

Balak 5780

Living Wage for Care Workers

Rabbi Aaron Goldstein
4 July 2020



Numbers 22:21-35
Micah 5:6-6:8

There is no doubt that three is a magic number! Ancient society obviously figured out pretty early on that the average human brain could not recall more than 3 items at a time.

Three is a number chosen to show commitment as Jewish tradition suggests turning away a potential proselyte before accepting their integrity. As you would suspect, this is not your Rabbi's practice. It also takes three attempts in the fable of Bilaam and his talking donkey, for the Seer for Hire to wake up and smell the coffee - to be aware of reality

So beautifully crafted, we experience the world narrowing in on our unwitting protagonist and an ass stating in comic phrase, "Look, I am the ass that you have been riding along until this day! Have I been in the habit of doing this to you?"

Too often, we live our lives through this metaphoric fable, wandering through life with little awareness of what is really going on around us; or being too over-whelmed or apathetic to act on what we do know and experience.

The Covid-19 pandemic came and slapped us in the face. We came to many realisations about the planet we live on, the society we live in and our own lives. So many vows were made about life changing forever and that we would never go back to the way we were before. On a day that some see as a significant moment of turning back, will we forget what we wanted to change? What were the three things that you remember saying had changed in your life forever.

I would like to suggest one cause, because you can take one step today towards making it a reality. That is to make a massive change to the way we pay our keyworkers and in particular care workers: To pay a Living Wage. Increasing research shows that:

"Care homes in England that use more agency staff or do not offer sick pay are more likely to have higher levels of Covid-19 infection among residents... the Office for National Statistics... findings, highlighting how staff often on low pay and zero-hours contracts (and no sick pay) may have inadvertently contributed to the spread of the virus, came as the coronavirus-related death toll in care homes in England and Wales rose to 19,394."

Professor Sarah Harper, Clore Professor of Gerontology at University of Oxford, said: "Many of the care workers either work through agencies or have multiple roles, and they can visit several care homes and homes in the community all on the same day, which can further spread the infection between the most vulnerable groups of the population.

"This again raises the question of the state of the social care system, which has been in desperate need of reform for years. It is underfunded, and the care workers are underpaid. If we look at other countries where care home deaths were not as high, we can see a very different system of trained, respected carers, properly rewarded for their difficult work, and not reliant on multiple agency jobs to earn a living."

I vividly recall experiencing Rabbi Jonah Pesner at our LJ Biennial four years ago introducing community organising in the Citizens model. An example he brought was that of Detroit Care Homes populated by elderly people of means and staffed by those whose backgrounds seriously valued care, care for the elderly in particular and all family networks.

Regrettably their pay conditions were atrocious as were their leave arrangements so being present for their child's sports day or Christmas play necessitated taking unpaid sick days. The use of agency staff increased, the costs to the home providers increased and of course, the quality of care decreased.

All parties were angry until a community group asked the resident's families - mainly Jews, and the carers - mainly of Latin American backgrounds, what their issues were. Tears were shed at the realisation of shared interest when two people sat with each other and heard each other's stories. They discovered that they had a common interest and activated it, addressing the care companies to afford a living wage and employment conditions that allowed for time to be a parent or child: to be a human being involved in their own lives as well as that of those they cared for. It was a win-win-win, three parties all improving their lot, their dignity and their humanity.

This day, you can join with Citizens in the UK, indeed the parent organisation of which this Synagogue is a founder organisation of the Harrow Citizens branch. A few weeks ago hints were that the Government were listening to the evidence presented every moment through the pandemic, that it is so unjust that the mainly female, often BAME, group of key workers are risking so much doing such vital work yet paid and treated appallingly.

There was then a second signal two days ago when our Prime Minister said the government are urgent about fixing "the problem of social care" and has long been an advocate of the real Living Wage.

Let us provide a third step so that thinking and speaking is translated into action. Today, contact your local MP and insist that they act to dignify our publicly funded care workers with a real living wage, ahead of the spending announcement on 8 July.

One of Bilaam's blessings on the Israelites is "*Ma Tovu ohalekha Yaacov mishknotecha Yisrael* – How good are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel (Num 24:5)!" Many, in their need or particularism, have interpreted the parallel verse to mean wherever, whenever and whatever we are. As Liberal Jews, we know there are caveats: Our goodness is defined by our actions. Let's nudge the government over the line and make three a magic number for our care workers.