

Food Production & Distribution - 2009

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not pick your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger: I the Lord am your God... You shall not commit robbery. The wages of a laborer shall not remain with you until morning (Leviticus 19:9-13).

Issues

1. Recent revelations of exploitation of immigrant food workers have focused on the need to monitor working conditions.
2. Outbreaks of food-borne illnesses in the United States have indicated the need to strengthen food safety standards in food producing and processing facilities.
3. Family gardens, farmers' markets, and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) provide opportunities for healthy eating and for contributions to food security for disadvantaged groups.

Background

Women of Reform Judaism has long been concerned about the poor in our society and the conditions of workers. As early as 1936, WRJ (then the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods) passed a resolution against child labor. As recently as 1996, WRJ reiterated that position while expressing concerns over working conditions in sweat shops.

Within the last year, the issue of working conditions became especially resonant to the Jewish community when reports surfaced about abuses of workers at the largest kosher slaughtering house in the United States in Postville, Iowa. After an immigration raid against the plant, news reports circulated that the federal and state Departments of Labor had been investigating the plant on accusations of worker abuse. These included reports of children as young as thirteen working in the area where the slaughters were taking place, many wage offenses, sexual harassment, and other charges. At present over ninety charges related to worker abuse have been filed in the state courts against the owners of the plant.

Globalization and free trade agreements have brought with them an increase in trade of goods made around the world in unsafe and exploitative conditions. Groups have been formed to ensure that workers' rights are not trampled in factories that make many of the products that we buy in our stores. Other groups have been formed to improve worker conditions by certifying that goods have been made under "fair trade" conditions. Two products easily found and marketed as fair trade are coffee and chocolate.

Outbreaks of food-borne diseases have become an increasingly serious problem aggravated by the growth in global food production and distribution. In the United States the Center for Disease Control (www.cdc.gov) estimates that each year 76 million Americans get sick, more than 300,000 are hospitalized and 5,000 die from tainted food. Necessary steps to insure the food supply include: strengthening safety standards for growing, harvesting, and transporting domestic foods; instituting a broader inspection system and a more effective tracking system to trace the sources of food-borne disease.

While working conditions have become a concern, so have factory farms and the divide between the small farmer and the public. This is especially a problem in rural areas and in inner cities where poor people do not have grocery stores from which to purchase fruits and vegetables. At the large urban and suburban supermarkets, the fruits and vegetables are imported from around the globe, often from factory farms, profits

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going to all those between the producers and the stores with little going to local small-scale family farmers.

To respond to these conditions, small-scale family farmers are participating in community farmer's' markets and have created cooperatives called CSA's (Community Supported Agriculture) to sell their fruits and vegetables directly to consumers. Congregations and individuals have supported local farmers by joining CSA's or even creating their own. Some congregational CSA's have given surplus fruits and vegetables to food banks for distribution to the poor.

Resolution

Women of Reform Judaism urges its affiliates to:

1. Advocate locally and nationally for legislation that enforces regulations to strengthen food safety standards for growing, harvesting, and transporting food and that monitors working conditions and environmental issues in food processing facilities,
2. Sponsor sisterhood and congregational programs on healthy eating; encourage members to take advantage of the fresh foods available at local farmers' markets.
3. Encourage members and their families to create their own gardens and share the produce with local food banks, and
4. Educate their members to look for items, such as chocolate and coffee, marketed as "fair trade" to sell in their Judaica shops and for their personal and family use. Encourage the use of fair trade items at sisterhood and congregational events where food is served.