

# Perspectives on Jewish Business Ethics

## Jewish Business Ethics: Introductory Perspective by Rabbi Yitzhok Breitowitz

Let me give you a story which illustrates how this works in the business context. There was a rabbi, Rabba Bar Chanah who once hired workmen to transport barrels of wine for him. They were negligent and as a result, the barrels of wine broke and this man incurred a severe financial loss. He took the workers to court, suing them for the value of the wine that was destroyed and the workers' only defense was, "You know, we can't afford it. We don't have the money. What are you going to do about it?" So the courts found in favor of the workers. So, Rabba Bar Chanah questioned the court and said, "Is this the law? Is it not the law that I am entitled to recover for their negligence?" And the court told him, "For you, this is the law. You are a righteous person and because you are a righteous person, you have to take into account the equities of the situation, the unfairness, the fact that these are people who need the money, etc., and, therefore, you are compelled by virtue of your righteous status to go beyond pressing your exact legal rights." Well then, and perhaps this is an ancient example of chutzpah, they turned around and sued him for their wages. They said, "Well, wait a second, you didn't pay us our wages for that day." So, he was dumbfounded. He said, "Okay, it's one thing to say I can't recover from you but are you going to recover from me when you broke my wine because of your negligence?" Astoundingly, the court said, "Yes! That's a good idea. You have to pay." And, once again, he asked, "Is this the law?" And they told him, "For you, that's the law. These are people who need the money and therefore, you must go beyond the law."

Read more at <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/introductory-perspective-into-jewish-business-ethics>

## Jewish Employer-Employee Relations by Rabbi Jill Jacobs

While making certain demands on workers, the bulk of Jewish labor law imposes obligations on employers. This emphasis on the responsibilities of employers reflects an understanding of the essential power imbalance between employers and employees, as well as an internalization of the Exodus narrative. Often cited within discussions of labor law is the biblical verse, "they are my servants" (Leviticus 25:43), understood by the rabbis to imply "and not servants to servants." The experience of slavery and redemption instills within the lawmakers a wariness about any situation in which one person might, de facto, become the servant of another.

The central biblical text on the obligation of employers emphasizes the poverty of workers:

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. Give him his wages in the daytime, and do not let the sun set on them, for he is poor, and his life depends on them, lest he cry out to God about you, for this will be counted as a sin for you." (Deuteronomy 24:14-15)

This text assumes a situation in which workers are hired and paid by the day. In our contemporary context, this may be compared to people paid by the hour — that is, people paid according to the time worked, and not according to the job completed.

Read more at <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/jewish-employee-employer-relations/>

*More Reading:*

**A Jewish Work Ethic:** <https://www.oztorah.com/2011/05/a-jewish-work-ethic-ask-the-rabbi/#.W5Hwbc5KiM9>

**The Origin of the Jewish Work Ethic:** [https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/1062252/jewish/The-Origin-of-the-Jewish-Work-Ethic.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/1062252/jewish/The-Origin-of-the-Jewish-Work-Ethic.htm)

**The Jewish Ethicist: Ethical Work:** <http://www.aish.com/ci/be/48890777.html>

**Jewish Business Ethics 101:** <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/jewish-business-ethics-101/>

**Is There a Jewish Work Ethic?:** <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/work-in-jewish-thought/>

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For businesses who are confronted with the stress of laying off employees see the Outplacement Services webpage link <https://www.jcfs.org/jvs/what-we-do/employer-services/outplacement-services>