

# MAARIV

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In the middle of one of his classes at school a pupil noticed a cleaning worker standing on the second floor of an adjacent building cleaning windows. The worker was unsecured, just hanging there. The pupil pointed this out to his teacher who quickly found the janitor. "He's not our worker. He works for a contractor," the Janitor explained. The pupil and the teacher continued to the teachers' room where they found the school principal in the middle of a meeting. They pulled the principal out and forced him to get the cleaning worker down quickly.

"The message we get, when something like this happens in our school, is that a clean window is worth more than the life of the worker", says the pupil who is a volunteer in Bema'aglei Tzedek. "Its clear that the school is responsible and the principal would not let anyone stand like that on the second floor."

Anyone entering the Bema'aglei Tzedek offices without any preparation would think he has come upon the situation room of the Ministry of Social Welfare. You find a group of caring young people all dealing with problems of the weak members of society. The young activists do not hesitate in declaring that they are about to change the Israeli public agenda. If this sounds a little arrogant or perhaps naïve to anyone, that person is invited to spend an hour with them to be convinced, that with all the evils around us, there is hope.

Not so long ago, Asaf Banner, Shmuli Bing, Efrat Degani, Chili Troper, Gidon Rosenberg, and had just finished their army service and were looking around to do something good. Today, after 8 years of activity, they can be credited with a not so short list of successes. In their "good neighbor" project they are feeding a 1000 needy families every week. In their "social seal" project they are issuing certificates of good social criteria to restaurants and coffee shops that are committed to employee's rights and accessibility of their business to the disabled. In other programs they are bringing students and mobile coffee shops to distressed populations such as shelters for battered women and old age homes. In the last year they are passionately doing battle for workers of

## Justice in the Slave Market

**"With our eyes open we are all stealing from the new immigrant from Russia who works as a security guard and from the cleaning woman who came from Ethiopia", says Shmuli Bing, one of the founders of "Bema'aglei Tzedek" a public association. Within the framework of their activities they recruited hundreds of school children to fight for the rights of employees of independent contractors who provide security and cleaning services. Most of these workers don't know their rights and don't know what they should receive. A volunteer of the association: "This is moral corruption. When we close our eyes to it we become parties to it."**

*Kalman Libskind, Maariv*

independent contractors providing security and cleaning services. To this fight they have attracted hundreds of enthusiastic school children.

Last week Member of Knesset, Shelly Yechimovitz, invited Bing and his friends to present their analysis of a public tender to Education Minister Yuli Tamir. The tender, run by the local authorities company, chose contractors to provide security guards for all the schools in the country. "This public tender is perhaps the largest in our economy. It affects 4,500 workers and it is a classic case of intentional criminal exploitation of a weak population," says Bing in anger. "The price per hour that was announced by the local authorities company to be paid to the security contractors is a lot lower than the amount they must pay their workers. This is without considering that the contractors want to make a profit. If the contractor doesn't want to lose, and clearly he won't lose, he will take the money from the workers pension fund and won't pay him for overtime or for travel expenses. Whoever set the prices for the tender as a losing proposition for the contractor is a party to this kind of exploitation."

This example is not an exception to the rule. At Bema'aglei Tzedek they have analyzed a whole list of public tenders for government and public services. "All of them", says Bing, "are stealing, knowingly, with their eyes open from the new immigrant from Russia who works as a security guard and from the cleaning woman who came from Ethiopia."

### Brain Washing

Bing presents, as an example, the tender for cleaning services issued by Yad Vashem six months ago. "The cost per hour that the winning contractor committed to pay his workers is less than the minimum wage set by law. This guarantees that the workers will earn less than a legal wage. Whoever sat on the tender committee should have known this." Showing the minutes of the tender committee, Bing goes on to say, "the only subject that interested them in the meeting was who gave the lowest bid. Not a word about what the cleaning workers have the right to receive. This is the way it is in many other tenders. We told the comptroller of the Ministry of Internal Security how workers were being exploited in his ministry and to his credit I can say that

the situation was corrected."

The Bema'aglei Tzedek Association began as a group of religious people but very quickly bridged the gap between religious and secular, between right and left. "The fact that in all the recent struggles in the field of social reform we have not heard a religious Jewish voice bothered us," says Asaf Banner. "The Chief Rabbi only applied to the High Court of Justice when they didn't pay the salaries of the employees of the religious councils. He did not apply to the court when the State, a Jewish State, held back salaries generally."

About a year ago the group from Bema'aglei Tzedek met with members of the "Forum for the Enforcement of Workers Rights" and the organization "Line to the Worker" ("righteous people doing amazing work"), and asked about information on workers for independent contractors. By going out to the field they achieved real insight to the problem. Banner: "For years we found ourselves handing out food to needy families and then you stop and ask yourself: we're dealing here with families where both husband and wife are working full time – why do they need our food? One day one of the volunteer pupils, who had been bringing food weekly to the cleaning worker at her school, came to me and said she doesn't understand what's happening. The man works, she sees him every day. Why does he need food packages? That's when we understood that something needs to change."



After initially charting 200,000 workers for contractors, the Bema'aglei Tzedek group focused on changing the situation in schools. Tens of thousands of custodial, maintenance and security workers work in the schools. Many of them are new immigrants who don't know their rights and don't know what they should receive. Last summer when most high school students were at swimming pools, Bing, Troper, Banner and their friends succeeded in recruiting a number of them for a 4 day concentrated brain washing about this part of Israeli society. They met with foreign workers; toured south Tel Aviv to learn about the phenomena of trafficking in women, heard lectures and learned to read salary slips workers receive.

"If there is such a thing as the "best of our youth" they were the ones who attended our seminar," Shmuli Bing, says with emotion. "These are kids that see the big picture. Like a crack fighting unit of the next generation." At the beginning of the school year Bema'aglei Tzedek and the students took on 30 schools, trained "trustees" who volunteered to work under supervision of the association and appointed coordinators for every 4-5 schools.

"The job of the young trustees", explains Shmuli Bing "is to form a relationship with the workers. To get to know them, to speak to them, to listen, and to see how they can be helped. The trustees explain to them their rights and ask to see their salary slips to check if they aren't being cheated. That they are not losing pension rights, holiday pay or overtime. We have created among this population, coming from the weak sectors of our society, the feeling that there is someone who listens to them, that the kids appreciate them, thanking them for what they do, and ready to fight for their rights if they are affected negatively."

"We have a society made up of first class and second class people", says Bing. "When we struggled for accessibility for the disabled and we tried to convince the Gabbais of synagogues to attach a ramp to the entrance so that disabled in wheelchairs could get in, one of the Gabbais said to me, 'Sorry we don't have the money'. I asked him: 'Do you turn on the air-conditioning in the summer?' He answered: 'yes'. Then I said to him: 'you have the money but in your priorities it is more important that you be comfortable than the disabled be able to come to pray with you."

At the association they call the workers for contractors "the transparent people." "A person can empty the garbage can in your office for a year and you don't know his name and whether his employer pays into his pension fund. You may say hello, but he's still transparent. We did a large scale poll among security guards and cleaning people asking them if the client, who could be a school principal or a shopping center manager, or a supermarket manager ever asked them how much they earn for their



work. Not one of them answered yes. They apparently were not made in G-d's image. We see what happens when our trustees approach them and begin speaking to them. Suddenly the trustees find themselves sitting and listening to their life stories. Suddenly someone is noticing them. Take, for example, the cleaning woman at a school or a factory. Where does she drink her coffee? Who speaks to her? She's alone all day. Only the janitor gives her instructions. Apart from him she has no one to speak to."

An immediate change is felt in the schools where Bema'aglei Tzedek has entered. "Following our activity they changed the contracts with the contractors and added new clauses protecting workers rights", says one of the coordinators who asked not to have her name mentioned so as not to cause any harm to the workers in her school. She's a tenth grade student who wanted to know what the cleaning workers were earning. She contacted the contractor and asked to meet with him. She left the meeting totally stunned. "He told me clearly that he can count on one hand the number of his workers who have a pension fund."

On Rosh Hashana the tenth grader and her friends collected one shekel from each of the children at the school and bought gifts for all the cleaning women, all of them immigrants from Ethiopia. To each gift they included a letter of thanks from the children. This week they will give Mishloach Manot for Purim.

"In another instance one of the trustees that I work with at another school suggested to a security guard that we would help him check his rights", the tenth grader relates. "The guard was so happy that someone was interested in him that he immediately took out his last salary slips. We checked the slips

and discovered that the contractor was paying him 200 shekels less per month than the minimum he was supposed to pay. The contractor didn't even know he was paying less than he should have been paying the guard. A few days ago the contractor was forced to pay 630 shekels for 3 months work."

"We are dealing with outright cheating and our feeling is that we are succeeding in changing things. There is great progress. The school administration is starting to ask questions because the pupils are bothering them and it isn't pleasant. Today none of the kids leave their chairs lying around after studies. We talked about these issues and the kids realize that what takes us a minute save an hour of work for the cleaning people. That's an hour less that they would have with their children at home and an hour less of backbreaking work after moving 500 chairs. If, because of pains in her back, she won't make to work tomorrow then she won't earn anything, because she works on an hourly basis."

### A System of Success

Itai Lahad, an 11<sup>th</sup> grader serving as a coordinator of trustees in 5 schools feels that the activity is causing a real revolution for the workers. Lahad knows all of the security guards and cleaning workers personally. They in turn know the energetic, vigorous young man as an address to solve problems. He is especially proud of the fight he fought for the security guards in a neighboring school.

"We checked their pay slips and found that none of them get payment for a pension fund, or for paid holidays or overtime", he explains. "Today after we intervened they get it all. We had a worker that was not paid travel expenses for 3 months. We made sure that they would pay him 600 shekels. You have

to understand that the contractors try to get away with paying less. We make sure that they don't succeed."

How do the workers relate to your activities?

"At first they were shocked that someone relates to them. At the beginning of the year we handed out chocolate with a letter of thanks to the workers for all they do for us. When I gave it to a security guard he began to cry. He said this was the first time, since he started working, that someone even related to him. I myself was in shock from that. This is a guy I know for 2 years and I never thought about it."

"Its chocolate. It costs 10 shekels", explains Bing. "Its important that the pupils recognize the need to thank those that work for them. It's an educational process. If I am concerned about the cleaning woman's minimum wage then I shouldn't throw a bag on the floor for her to clean up. We have to break the concept of slaves and masters."

During the Moslem holiday, Id Al-Fitter, the pupils at Itai Lahad's school discovered two cleaning workers who were Arabs that looked unhappy. Their contractor had refused to let them off for the holiday. The pupils decided to send the workers home for the holiday and undertook to clean the school for two days instead of them. "They came back the next day and didn't stop thanking us. It was so emotional," says Lahad.

"You have to understand that right under our noses a modern slave market is taking form," says Chili Troper. "If in the State of Israel, there are large groups of people getting up early every day for work and returning home late at night, to do jobs that most of us would refuse to do and living in terrible poverty-that's moral corruption. When we close our eyes to it, we become a party to it."