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Temple B'rith Kodesh,

Rochester, New York

Shabbat Shmini 5779

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I am grateful to our eighth and ninth graders for leading us in tonight's service. I look forward to your continued presence on the *bima* and your participation in the life of the congregation in many important ways.

I want to take a few minutes this evening to discuss social justice. Students, you know that as you were preparing for bar and bat mitzvah, that you were asked to complete a mitzvah project. You did great things: some here in Rochester, some connected to Israel or other places around the world. You had an impact on so many different groups, including children, pets, the homeless and hungry, those with special needs, and more.

The reason why these mitzvah projects are so important is that they reflect a central part of our Jewish identity. We not only value prayer and ritual, but we dedicate ourselves to engagement with the community for the sake of justice, equality, and peace.

You also know that *tsedakah* is at the core of who we are. Students, you are always so generous in bringing *tsedakah* to Religious School, and members of the congregation are also devoted to contributing to those who are in need.

*Tsedakah* and *tikkun olam*, giving and acting to help repair the world, are among the most important elements of our congregation. It is a proud part of our 170 year history that we have been engaged in many different efforts to bring healing and hope to our city.

Rochester is, of course, the historic home of Susan B. Anthony, and so our congregation has long had partners from across the faith community in doing justice work.

I invoke Susan B. Anthony's name tonight because of an important date that will come during this next week...April 2.

April 2 is the 92nd day of the year.

Why is this important?

Sadly, it is because the 92nd day of the year is a marker of a great injustice.

This day has become known as Equal Pay Day. It will not be until that day this coming week, 92 days into the year that women will have earned what men earned in the previous year.

Think about this for a moment...the gap in pay equity is so significant that women need to work for all of January, all of February, and all of March...and still will not have “caught up” to the pay that men received for equal work.

There are legislative responses and efforts across society. For us as Jews, with the pursuit of justice at the center of our identity, there are specific responses we can make.

Our Reform movement, under the leadership of Women of Reform Judaism and the Women’s Rabbinic Network, has launched a Reform Pay Equity Initiative.

I am proud that my rabbinic body, the Central Conference of American Rabbis, has created a Task Force on the Experience of Women in the Rabbinate.

Both of these efforts, along with others, seek to address the injustices and inequalities when it comes to equal pay, equal opportunity, equal presence in leadership roles, and more.

I mention this tonight in the hopes that we will take note of April 2nd this coming week as a time to take action. As with so many other issues, we can’t say “It’s not our problem” and “It doesn’t happen here.”

My colleague Rabbi Marla Feldman expresses it this way: “The issue of pay equity is not a woman’s issue – it is a family issue. When we under-value, and under pay, a segment of our workforce, everyone suffers. When a woman’s income is diminished, that entire family’s income is diminished.”

We can advocate for change through the judicial and legislative systems. We can ask the hard questions and advocate in our workplaces across our community.

One of the founding principles of Reform Judaism, over 200 years ago, was a commitment to equality between men and women. Even with that foundation, it took many years to right some wrongs—ordination of women didn’t happen until 1935 and not until the 1970s in a normative and institutional fashion. Equal pay issues and equal presence in the ranks of leadership still abound in our own movement.

So we recognize that there is work that needs to be done, and also that we have the potential to have an impact. The task forces and initiatives are important, and all of us having the awareness to raise our voices is critical.

It was more than 55 years ago that President Kennedy signed the Equal Pay Act, which requires equal pay for equal work. And yet, we are still here, three months into the year before women will receive equal pay from the previous year.

In two different places in the Torah (Leviticus 19:13 and Deuteronomy 24:15) there are specific commands about not holding back payment for workers beyond the day on which the work is done...if you don’t pay before the sun sets, it is abusive and as if you have committed robbery.

This is a very specific commandment, and we know that repetition in the Torah serves as emphasis.

So, we have a very clear mandate, given to us from our earliest and most important teachings: we must pay what is due, and that includes equal pay for equal work.

Let's make this Tuesday a day when we take action. On the legislative front, there is a Paycheck Fairness Act (S862/HR. 1619) that could be passed, which would strengthen the original 1963 Equal Pay Act and the 2009 Fair Pay Act. On the Jewish front, we can lend our support to the WRJ, WRN and CCAR leadership. And, in the places where each of us is personally engaged, we can encourage an investigation and response, to ensure that we are working towards equality.

My prayer this Shabbat is that we will be blessed with a day of shalom, remembering that shalom not only means peace but wholeness, and that in the coming days, we will be able to do the hard work of *tikkun olam*, of repairing the world and creating wholeness and equality for one and all.