marquis. (2017 book)

The Other Side of the Sea: A Haggadah for Fighting Modern-Day Slavery, by T'ruah. (available at www.truah.org/haggadah)

www.ciw-online.org

The CIW and T'ruah are founding members of the Worker-Driven Social Responsibility Network, which aims to bring models like the FFP to a wide range of workplaces. www.wsr-network.org

About T'ruah

T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights brings a moral voice and the power of the Jewish community, including over 2,000 rabbis and cantors, to protecting and advancing human rights in North America, Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories. Since 2011, T'ruah has brought over 100 rabbis and cantors to Immokalee to learn from the CIW, become "Tomato Rabbis," and return home to mobilize their communities in support of the Campaign for Fair Food.

