



Magen Tzedek - Responding to a Higher Responsibility

We in the Conservative movement are delighted that the principles of Magen Tzedek have permeated the consciousness of the American Jewish community. Magen Tzedek, which is not a hekhsher or kashrut certification, instead reflects the highest standard on a variety of important issues: employee wages and benefits, health and safety, animal welfare, corporate transparency and environmental impact of food production. Magen Tzedek demonstrates that ritual and ethical commandments have an equal place at our tables.

There has been much in print lately about Magen Tzedek (and some confusion about it because some people call it by its original name, Hekhsher Tzedek). Much of what has appeared has focused on the rabbis who have worked so diligently to create the message and mission of Magen Tzedek. We are inspired by the vision and the work of Rabbi Morris Allen and Rabbi Michael Siegel, who saw the urgent need for the Jewish community to have a way to express its adherence to the Torah's ethical principles that God has commanded of our people. Their insistence that the dignity of every human being be protected and their willingness to withstand the unjustified criticism that such moral vision engenders is a credit to our movement. We are shocked and dismayed that anyone would fail to see anything but merit in their holy work.

The Torah says, "Do not oppress the hired laborer who is poor and needy, whether he is one of your people or one of the sojourners in your land within your gates... lest he cry out to God about you, for this will be counted as a sin for you" (Deuteronomy 24:15). The Talmud expounds: "'His life depends on them' indicates that anyone who denies a hired laborer his wages, it is as though he takes his life from him." The Talmud informs us that God is concerned about workers' rights and dignity, and employers must take that seriously.

As Conservative Jews, we understand that the commandments bein adam l'Makom (between human beings and God) and bein adam l'havero (between human beings) are commanded equally by God. Ethical standards are found in the Torah alongside the laws of kashrut and should be treated as equally binding by producers of kosher food. Kashrut must involve more than simply eating some foods and not others, or combining foods in some ways but not others. We must look at the act of eating as a wholly holy enterprise.

Because the Torah commands it, we as Conservative Jews seek to assure through Magen Tzedek that the holiness of eating includes how food production workers are treated. The Magen Tzedek seal signifies to the public this food was produced adhering to the highest ethical standards, just as the hekhsher signifies that the food is kosher.

Yes, our critics are correct when they say the absence of appropriate working conditions does not render food treif (unkosher), but Torah tradition is clear that there is a higher Jewish level of ethical practices expected in the workplace. We must inspect the way in which workers are treated just as we inspect the ingredients that go into our food.

Through the years kashrut organizations have kept their focus exclusively on an ever-more-stringent understanding of kashrut while expending little or no time to make sure that the workers making the food were treated as they should have been treated. As a result, some producers came to disregard the mitzvot governing the proper treatment of workers.

The goal of Magen Tzedek is simple -- to do as much as possible to insure that workers' rights are upheld and their dignity is observed. We must make it impossible for anyone to say that we consumers stood idly by as the workers who produced our food were mistreated. Magen Tzedek will allow us to say that food that carry that seal was produced by a business that follows federal law, state law, and Jewish law on the treatment of workers, and takes that obligation as seriously as it takes Jewish law on food ingredients.



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