

Our member, Don Siegel, sent me this Haggadah: The Labor Seder Haggadah, published by the New England Jewish Labor Committee. There's minimal Hebrew and not much about the exodus of the Jewish people from Egypt. There's a lot about labor activism; about Jews – rabbis and congregations - partnering with the non-Jewish community to support the rights of workers. The Haggadah, and the group that supports it, was a surprise for me. It's been a long time since I've heard about Jewish labor activism.

We Jews were among the founders of the labor movement in this country. Samuel Gompers was the founder of the American Federation of Laborers. Rose Schneiderman was the founder of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, a group that was later led by David Dubinsky for thirty years.

Perhaps as we got more affluent, or as so many of us went into professions, Jewish labor activism declined. We were more comfortable, and we had less contact with blue collar working men and women.

There is, however, one great story – perhaps many of you know it. It’s the story of Aaron Feuerstein, whose family owned Malden Mills, a textile company in Lawrence, MA. In 1995, Malden Mills was struggling – and then the factory burned down. Not only did Feuerstein refuse to build a new factory in the south or in Asia; or take the insurance money and retire; he paid all of workers their full salaries for 60 days and rebuilt the factory in Lawrence. He said, “I think it was a wise business decision, but that’s not why I did it. I did it because it was the right thing to do.” Malden Mills struggled after the fire; it declared bankruptcy and was bought out. I don’t know if Feuerstein is still part of the company. But he insisted on taking care of his workers.

The concern for the working man and woman was not a graft onto Judaism. It grew out of it naturally.

- From the constant reminder of the Torah to remember that we were slaves in Egypt.
- To the opening of the Haggadah with the invitation to those who are hungry to enter and eat.
- And toward the end, we invite Eliyahu HaNavi to our Seder.

Who is Eliyahu HaNavi? He's the one who wanders the world to see how Jews are living. One of the most famous folktales of Eliyahu HaNavi is The Three Wishes. It's the story of Elijah walking down a road when he passes a small, run down house. He knocks on the door to say that he's a poor, hungry traveler. Could the family spare some food? An old poor couple explain that they don't have much but whatever they have, they will share with him. At the end of the meal, Elijah grants them three wishes. The couple chooses money, clothing and a

palace. A year later, Elijah comes back to see how the couple has used their gift. He comes to the gate of the home, now protected by guards and dogs. He asks for food, but the guards send him away. The couple comes out in their fine clothes, but they no longer recognize the prophet. They say they have nothing for him. ... They have forgotten where they came from.

Among the messages of the Seder and of the Torah itself is that we must never forget where we came from. If we had an affinity with the working man and woman of this country, it is because we remembered that not too long ago, that was us.

Here are two stories I've told you before.

- One was about my grandfather, the fruit peddler, who hired a young African American boy to work with him on his truck. One day, before he went out on his route, he took the boy to a diner

for breakfast. The owner said, "I'll serve you, but I won't serve him." My grandfather said, "If you won't serve him, then you won't serve me and walked out."

- The other story was about Izzy Oster who, growing up very poor, who danced on street corners during the Depression, made a fortune in scrap metal after the War. Every year at Christmas time, he loaded up his station wagon with food and toys and made deliveries in poor neighborhoods of Tampa.

As our situation in America has changed, so too has our politics. But however we vote, I believe we must always remember that it was not too long ago that we were the little guy. We were the manual laborer; we were the outsider; we were the ones who had little.

When I think of those who came before me, I remember how little they had. When I see those who have less, I think, "It was not so long ago

that that was my family.” If the Seder reminds us of anything, it should be that.