

## **A Light to the Nations? Historical and Contemporary Cases**

Lesson plan for adult education

*This lesson plan is part of a larger Go & Learn lesson entitled “We Have Found You Wanting: Labor Activism and Communal Responsibility,” which can be found at <http://jwa.org/teach/golearn/sep08/>.*

*This lesson plan can be used for a program on the concept of Or LaGoyim [“light to the nations”] or as a starting point for a new community project.*

1. Begin by offering some background on Rose Schneiderman. See the introductory essay on the main page of this edition of *Go & Learn* (see website listed above).
2. Discuss the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire. Though some in your group may be familiar with this event, you should provide background information about the fire, the community in which it happened, and also the fact that it was a Jewish-owned business, employing large numbers of Jewish immigrants. If you want more information than what is included in the introductory essay, see <http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire>.
3. *Or LaGoyim* – A Light to the Nations

Introduce the above term to your participants. If the participants have heard this term before, ask them to clarify how it has been used. If not, use the following information to give them grounding in the concept and how it has been used by the State of Israel and Jews elsewhere.

- The phrase “*Or LaGoyim*” first appears in Isaiah, chapter 42:6-7

*I the Lord have called you in righteousness, and will hold your hand, and will keep you, and give you for a covenant of the people, **for a light to the nations**; To open the blind eyes, to*

*bring out the prisoners from the prison, and those who sit in darkness, out of the prison house.*

- David Ben Gurion took the term “A light to the nations” from Isaiah and applied it to the State of Israel. His hope was that Israel would be a moral state that would serve as a beacon to all other nations. Given Ben Gurion’s use of the phrase, some now interpret “*Or LaGoyim*” as referring to Israel, while others see this as a directive intended for the entire Jewish people.

Begin a discussion with your participants on the concept of being a “light to the nations.” You may use the following questions as a guide:

- How do you interpret what Isaiah meant by the phrase?
- What do you think about Ben Gurion’s application of the concept to Israel? Is it a worthy goal? A realistic one?
- Do you have any concerns about the concept of “*Or LaGoyim*”? Do you think it implies Jewish moral superiority or merely frames a goal we should strive to achieve?
- Are other groups also responsible for modeling moral behavior? Or is it a double standard?
- Do you think “*Or LaGoyim*” should be read as a metaphor only, rather than as a practical dictum? If so, as a metaphor for what?
- How do we respond when Israel/the Jewish people fall short of this ideal?

#### 4. Return to the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire

Following the fire, Schneiderman made a speech at a memorial for the 146 workers who died. (See main page of this *Go & Learn* for text of her speech from April 2, 1911, <http://jwa.org/teach/golearn/sep08/>.)

Read this speech together.

Consider the following questions:

- What does Schneiderman mean when she compares working conditions in her time to the Inquisition? What do you think of this comparison? Is it too extreme?
- Who are the “good people of the public” to whom Schneiderman addresses her criticism? Is Schneiderman speaking to Jews? To workers? To the middle class? What does she believe is their responsibility? Do you agree?
- What do you think are the responsibilities of Jewish business people? Should their responsibilities be different than others? What about the Jewish community in general? Should Jews be held to a different standard by their own people?

5. The Postville, Iowa crisis: When Kosher isn't “Kosher”

Postville, Iowa, is home to Agriprocessors, the largest kosher slaughterhouse in the U.S. In the spring of 2008, Agriprocessors (and the Rubashkin family that owns it) became the focus of multiple investigations into the hiring and treatment of their employees, including over 9000 child labor violations.

See the following articles for background information:

*New York Times*, July 27, 2008 – “After Iowa Raid, Immigrants Fuel Labor Inquiries”

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/27/us/27immig.html?pagewanted=1&r=1&hp#>

*Forward*, September 10, 2008 – “Kosher Industry Looks to Future in Wake of Agriprocessors Charges”

<http://www.forward.com/articles/14169/>

Events such as this raise questions in the Jewish community about what responsibility the entire community bears for legal and ethical

violations within Jewish businesses and institutions. This particular situation is complicated further by the fact that many communities rely on a limited number of kosher meat processors to provide them with what they need to keep kosher.

Discussion:

- What have you heard about this issue?
- How do you think the Jewish community should respond?
- Discuss some of the actions being taken by the Reform and Conservative movements (Heksher Tzedek - <http://www.hekshertzedek.org/>), and by the Orthodox Union (<http://jta.org/cgi-bin/iowa/breaking/110297.html>).
- Do you think these are good responses?
- What do you think is the best solution?
- What do you think people should do if Rubashkin's is the only Kosher meat distributor in town? In other words, which do you feel takes priority – observing *kashrut* or observing laws about the ethical treatment of workers?
- Do you think it is reasonable to add a level of ethical *kashrut* to the traditional understanding of *kashrut* (in which ethics are not a consideration)?
- Can you think of any other rituals or *mitzvot* where ethics should/could be added?
- What is our communal responsibility in this situation? What is our individual responsibility?
- Recall this line from Rose Schneiderman's speech: "*We have tried you good people of the public and we have found you wanting.*" What would Schneiderman require of the Jewish people in today's world?

You may choose to use this program to kick off a drive towards making your institution's activities more ethical. Some examples:

- Making synagogue/organization's events less wasteful of food and resources (such as paper, plastic, etc).

- Beginning a drive to recycle at ALL synagogue or organizational events – even in states that do not require this.
- Making sure that all products sold in and bought by your institution follow the ethical guidelines that your community feels are best representative of them (which entails a previous step of defining these ethical guidelines for the institution).
- Ensuring that all employees at your organization are being treated properly and perhaps beyond the bare minimum levels required by state and federal guidelines. (See Rabbi Jill Jacobs' *teshuvah* on the living wage:  
[http://www.jewishjustice.org/download/section72/Jacobs\\_Living\\_Wage\\_Teshuvah.pdf](http://www.jewishjustice.org/download/section72/Jacobs_Living_Wage_Teshuvah.pdf)).

If your group is based in a synagogue, this would be a great opportunity to bring in the Rabbi, Cantor, educator, or relevant lay leader to discuss these issues and how they impact your specific community. What should be your community's plan of action here?