



TAM

Tastes of Yiddish Culture for Kids & Teens

**13. Reaping in Song:
The Weekend and Yiddish Protest Culture
a.k.a.
Workers' Rights, Yiddish, and the Weekend
a.k.a.
Sweatshop Poets and Their Songs**

*What role did Ashkenazi Jews play in the creation
of a two-day weekend in the United States?*

Grades 7 - 12
60 - 90 mins

Objective:

- Participants will understand the Jewish role in the establishment of the two-day weekend in the U.S.
- Participants will understand the role of music/song in inspiring people in difficult situations.

Main Question:

- What role did Ashkenazi Jews play in the creation of a two-day weekend in the United States?

Materials needed:

- Song sheets for song(s) you will teach
- Copies of individual readings (testimonies, etc.) for individual participants to read to other participants
- Copies of songs for discussion, in Yiddish transliteration, translation, and *alef beys*, if possible
- Recordings of songs discussed (CD, YouTube link)

Any special room requirements:

- A room with a large dry-erase board; otherwise a room with a large chalk board

INTRODUCTION, PART 1

See Intro In "B. Strategies, Introduction and Basic Content, for all Lesson Plans"

INTRODUCTION, PART 2

Sweatshops + Yiddish = Weekend?

Facts: What do we know? (15 minutes)

Note: This activity is specifically designed to emphasize what participants already know and to connect it to the subject at hand. Most of the content should come from the participants, so encourage them by asking questions they can answer and providing information intermittently that will lead them to give more answers and ask questions themselves.

—On one side of the board, write the word “SWEATSHOPS” across the top of the board. Ask participants the following questions, being sure to write down their answers on the board:

What is a sweatshop?

Sweatshop definition: A sweatshop is any business that violates laws on wages, hours, workers’ compensation, industrial homework, child labor, and occupational health and safety.”

Do we agree on this definition?

Note to presenters: At the time of the sweatshops that employed Yiddish-speaking workers, much of the abuse was legal. Sweatshops were awful places, even if legal.

—Allow participants to respond, and move on to these questions:

What do sweatshops make?

Where are sweatshops located?

What language do people in sweatshops speak?

—When everyone has contributed to defining the sweatshop, leaving a column of clear space in the middle of the board, write the word “YIDDISH” across the top of the board on the opposite side of the board. Again, ask participants the following questions, being sure to write down their answers on the board:

What is Yiddish?

Who speaks Yiddish?

Where does Yiddish come from?

If this particular line of questioning fails to receive satisfactory answers at first, ask the following leading questions:

Where are all sides of your family originally from, before they came to the U.S.?

How (and when) did they come to this country?

Were they always English-speakers?

What languages did they speak?

Note: As nearly everyone in America was an immigrant at some point, even people of non-Ashkenazi Jewish heritage will be able to contribute pertinent information about the contribution of non-English language to American culture and identity. Note that the phrase “immigrant experience” does not mean the same thing to all participants; use the phrase “Jewish immigrant experience” to refer to ours.

—Finally, in the middle of the board write “WEEKEND” across the top of the board and ask the following questions, especially to participants who perhaps have not contributed anything yet to the board/conversation. Ask each question as directly as possible:

What is a weekend?

What days are in the weekend?

What is the main difference between the week and the weekend?

What is your preferred time of the week—the week or the weekend—and why?

Finally, ask:

What do any of these three subjects (sweatshops, Yiddish, weekend) have in common with each other?

—At this point, it is not necessary to write the participant’s answers on the board. Encourage participants to discuss their theories as to the connection of the three subject. If no ideas are offered, move directly to the next activity:

BODY

The Immigrant Experience And Sweatshop Poets

Evidence: What Can You Tell? (15-20 minutes)

Let’s take a moment to hear a little about the lives of people familiar with two of those columns on the board: YIDDISH and SWEATSHOPS.

—Enlist a participant to read the first reading:

Reading #1:

In 1900 more than 150,000 Jews were employed in the Lower East Side garment trade. They worked at jobs that required speed, deftness, and a capacity for dull, monotonous repetition of the same task: one worker cut, one stitched, the next made buttonholes.

Labor began at day-break, continued beyond the dinner hour, and persisted into the night, workers

taking their pieces home in the hope of extracting a further handful of change from their toil...eight cents for sewing, three for ironing, five for finishing.

Half of a cloak maker's life was said to be spent looking for work, the other half trying desperately to manage a living from it.

The Lower East Side is a part of Manhattan, in New York City. Today, parts of the Lower East Side are very trendy, with expensive apartments and fancy restaurants, but over a hundred years ago it was full of workers and sweatshops. What exactly were these sweatshops like?

—Enlist a participant to read the second reading:

Reading #2:

The thirteen thousand living quarters in New York licensed for (sweatshops) in 1911 were dank, crowded, stiflingly uncomfortable places, breeding grounds for tuberculosis; the wages – in 1900 a child working in a sweatshop averages \$2.94 a week – a contributor to malnutrition.

Now that we've had a brief taste of life in the sweatshops, here's what we hope is a simple question:

Does it sound like the kind of place you would want to work?

As you can imagine, over a hundred years ago the Yiddish-speaking Jews of New York weren't so happy about working in sweatshops either. But many had no choice: they had to eat and have a place to live and provide for their families. In order to do that, they had to work, no matter what the conditions or pay was like.

Just imagine what it must have been like to have to work in such horrible conditions for a little amount of money...actually, we don't have to imagine, because the people who worked those job can tell us themselves.

—Enlist a student to read the third reading:

Reading #3: (this song is taught in Yiddish on the next page)

Don't look for me where myrtles grow,
You will not find me there, my beloved.
Where lives wither at the machines,
There is my resting place.

Don't look for me where birds sing,
You will not find me there, my beloved.
A slave am I, where chains clang.
There is my resting place.

Don't look for me where fountains spray.
You will not find me there, my beloved.
Where tears flow and teeth gnash,
There is my resting place.

And if you love me with true love,
Then come to me, my good beloved,
And light up my gloomy heart,
And make sweet my resting place.

Translation compiled by Willie Lockeretz and Linda Gritz, for A Besereh Velt (A Better World), The Yiddish Community Chorus of Boston Workmen's Circle.

These words were written by a Jewish poet named Morris Winchevsky who was a part of a group of writers called the Sweatshop Poets. They wrote about their lives working under horrible circumstances, fighting for a better life and working for a better future.

The words you just heard were from a Yiddish song of Winchevsky's called "*Mayn Rueh Plats*," which means "My Resting Place".

Where do you think the poem takes place?

Let's take a minute and hear how what this song actually sounds like:

—Distribute song sheets to participants.

***Mayn Rueh Plats*, by Morris Winchevsky**

*Nit zukh mikh vu di mirtl grinen,
Gefinst mikh dortn nit, mayn shats.*

Don't look for me where myrtles grow,
You will not find me there, my beloved.

*Vu lebns velkn bay mashinen,
Dortn iz mayn rueh plats.*

*Nit zukh mikh vu di feygl zingen,
Gefinst mikh dortn nit, mayn shats.
A shklay bin ikh, vu keytn klingen,
Dortn iz mayn rueh plats.*

*Nit zukh mikh vu fontanen shpritsn.
Gefinst mikh dortn nit, mayn shats.
Vu trern rinen, tseyner kritsn,
Dortn iz mayn rueh plats.*

*Un libstu mikh mit varer libeh,
To kum tzu mir, mayn guter shats.
Un hayter oyf mayn harts, dos tribeh,
Un makh mir zis mayn rueh plats.*

Where lives wither at the machines,
There is my resting place.

Don't look for me where birds sing,
You will not find me there, my beloved.
A slave am I, where chains clang.
There is my resting place.

Don't look for me where fountains spray.
You will not find me there, my beloved.
Where tears flow and teeth gnash,
There is my resting place.

And if you love me with true love,
Then come to me, my good beloved,
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Translation compiled by Willie Lockeretz
and Linda Gritz, for *A Besereh Velt (A Better World)*,
The Yiddish Community Chorus of
Boston Workmen's Circle.

Recordings:

—Aquabella (women's quartet):— 3:42 <https://youtu.be/UwRc3mdWuds>

—Daniel Kahn (with sections in English) — <https://youtu.be/INRaU7zUGRo>

—Unknown: (solo woman's voice; 2nd verse is dramatically recited): <https://youtu.be/tJkBGa3dxQM>

Is it a sad or happy song? How can you tell?

If you had not heard the translation of the song first, what would you think the song was about?

Is it a romantic song, a song against the sweatshop life, or both?

Why do you think the place where the poem is located is called "my resting place"?

"Mayn Rueh Plats" might seem overly dramatic, but the death it described was real.

—Enlist a participant to read the fourth reading:

Reading #4:

When a fire broke out at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company in 1911, workers were locked inside the burning 10-story building. Many workers jumped to their death rather than be burned alive....

“Although the fire department was able to extinguish the blaze within half an hour, in those thirty horrible minutes 146 workers, most of them young Jewish and Italian girls, lost their lives. It was the most traumatic incident in New York’s industrial history, and it inflicted grief and rage on the entire Lower East Side.”

“The conditions that led to the fire were dreadful: doors that should have opened onto a staircase were locked (to prevent pilferage, the company’s owners later said); other doors that should have opened outward opened inward instead and were sealed shut by the weight of bodies straining to escape. No fire drills had ever been held, and many of the women who died leaped in panic through broken windows.”

SOURCE: Ken Blady, and quotes from “Live & Be Well, pp.166-167. Reprinted with permission of Rutgers University Press.). See resource materials, below.

Obviously life for Yiddish-speaking workers at the turn of the century was very difficult—and that was if they managed to make it out alive. Songs like “*Mayn Rue Plats*” depicted a way of life that workers could no longer stand: dangerous working conditions, little pay, long hours and possible death.

Having poets and other artists actively speaking out about the horrors of working life helped working people feel like they weren’t suffering unnoticed. The Sweatshop Poets lifted up the workers, making them into a noble hero that fought to survive. The Sweatshop Poets also gave workers weapons with which to fight their suffering—words, music, and ideas. The life of the worker didn’t have to be miserable forever. The worker could find ways to fight back. The hope that these poets gave working Jewish people was in a language they used, spoke and understood — Yiddish.

Eventually the sweatshops gave way to factories, and workers in factories started to create unions to protect workers. Unions continue to protect workers and their rights even today. The rise of people organizing into unions led to an easing of the hard lives of workers.

A feature of that hard life that unions fought against was the seven-day work week. People often worked every day of the week in dangerous and unhealthy conditions. That’s where our third subject comes in: The Weekend.

Action: What Did They Do? (10-15 minutes)

Here’s some surprising information: the weekend had to be created. It used to not exist. Now, of course, a day off with no work existed before this time period. Way, waaaay before this time period. I’m sure you’re familiar with the concept of this day off. Jews call it *Shabes* or *Shabbat* and it’s in the *Toyreh/Torah*: God took a day off from creating the world and rested, so we take a day off from work each week, and rest.

What’s interesting for us about *Shabes* and the creation of The Weekend is that if it had been any other day besides Saturday, we wouldn’t have the two-day weekend we know and love. Imagine: if the Jewish Sabbath had been on Wednesday, we would not have a weekend. We’d perhaps have Wednesday and Sunday (the Christian Sabbath) off instead.

—Enlist a participant to read the fifth reading:

Reading #5:

We would have Wednesday and Sunday off. And what kind of weekend is that?... even as Americans agitated for more time off, two days off right next to each other was not a foregone conclusion....we can thank the massive influx of Jewish immigrants in the late 1800s. They made up a big part of the factory work force. And, Feldberg says, their holy day wasn't Sunday. 'Jews for the most part had to either voluntarily not conduct business on Saturday while the rest of the country did, or abandon their religious principles to make a living, keep a job.'

SOURCE: http://weekendamerica.publicradio.org/display/web/2007/11/24/a_weekend_history_lesson.

Now, the world can already thank the Jews for the idea of *Shabes* in the first place, but it's specifically because so many Jews were an important part of the American factory workforce that we have Saturday added to Sunday in order to make what we call the Weekend.

—Enlist a participant to read the sixth reading:

Reading #6:

The five-day week was first instituted in 1908 by a New England mill to accommodate Jewish workers who would not compromise their religious scruples by working on the Sabbath. The mill granted these Jewish workers a two-day weekend. Other companies soon followed suit.

[Henry] Ford [founder of the Ford Motor Company and a well-known anti-semitic] hated labor unions. But he shared their hope in this strange new thing called a weekend. He gave his workers two days off back in the early 1900s, even though the federal government didn't mandate the forty-hour work-week until 1938.

SOURCE: http://weekendamerica.publicradio.org/display/web/2007/11/24/a_weekend_history_lesson

CONCLUSION

“We Are All Brothers And Sisters”

It’s a curiosity of history that we have Jews to thank for the two-day weekend, but as we have seen, that certainly seems to be the case. What do you think?

How is there a connection between Jewish workers and the two-day weekend?

How is there a connection between the Sweatshop Poets and the fight for worker’s rights?

Do you think there is a connection between the work Sweatshop Poets did to lift up the workers and the creation of the Weekend?

The Sweatshop Poets didn’t write only songs of tragedy like “Mayn Rue Plats.” They also tried to give Jewish workers a picture of hope—a better future that they could fight for together.

The same poet who wrote “Mayn Rue Plats” also wrote a song about people coming together like brother and sisters. Let’s look at the world he was trying to create:

— Distribute the song sheet

Aleh Brider, by Morris Winchevsky

*Un mir zaynen aleh brider, oy, oy, aleh
brider!*

*Un mir zingn freylekh lider, oy, oy, oy!
Un mir haltn zikh in eynem,
Oy, oy, zikh in eynem!
Az elkhes iz nito ba keynem, oy, oy, oy!*

*Un mir zaynen aleh eynik
Tsi mir zaynen fil tsu veynik.
Un mir libn zikh dokh aleh
Vi a khosn mit a kaleh.*

*Un mir zaynen aleh shvester
Azoy vi Rukhl, Rus un Ester.
Un mir zaynen freylekh munter
Zingen lider, tantsn unter.*

*Un mir zaynen aleh brider
Vayl mir davnen fun eyn sider.*

*Un mir zaynen aleh freylekh
Azoy vi Yoynesn und Dovid ha-meylekh.*

Frum un link fareynikt aleh

We’re all brothers and sisters.

We sing and dance,
Stick together, care for one another.

It’s not like this with just anyone.

We are all bound together,
Whether few or many.
We love each other
like a bride and groom.

We are sisters
like Rachel, Ruth, and Esther.
We are in high spirits,
Singing songs, dancing.

We are all brothers
because we pray from the same prayer
book.

We are all happy/gay
like Jonathan and King David.

The observant and leftists are united,

Vi der khosn mit der kaleh.
Vi der khumesh mit der rasheh
Vi der kugl mit der kasheh.

Like a bride and groom,
Like Khumesh with Rashi,
Like kugel with kasha.

— Play or sing the song.

Sheet music in “*Mir Trogn a Gezang*”, by Eleanor Gordon Mlotek, p. 160

Link to video of “*Aleh Brider*”:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OISa_DhOb30

Classic version by The Klezmatics

Time: 3:25

RESOURCE MATERIALS

A. Sweatshops then and now

“The sweatshop has scary-looking electric wiring, cluttered aisles with plastic bags of fabric piled ceiling-high, just waiting for a lighted cigarette to send the whole place up in flames. Its emergency exit door is barred by a padlocked steel gate, another fire department violation. Scattered among the twenty or so sewing machines in this crammed and unventilated space are some 50 workers, – many of them underaged. One of the investigators found a 12-year old girl helping her father in this garment shop.”

This journalistic expose is an account of conditions that immigrant Asian and Latin American workers are subjected to in American sweatshops today.

Did you know that immigrant, Yiddish-speaking Jews worked in New York sweatshops 100 years ago?

[Jewish sweatshop description #1:](#)

“German-Jewish cloth merchants would assign bolts of fabric to individual contractors, who would in turn hire unskilled and semi-skilled immigrants to convert the cloth into garments. Workers – many of them women and children – would buy their own thread, cutting knives, and needles (usually from the contractor, at a 500% markup), and be paid for each piece they produced. Being a “sweater” – the name for the contractors – was a low-investment business; often as not, the shop was a tenement flat, and the labor force was eminently available and exploitable.

“In 1900 more than 150,000 Jews were employed in the Lower East Side garment trade. They worked at jobs that required speed, deftness, and a capacity for dull, monotonous repetition of the same task: one worker cut, one stitched, the next made buttonholes. Labor began at day-break, continued beyond the dinner hour, and persisted into the night, workers taking their pieces home in the hope of extracting a further handful of change from their toil – at, according to Jacob Riis describing boys’ jackets, eight cents for sewing, three for ironing, five for finishing. Half of a cloakmaker’s life was said to be spent looking for work, the other half trying desperately to manage a living from it. Complaint was futile – the contractors (who usually earned double what their most skilled worked made) would blame the suppliers, and the workers never knew who the suppliers were.

“The thirteen thousand living quarters in New York licensed for (sweatshops) in 1911 were dank, crowded, stiflingly uncomfortable places, breeding grounds for tuberculosis; the wages – in 1900 a child working in a sweatshop averages \$2.94 a week – a contributor to malnutrition. Eventually the sweatshops gave way to factories, and factories bred union organizing, and that in turn led to an easing of the hardships of the garment workers.”

Jewish sweatshop description #2: (from “Live & Be Well,” by Richard F. Shepard and Vicki Gold Levi, p. 162. Reprinted with permission of Rutgers University Press.)

“German-Jewish cloth merchants would assign bolts of fabric to individual contractors, who would in turn hire unskilled and semi-skilled immigrants to convert the cloth into garments. Workers – many of them women and children – would buy their own thread, cutting knives, and needles (usually from the contractor, at a five hundred percent markup), and be paid for each piece they produced. Being a “sweater” – the name for the contractors – was a low-investment business; often as not, the shop was as tenement flat, and the labor force was eminently available and exploitable.

“In 1900 more than 150,000 Jews were employed in the Lowest East Side garment trade. They worked at jobs that required speed, deftness, and a capacity for dull, monotonous repetition of the same task: one worker cut, one stitched, the next made buttonholes. Labor began at day-break, continued beyond the dinner hour, and persisted into the night, workers taking their pieces home in the hope of extracting a further handful of change from their toil – at, according to Jacob Riis describing boys’ jackets, eight cents for sewing, three for ironing, five for finishing. Half of a cloakmaker’s life was said to be spent looking for work, the other half trying desperately to manage a living from it. Complaint was futile – the contractors (who usually earned double what their most skilled worked made) would blame the suppliers, and the workers never knew who the suppliers were.

“The thirteen thousand living quarters in New York licensed for sweating in 1911 were dank, crowded, stiflingly uncomfortable places, breeding grounds for tuberculosis; the wages – in 1900 a child working in a sweatshop averages \$2.94 a week – a contributor to malnutrition. Eventually the sweatshops gave way to factories, and factories bred union organizing, and that in turn led to an easing of the hardships of the garment workers.”

Sweatshop definition: A sweatshop is a name given to any business that violates laws on wages, hours, workers’ compensation, industrial homework, child labor, or occupational health and safety. Or that treated its workers poorly in any of these dimensions even before the enactment of laws on those subjects.

Did any of your ancestors work in a sweatshop in New York?

If they don’t know, ask them to ask their families what jobs their immigrant ancestors had (and where), when they first arrived in the U.S.

It might difficult for Jews whose parents and grandparents are successful professionals to fathom this, but it aptly describes the sordidness, the drudgery, and the miserable conditions our immigrant ancestors experienced when they first arrived to America’s shores in the late 19th century. Despite myriad laws that are supposed to reign in the excesses of the exploitative sweatshop system, very little has changed in the last century and a half.

Why are/were these called sweatshops?

Answer: They were very hot, and people sweated.

B. Background about sweatshops

An American muckraking journalist once remarked that the crazy nihilist who hurled a bomb at the Russian czar, Alexander II, in 1881 added two and a half million Jews to the American population. Jews were accused of being involved in the conspiracy to assassinate the czar, and with the outbreak of pogroms many were killed and injured. Fed up with life in the Russian Empire masses of impoverished Jews crossed the Atlantic in steerage and flocked into the industrial centers of the Eastern seaboard. By far the largest percentage disembarked at Castle Garden (after 1892 in Ellis Island) and settled in Manhattan's Lower East Side.

Earning a living and bringing over the rest of the family left behind in the Old Country was the first of the many problems facing the *greener* (greenhorn). Everyone had to toil "*shver un biter*" (Yiddish for hard and bitter). If they chose not to peddle *shmaltz* herring, knishes, or pretzels from a pushcart they had no choice but to go to work in a dismal, overcrowded and poorly ventilated "needle" (tailoring) sweatshop.

The most descriptive and early account of the living and work conditions of the newly arrived was described by Dr. George Price, an immigrant who himself had toiled in the sweatshops as a youth, and in 1890 was appointed sanitary inspector for the Lower East Side:

"These buildings in which the Jews live are crowded, damp, without elementary sanitary facilities, half in ruins. The flats are dark, emitting an unbearable stench, particularly those flats which also serve as sweatshops. The inhabitants are in a poor state of health. Children die like flies during the frequent epidemics. Parents are forced to have their children help them in tobacco or tailoring work or else send them – at the age of six or seven – to work in a shop, which means physical, psychological and moral deterioration ... Not infrequently we come across buildings housing one hundred families with eight persons (each) (800 people)."

Many children slept on rooftops or on fire escapes. With parents having little time to devote to raising their children, and the kids receiving almost no education to speak of, many grew up wild in the streets where they got into myriad fights and turned to various criminal activities.

C. Ask whether participants know what role Yiddish-speaking Jews played in early U.S. labor history. Or ask whether they know that in history, workers worked seven days a week.

Essay by Ken Blady:

Arriving to the U.S. in the tens of thousands the immigrants represented a pool of mostly semi-skilled and unskilled-labor. The Singer sewing machine had arrived to Eastern Europe in the 1870s, and during the great migration many Jews, both male and female, brought with them the tailoring and knitting skills they had learned in *di alteh heyim* (the Old Country). Their desperate need for paid work pushed them to the city's growing garment industry. The more "fortunate ones" found work with a *landsman* (an immigrant from the same hometown), who had arrived sometime earlier and had established a work space out of his own home.

Like Latinos today who stand at the entrances to freeways or in front of big box stores waving their hands to signal their availability for day labor, the less fortunate Jews who did not have "connections" were constrained to mill around by the hundreds in the *khazer mark* (the so-called pig market in Hester Street Park on the Lower East Side) and "hire out their hands." Bosses or their agents would come around to search for cheap labor.

The Jews' arrival coincided with a period when the garment trades were undergoing a rapid expansion as the demand for factory-made clothes surged. Moses Rischin, Emeritus Professor of History at San Francisco State University, has given us a vivid depiction of the evils of the sweatshop system:

“Skilled tailors set up shop in their... tenement flats. During the day the front room, bedroom, and kitchen became a whirling, churning factory, where men, women, and children toiled as operators, basters, pressers, finishers, fitters, button-hole makers, and basting-pullers. Contractors, vying to lower production costs by employing labor more and more efficiently, introduced the task system. Under this system the ‘team’ engaged in section work — the ten or twenty workers, members of the family, relatives, *landslayt* or boarders — was assigned a work quota: individual workmen were no longer paid individually by the piece.”

(*Landslayt* means people from the same town or city in Eastern Europe.)

The standard pay for this mind-numbing, tedious, and exhausting 70–84 hour work week (the latter hours especially during peak season) was ten to twelve dollars. That’s what they earned in a week. There were no child labor laws and certainly no sexual harassment laws in place. Women and girls sometimes suffered sexual abuse at the hands of bosses and fellow workers in the shop.

Many Jews succumbed to illness, especially tuberculosis (which was referred to as the “Ghetto Disease”), malnutrition, and exhaustion, and never found the path from tenement sweatshop to a better life. Concern over the appalling conditions of workers was exposed by reformers and muckrakers, and combatted by the fledgling Jewish labor unions, but amelioration of the abuses and the imposition of basic labor laws governing minimum wage, child labor, overtime, safety and health — would have to wait until after the Triangle Fire disaster in 1911.

Although some workers were men, most were teenage girls and young unmarried women. They worked to support their immigrant families, and to save up enough money to bring over family members who were left behind in the Old Country. Led by young Jewish women like Pauline Newman, Clara Lemlich, and Rose Schneiderman sweatshop workers organized an industry-wide strike in 1909, which came to be known as the “Uprising of the 20,000.” They distributed thousands of circulars in Yiddish, Italian, Russian and English. Thousands of women went on strike. Many strikers went to jail. Some, holding out, were near the point of starving to death. But in the end the bosses offered a settlement: a shorter work week, increased wages, a board of arbitration, and no fees for work equipment.

D. Triangle Fire

When a fire broke out at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company in 1911, workers were locked inside the burning 10-story building. Many workers jumped to their death rather than be burned alive. All together 146 people, mostly young Jewish and Italian girls, died in the fire. Because of Jewish union activism, laws were passed limiting the number of hours or kinds of work children could do. The Fair Labor Standards Act set a minimum age and standards for employment. (Source: Ken Blady)

“On Saturday afternoon, March 25, 1911, fire enveloped the Triangle Shirtwaist Company, which occupied the top three floors of the ten-story Asch Building near Washington Square. Although the fire department was able to extinguish the blaze within half an hour, in those thirty horrible minutes 146 workers, most of them young Jewish and Italian girls, lost their lives. It was the most traumatic incident in New York’s industrial history, and it inflicted grief and rage on the entire Lower East Side.” (Source: “Live & Be Well,” by Richard F. Shepard and Vicki Gold Levi, pp. 166–167. Reprinted with permission of Rutgers University Press.)

“The conditions that led to the fire were dreadful: doors that should have opened onto a staircase were locked (to prevent pilferage, the company’s owners later said); other doors that should have opened outward opened inward instead and were sealed shut by the weight of bodies straining to escape. No fire drills had ever been held, and many of the women who died leaped in panic through broken windows.” (Source: “Live & Be Well,” p. 167. Reprinted with permission of Rutgers University Press.)

“It was a galvanic moment in labor history, as the entire community – indeed, virtually the entire city of

New York – rushed to stand by the workers in the shirtwaist industry. Rallied and parades and protest meetings enlisted wide support, but it was probably Rose Schneiderman's classic speech to an audience of uptown women at the Metropolitan Opera House that best expressed the sentiment of the Lower East Side, especially when she said, "I would be a traitor to these burned bodies if I came to talk of fellowship." The tragedy of the Triangle Fire strengthened the garment unions and brought about reforms in various industrial laws. But to the owners of the company, Max Blanck and Isaac Harris, who sold their Triangle blouses wholesale for \$1.50 each, the terrible story ended in acquittal on all counts of building code violations and thus the release of insurance monies to cover their losses." (Source: "Live & Be Well," p. 167. Reprinted with permission of Rutgers University Press.)

E. Other descriptions of American working conditions

Source: http://weekendamerica.publicradio.org/display/web/2007/11/24/a_weekend_history_lesson
As of 2017-05-02, this page is no longer on that site.

It is hard to imagine life without the weekend. But the word didn't even exist until the 1870s, when Americans were deep into the industrial revolution. "Many working people who were in the factories of the industrial revolution were fresh off the farms, and they were used to regulating their own day, and their own working rhythms," says Morales. "And here, all of a sudden they're having to adapt themselves to whistles, to bells, to the clock."

Many workers—men, women and children—put in 10 to 16 hour days, seven days a week. And you remember this part from history class: Labor organizers called on the government to mandate shorter hours. Workers lost lives in the struggle. At Haymarket Square in Chicago, police gunned down protesters and men were hanged for inflammatory speeches.

The men were demanding, as they put it, time for "what we will."

"The right to have time with our families. To pursue education," says historian Michael Feldberg. And to go to the zoo, the museum, the church. Actually, getting Sunday off for worship was relatively easy. Feldberg says, it was Saturday that was the tough part. "If the Jewish Sabbath had been on Wednesday, we would not have a weekend. We would have Wednesday and Sunday off."

And what kind of weekend is that? Feldberg says even as Americans agitated for more time off, two days off right next to each other was not a foregone conclusion. He says for that, we can thank the massive influx of Jewish immigrants in the late 1800s. They made up a big part of the factory work force. And, Feldberg says, their holy day wasn't Sunday. "Jews for the most part had to either voluntarily not conduct business on Saturday while the rest of the country did, or abandon their religious principles to make a living, keep a job."

But Jewish and gentile factory workers aren't the only ones who brought you the weekend. Some of the people who owned the factories helped too. People like Henry Ford. Ford hated labor unions. But he shared their hope in this strange new thing called a weekend. He gave his workers two days off back in the early 1900s, even though the federal government didn't mandate the forty-hour work-week until 1938. Ford pretty much invented weekend road trips, and promoted his own weekend romps in breathless newspaper editorials.

Christian Overland of the Henry Ford museum explains it like this: Ford wanted to sell his Model T. And if people were stuck in factories all week, "when are they going to use it? If your workforce is your consumer, you have to give people the time off to buy the things." And to take them out on weekend adventures, and drives in the country, and, later, trips to the mall, and little league practice, and all those other weekend errands we've come to know and love.

So, who invented the weekend? It was brought to you by the Labor Movement, but also Management. Jews. And Gentiles. And you may as well throw in God, since he came up with the whole "day of rest thing" in the first place.

F. Unions made up of Yiddish-speaking Jews fought for better working conditions

The Jewish trade union movement in the U.S. was a movement in Yiddish.

The workers and the managers and the factory owners spoke Yiddish as their first language.

"Eventually the sweatshops gave way to factories, and factories bred union organizing, and that in turn led to an easing of the hardships of the garment workers." (Source: "Live & Be Well," page 162)

Many Jews were among the avant garde of the union leadership that fought to ameliorate the conditions of sweatshop laborers. Among the better known are:

Samuel Gompers (1850-1924), founder of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), who promoted equitable wages, reasonable work hours, child labor laws, workers' compensation for those injured on the job, and the right to bargain collectively.

Sidney Hillman's (1887-1946) Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America Union in 1929 was the first union to demand a five-day workweek and receive it. As a founder of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), Hillman organized unskilled laborers into unions, and battled racketeers and organized crime when they tried to infiltrate and corrupt the labor unions.

David Dubinsky (1892-1982), president of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU), an immigrant who had spent time in czarists prisons for his radical activities. Arriving to the *guldeneh medineh* (the Gold Land – the USA), Dubinsky toiled in a sweatshop as a sewing machine operator making knee pants. He was instrumental in unifying the fragmented ranks of labor, and he struggled against the Communists' attempt to take control of the unions.

Lesser known to the modern student of the Jewish role in labor unions is Joseph Barondess (1867-1928), an immigrant from Ukraine (and relative of Chief Justice Louis Brandeis), who helped found the predominantly Jewish Cloakmakers Union. Testifying before a government commission established to deal with the excesses of the sweatshop system, "The King of Cloakmakers" remarked: "I have seen six little girls plying [needles] on heavy clothing in a tenement shop, while on the floor besides them lay a half-dozen opium fiends indulging in the drug."

Poverty, it seems, in whatever century, in whatever ghetto, sends hideous neighbors.

G. Origins of the weekend

Sidney Hillman's (1887-1946) Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America Union in 1929 was the first union to demand a five-day workweek and receive it.

<http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2014/08/where-the-five-day-workweek-came-from/378870/>

It took decades for Saturday to change from a half-day to a full day's rest. In 1908, a New England mill became the first American factory to institute the five-day week. It did so to accommodate Jewish workers, whose observance of a Saturday sabbath forced them to make up their work on Sundays, offending some in the Christian majority. The mill granted these Jewish workers a two-day weekend, and other factories followed this example. The Great Depression cemented the two-day weekend into the economy, as shorter hours were considered a remedy to underemployment.

<http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2014/08/where-the-five-day-workweek-came-from/378870/>

In order to provide employment for the maximum amount of people the Federal Government during the Great Depression “cemented” the two-day weekend into the economy.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Workweek_and_weekend

The first five-day work week in [the United States](#) was instituted by a [New England cotton mill](#) in 1908 to afford [Jewish](#) workers the ability to adhere to the Sabbath.^[1]

In 1926 [Henry Ford](#) began shutting down his [automotive factories](#) for all of Saturday and Sunday. In 1929 the [Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America Union](#) was the first union to demand a five-day workweek and receive it. After that, the rest of the [United States](#) slowly followed, but it was not until 1940, when a provision of the 1938 [Fair Labor Standards Act](#) mandating a maximum 40 hour workweek went into effect, that the two-day weekend was adopted nationwide.^[1]

By 1945 a law was instituted — 5 U.S. Code § 6101 — in which the basic 40-hour workweek would be scheduled for 5 days, Monday through Friday when possible, and the two days outside the basic workweek are consecutive.

So now, most workers enjoy a two-day weekend.

How do you feel about the role of Jews in giving the world two consecutive days off each week, i.e. a weekend?

Everyone has the right to rest, not only royalty.

H. Recent threats to the weekend

March 20, 2015, “Los Angeles Times”:

“Legislators in Wisconsin have introduced a bill to abolish employees’ legal right to [at least one day off per week](#). State law currently allows factory or retail employees to work seven days or more in a row for a limited period, but they and their employer have to jointly petition the Department of Workforce Development for a waiver. These petitions apparently number a couple of hundred a year. The new proposal would allow workers to “voluntarily choose” to work without a day of rest. The state agency wouldn’t have a say.

“It can’t be a secret what “voluntarily” really means in this context. As Marquette University law professor Paul Secunda told the Nation, the measure “[completely ignores the power dynamic](#) in the workplace, where workers often have a proverbial gun to the head.” Workers will know that if the boss demands it, they’ll be volunteering or else.

“The new measure tracks one last year that was introduced too late in the legislative session to reach a vote. As the [Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel reported](#) at the time, it came directly from the wish list of Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce, the state’s biggest business lobbying group. According to the newspaper, the measure’s sponsors at first “said they had heard from businesses with employees who want to work the additional time.” Under questioning, one sponsor, Republican state Rep. Mark Born, acknowledged that he had met only with representatives of the business lobbying group.

“(Wisconsin Governor Scott) Walker hasn’t said he would sign the bill, but he hasn’t spoken out against it either; nor did he when it was introduced last year. The elimination of a guaranteed weekend would fit nicely with the rest of Walker’s anti-worker [strategy?] which includes his having ended collective bargaining rights for most public sector employees and signing the deceitfully named “right to work” law, which prohibits requirements that private-sector workers join unions or pay a representation fee as a condition of employment. Right-to-work laws in general are associated with poorer workplace

conditions and lower pay than in union-friendlier states....

I. Sweatshop poets

<http://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/video/poetry-at-labor-strikes>, Paul Buhle: When strikes and layoffs were in the 1890s, there were large meetings in the middle of strikes, and poets read or recited their poetry at labor strikes, sometimes for up to thirty minutes – the workers would then be willing to continue to starve and strike for weeks more. For barely literate Jewish anarchists and socialists, poetry was very important.

Describe the "Sweatshop Poets". See <http://www.laits.utexas.edu/gottesman/poets.html>, which begins,

"The first group of Yiddish writers in America that one can regard as a "school" are the "sweatshop poets" whose most creative time were the 1890s and the 1900s. They are in fact the first school of Yiddish poetry anywhere in the world. These writers included [Morris Rosenfeld \(1862-1923\)](#), [Morris Winchevsky \(1856-1932\)](#), [David Edelshtat \(1866-1892\)](#), and [Joseph Bovshover \(1873-1915\)](#). These four are linked in their poetry by a compassion for the working masses in the sweatshops of New York, and a desire for a revolutionary change in their conditions...."

Morris Rosenfeld described in "Live & Be Well," by Richard F. Shepard and Vicki Gold Levi (book out of print but available through used book market) on pp. 139-140. Also described at <http://blogs.forward.com/the-art-y-semite/135013/morris-rosenfelds-sweatshop-songs/> Latter includes portion of poem, "The Sweatshop."

[Sweatshop poets (mentioned on p. 178) were followed by poets known as *Di Yung* (pp. 188-189), the Young Ones, but Sweatshop Poets are not described.]

J. More about "Aleh Brider"

From "Live & Be Well," by Richard F. Shepard and Vicki Gold Levi, p. 178. (Reprinted with permission of Rutgers University Press.):

"Winchevsky, Morris (1856-1932): Winchevsky was something of an anomaly among the "sweatshop poets" with whom he was identified: He was an educated man, fluent in Russian, German, Hebrew, English, and Yiddish. He came to America in 1894 as a well-known figure in the Socialist movement, having lived nearly twenty years in England, where he had begun to write in English and had been a member of the literary Socialist circle that revolved around William Morris. When he arrived here, he was hailed as the *zeydeh* of socialism, and used poetry as the means to his political end (just as he used Yiddish itself as a means to reach the Jewish masses). Despite his Socialist deprecations of it, Winchevsky was the only one of the sweatshop poets who brought a store of Jewish culture with him to America."

From Wikipedia: Winchevsky (Leopold Benzion Novokhovitch) was born in Kovno, Poland. "After immigrating to New York City, Winchevsky joined with Abraham Cahan and Louis Miller, two other prominent New York Jewish socialists, to found what would later become the largest Yiddish-language daily newspaper in the world, "The Forward," in 1897. This got them kicked out of the Socialist Labor Party. They would later migrate to the Social Democracy of America, the Social Democratic Party of America and the Socialist Party of America. Winchevsky was later selected as the representative of the Jewish Socialist Federation to the American Jewish Congress when the AJC met to select its delegates to the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. At the meeting of the Congress, Winchevsky was publicly censured by the JSF for expressing Zionist sentiments. He was subsequently associated with the Communist Party USA and its Yiddish daily "*Morgen Freiheit*."

The song was perhaps written to be recited at Triangle Shirtwaist Fire funerals.

K. Making it personal

What can you, as a Jew, give to the world today?

L. Image of Singer sewing machines, used by sweatshop workers

<http://www.eldridgestreet.org/singer-sewing-machine-advertisement/>