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"The Jewish people lack the principal ingredient for national life. We lack the habit of labor ... for it is labor which binds a people to its soil and to its national culture..." (A.D. Gordon, "Our Tasks Ahead," 1920)

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Fruits of our labor

The kibbutzim and moshavim that make up the backbone of Israeli agriculture were founded on A.D. Gordon's philosophy of national redemption through labor, and, by most standards, Israeli agriculture remains a huge success. Israel's drip irrigation methods are used around the world, its dairy cows are among the most productive, and locally developed strains of flowers and vegetables feature prominently in world markets. In recent years, however, the land has not been predominantly worked by Israeli citizens. As Passover approaches, with freedom and slavery on our minds, it is a prudent time to ask whether an industry dependent on foreign labor can truly be considered successful.

The Thai workers on whom Israeli agriculture depends, who made up 45 percent of agricultural labor as recently as 2001 (the last year for which figures are available), are certainly not slaves. As part of the foreign-worker population, they are protected by Israeli labor laws, and most return to Thailand wealthier than their fellow countrymen who did not work abroad. In general, agricultural laborers, who live close to their bosses and have daily contact with them, are treated far better than aliens with jobs in urban centers. In many ways, the employment of foreigners in Israeli agriculture is a win-win situation, as it allows farmers to develop highly specialized greenhouse agriculture while providing the foreign laborers with a mechanism to establish themselves economically. In peripheral areas such as the Arava, in the southern Negev, this source of labor is essential, as local residents are unable to do all the work themselves, and Israelis from other parts of the

country are often unwilling to come south for this work, even during periods of high unemployment.

The ready availability of low-cost labor has significantly diminished the number of Israelis involved in farming. While it may appear benevolent, this dependence on foreign workers carries a high price for the agricultural community and the kibbutzim in particular. The large number of educated Israeli farmers in the 1960s and 1970s – and their desire to make their own work easier – was the spearhead that turned Israel into a world leader in agricultural technology. This aging generation of farmers is being replaced by a much smaller generation, who primarily manage other workers.

Originally, the prime national motivation for developing Israel's agricultural sector, despite the nation's lack of water resources, was the fear of dependence on foreign imports for food supplies. While nowadays nearly as much of the country's food is exported as imported, because of the labor situation, Israel still depends on a foreign labor force.

It is the kibbutzim themselves that are truly paying the price for abandoning the policy of self-labor, by which they did the work themselves instead of hiring others. In agricultural branches with mostly foreign workers, the kibbutz profit represents "rent" from hired labor and capital. While earning rent from one's assets is every capitalist's goal, the idea of earning rent from another's labor negates the very premise of the kibbutzim. This situation is not only morally problematic but can also give

rise to social and economic problems. The evidence for this comes from research on "social loafing," the tendency of an individual to work less when part of a group than when alone ("parasitism" in kibbutz slang). While this tendency exists in all cultures, "parasitism" is reduced if members identify strongly with the group and feel that

their contribution is valuable. In a kibbutz that receives much of its income as rent on its assets and on outside labor, members may feel their contributions are not essential to the group product, and thus contribute less.

Solely blaming farmers for the growing dependence on foreign workers would be a mistake. The Agriculture Ministry has, since the 1990s, provided generous grants for construction of greenhouses, in which growing is extremely labor-intensive. At the same time, the funds made available for development of labor-saving technologies were far lower and not pushed in the same manner. Furthermore, no direct subsidy has been offered to an extent that would allow the farmers to replace foreign workers with Israelis at a price that will attract Israelis. Farmers have been forbidden from using agricultural land for any purpose other than farming.

While some farmers have been able to survive economically without foreign labor, these are not the majority. Israeli farmers, particularly in the kibbutzim, have had to face a no-win set of alternatives: Either renege on values in a way that threatens your social and economic structure, or be left without a source of income. The Agriculture Ministry must help Israel's farming sector return to the essence of Gordon by using technological developments to reduce Israel's dependence on foreign labor.

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