

Jewish Responsibility, Human Responsibility

Lesson plan for junior high or high school

This lesson plan comes from 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 has two parts. You may choose to do one or both. For either, begin by offering some background on Rose Schneiderman. See the introductory essay on the main page of this *Go & Learn* lesson (found on the website listed above).

“A Light to the Nations”

1. Begin with a discussion of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire: give students background information on the fire, including the working conditions that preceded it, as well as the fact that this Jewish-owned business took advantage of its primarily immigrant population.

If you want more information than what is included in the introductory essay, see <http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire>.

Discuss with the students:

- What was the responsibility of these factory owners to protect their workers? Does it matter that they and many of their workers were Jewish, or is this irrelevant?

Following the fire, Schneiderman made a speech at a memorial for the 146 workers who died. (See main page of this edition of *Go & Learn* for text of the speech.)

2. Have students read this speech together. Some questions to consider:

- What does Schneiderman mean when she compares working conditions in her time to the Inquisition? (You may need to provide some background information about the Inquisition here.)

- What do you think of this comparison? Do you agree that there is an “Inquisition” in every generation?
- What are the responsibilities of Jewish business people? Should their responsibilities be different than others? Should Jews be held to a higher standard by their own people?
- To whom does Schneiderman address her words: “*I would be a traitor to these poor burned bodies if I came here to talk good fellowship. We have tried you good people of the public and we have found you wanting...*” Who are the “good people of the public”? Jews? Workers? Middle class people? What does she believe is their responsibility? Do you agree?
- Schneiderman ends with the following quote: “*I can’t talk fellowship to you who are gathered here. Too much blood has been spilled. I know from my experience it is up to the working people to save themselves. The only way they can save themselves is by a strong working-class movement.*” Why does Schneiderman feel this is the only solution? Do you agree? Can you think of any contemporary parallels? Do you believe there are times when the only thing to do is to “save oneself”? Give examples.

3. Read 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.*

Traditionally, Israel has been called by its founders “a light to the nations” – *Or LaGoyim*. Some people have understood this to mean that both the State of Israel and the Jewish people should behave in a way that is more “upright” than other nations. This concept can be problematic both in terms of what it implies about other nations (i.e. that they are in

some way inferior) and in terms of the difficulties in fulfilling this expectation. Nevertheless, the concept persists in many Jewish circles.

See the following article by Yossi Abramowitz for another way to interpret this concept, applying it to issues of environmental responsibility:

http://www.shma.com/june_08/renewable_light.htm

You may either read this article with your students, or summarize it for them.

4. Discuss what it means to be a “light to the nations.”

- How do you understand this phrase? That Jews have a special responsibility to show non-Jews “the right way”? That all of us have a responsibility to be role models for others? One might choose to understand this on an individual level, or as part of a given community – school, town, federal government, religious group, etc.
- How do you feel about this concept?
- How might we serve as a “light to the nations”? Brainstorm to come up with 3-5 concrete ways in which to be a “light.” Ideas might include:
 - Making lifestyle changes that model responsible behavior, such as reducing the carbon footprint of your family and/or community
 - Volunteering time to aid local needy people, such as by working in a soup kitchen, reading to the elderly, or tutoring school children
 - Launching a living wage campaign at your school/synagogue (see section on “The Ethics of Consumption” for more information on this)

You may choose to take one of their ideas and focus on actual ways to put it into practice. Create a student committee to work on developing this project. You may also choose to merge this with an existing Tikkun Olam committee.

The Living Wage and Ethics of Consumption

1. Begin with a short discussion on some of the unique challenges that Rose faced as an immigrant, as a child who lost her father, and as a child living in poverty. You might ask the students to consider the differences between the conditions of Rose's childhood and their own.

Emphasize to the students that there are still children, even in the U.S., who must work to make money for their family's survival. You may choose to introduce some statistics on children living below the poverty line in the U.S., and discuss some of the stresses of being an immigrant – legal or undocumented – in 21st century America. See the following website for more information

http://www.nccp.org/publications/pub_684.html.

Some topics to discuss from these statistics include:

- differences in poverty levels among various racial minorities
- how immigrants fare in the struggle to overcome poverty
- impact of poverty on children (i.e., health, nutrition, education, future employment opportunities)

2. Introduce the concept of the “living wage.” One way that many U.S. social justice organizations are fighting poverty is by campaigning for a “living wage.” Ideally, every full time job would pay enough to allow people to live and feed their families reasonably in the current economy.

In reality, many people are paid a federally-mandated “minimum wage” which is actually too low to afford even adequate nutrition and health care for their families. Some people – often immigrants who may be hired and paid illegally – are not even paid the legal minimum wage. Many of them are without any recourse to complain, since they may be undocumented and/or unable to get a better job.

One recent example of Jewish attention to the issue of the living wage is a *teshuvah* (a rabbinic response to a question of Jewish law) by Rabbi Jill Jacobs, in which she concludes that institutions of the Conservative movement should treat their workers with dignity and ensure that they make a living wage. See

http://www.jewishjustice.org/download/section72/Jacobs_Living_Wage_Teshuvah.pdf

This *teshuvah* was passed by the Conservative Movement's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards in May 2008.

2. Introduce the concept of the ethics of consumption. Campaigns that target child labor and sweatshops – like those in which Rose Schneiderman worked – ask us to consider our own ethics of consumption. Do we ensure that our clothing, food, and other possessions are made in factories or grown on farms that pay fair wages? Do they employ or abuse underage children? Examples of these campaigns include the British-based No Sweat (<http://www.nosweat.org.uk/about>) and Coop America's anti-sweatshop program

(<http://www.coopamerica.org/programs/sweatshops/>). The Progressive Jewish Alliance has an anti-sweatshop campaign and related curriculum called “No Shvitz: Your One-Stop Guide to Fighting Sweatshops” (<http://www.pjalliance.org/article.aspx?ID=282&CID=1>).

See the following from Human Rights Watch on child labor around the world: <http://hrw.org/children/labor.htm>

3. Discuss individual and communal responsibility as it relates to ethics of consumption and the living wage. You may use the following questions to guide your discussion:

- Who has the responsibility in ensuring that human and civil rights are maintained in manufacturing and farming? Is it the owners and managers? Is it the stores that distribute these items? (i.e., Do stores like Walmart bear the brunt of this responsibility?)
- What responsibility do we have as consumers? How far do we take this responsibility? Is it enough to make educated decisions about

- what we purchase? Should we boycott or picket stores that sell items that rely on child labor or sweatshop labor? Is it our responsibility to educate others about these issues?
- What responsibility do we have as community members to ensure that all employees of our institutions are paid a living wage? Who sets these policies and how can we influence them?
 - Brainstorm ways in which we may address our own “ethics of consumption” and the issue of living wages in our communities (towns and cities, schools, synagogues, etc.)

4. Activity

If you have computer access, have students look at whatever clothing and personal belongings they have with them and research online the practices of the manufacturers who made their items. For example, if they have an iPod, research Apple; if they are wearing Abercrombie and Fitch, have them look up what country their article of clothing comes from and try to determine the employment practices that may have been involved. They may find that they are buying from companies that are following labor practices that they are comfortable with, and they may also uncover more troubling information. Either way, this “research” helps us get into the practice of being more thoughtful about where our material possessions come from and who made them.