

Introduction to *dvar tikkun*/social justice talk by:  
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**Tikkun Leil Shabbat**, Washington DC — [www.tikkunleilshabbat.org](http://www.tikkunleilshabbat.org)

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The Talmud recounts that when Rabbi Ben Zoma saw a crowd of people, he said “Blessed are You, the Knower of Secrets.” And this is still written in many prayer books with the *brachot*/blessings for different specific occasions, that this is the blessing we say when we see a large crowd of people.

To explain why Ben Zoma said this blessing, “the Knower of Secrets,” when he saw a crowd of people, the Talmud relates another story:

He used to say: "How much work did Adam the first person have to do until he had bread to eat! He plowed, he sowed, he reaped, he gathered the stalks together, he threshed the stalks, he winnowed the chaff from the grain, he selected the other waste from the grain, he ground the grain into flour, he sifted the flour, he kneaded the flour into a dough, he baked the dough, and afterwards he ate the bread. But I rise early in the morning and find all these labors already prepared before me."

"And how much work did Adam the first person have to do until he had clothing to wear! He sheared the wool, he cleaned it, he disentangled it, he spun it into threads, he wove the threads, and afterwards he found a garment to wear. But I rise early in the morning and find all these labors already prepared before me. Indeed, all the nations [and according to some translations, all of the ‘trades’] diligently come to the entrance of my home. And I rise early in the morning and find all of them before me."

— *Talmud Brachot 58a*

I don’t think that Ben Zoma is saying literally that all of the workers who prepared his breakfast and his jacket were standing in front of his house.

But what’s extraordinary about this passage is that even in Talmudic times, this text reflects a consciousness that Jews were living in a complex economy with a highly specialized division of labor. Ben Zoma himself didn’t have to do — and probably didn’t know how to do — all of the intermediate steps to turn grain into a loaf of bread, or to turn a woolly sheep into a sweater. He was conscious that a crowd of people from different trades and maybe even different nations had participated in every slice of bread he ate and every garment he wore.

If *he* lived in a complex economy, how much more so do we! And echoing Ben Zoma’s blessing, often the nature of these relationships are *secret*. We may know vaguely that someone in Central America or in Africa may have harvested the coffee beans that made the coffee we buy at Starbucks. But how much of the four dollars we pay for that cup was given to the farmer? Did he or she earn enough from that harvest to get by?

And too often, to farmers and artisans in the global South, the way that the crop or handicraft they produce is valued or used is also a secret. Dependent on middlemen to bring their products to market, they have to accept the price they’re offered and can’t demand the real value of their goods; because commodity prices for cocoa or sugar or rice fluctuating in a futures market

somewhere hundreds of miles away. The world market is a secret, unpredictable force that determines their livelihood. We, like Ben Zoma, know vaguely that a whole crowd of people are implicated in our everyday purchases, even the in the first few hours of every morning, but the nature of those relationships is often a secret.

I bring this text tonight, on *Shabbat Sahar Hogein*, Fair Trade Shabbat, because Fair Trade is a movement to *take the secrets out* of global supply chains. Fair Trade offers a vision of a world in which producers in the global south and consumers in the global north collaborate directly to trade in a way that is open and fair. We can know vaguely, as Ben Zoma did, that there is a whole crowd of people implicated in our morning coffee, but Fair Trade invites us to walk out to the front door and look into each of those faces, and affirm the humanity of the people with whom we're connected by trade.

What I learn from reading Ben Zoma's reflection about the division of labor in the Talmud, and from reading that the workers he was dependent on inspired him to say a blessing, what I learn from this is that our economic interconnectedness with other people is a spiritual relationship and a moral relationship.

Ben Zoma's musings on supply chains are in the Talmud because trading relationships aren't only economic relationships. They are also human relationships.

And so it's my pleasure tonight to introduce our two speakers: Cecilia Appianim, a member of the Kuapa Kokoo cooperative in Ghana, and Erin Gorman, the CEO of the world's only farmer-owned chocolate company, Divine Chocolate USA.

— Joelle Novey