



The Observant Life Book Club

THE HALAKHAH OF CO-WORKERS

(Source: “Among Co-Workers”, Barry J. Leff, *The Observant Life*, Martin S. Cohen, Senior Editor, The Rabbinical Assembly, 2012, pp. 529-39)

While the “co-worker” relationship is unknown in the Bible or in rabbinic literature relations with co-workers can be as important as relations with family members and difficulties in our jobs can easily spill over into the rest of our lives when we “bring the work home with us.” While our ancient ancestors were primarily farmers or shepherds the halakhic literature - as Rabbi Leff points out - does include principles guiding the relationship between employers and employees as well as “issues of competition” among independent tradespeople (a term that applied to so many Jews throughout history and throughout the diaspora). And of course Jewish tradition has a great deal to say about how we should treat each other in whatever context we may have a relationship. The topic of this session, then, will be the “halakhah of co-workers” in which the group can consider how our ancient tradition can help us deal with the many difficult and complicated situations that arise when we “go to work”!

TASK:

Before coming to the book club meeting members should read Rabbi Leff’s chapter and come prepared to talk about a work situation they experienced (or heard about from someone close to them). The last few pages of the chapter can be helpful in thinking about this presentation and how to apply the various concepts covered in the chapter to your “real life” case study:

Improper Speech:

Perhaps most work place problems stem from some form of speech but there are distinctions that have significant consequences:

- *Hotza’at sheim ra* - “creating a bad name” (slander) - saying untrue things about someone, the worst form of gossip
- *L’shon ha-ra* - talking about other people with information that is essentially true but also negative and damaging
- *R’kbilut* - gossip *per se* - information that might even be positive but the speaker doesn’t have the right to share (without permission)

The Obligation to Rebuke

This concept applies to reporting on a situation that involves seeing someone doing wrong. But were the “rebuker’s” motives pure or was there some “hidden agenda”? Was the reporting done privately? Did the rebuker first try speaking with the co-worker?

Stumbling Blocks

A difficult workplace situation can arise when a co-worker suggests or facilitates an unwise or forbidden act by another co-worker. What are our responsibilities when the action isn’t ours but the speech that prompted it was?

Respecting Boundaries

Hassagat g'vul - originally the trespassing of actual boundaries, this concept can be applied to issues regarding the space of a co-worker: honoring his/her privacy (phone conversations, material on their desks) or encroaching on his/her responsibilities

Modesty

In terms of the workplace *tz'ni'ut* can be applied to office romances which should not involve public displays of affection or other inappropriate behavior and can easily lead to violations of the concepts outlined above.

PROCESS:

The group facilitator for the meeting should invite a brief presentation of the case study (5 minutes at most) that applies one or more of the concepts outlined above, a summary of how the situation was (or was not) resolved and whether or not there were ongoing consequences in the workplace.

The group discussion (10-15 minutes) that follows should consider how successfully this situation was managed and to what extent the outcome conformed to these principles that Jewish tradition considers fundamental to human relations:

- *Mip'nei darkehei shalom* - “for the sake of peace”
- (Avoiding) *b'illul ha-sheim* - “the desecration of God’s name”
- (Being mindful of) *B'tzelem elohim* - all people are created in God’s image