

FORWARD

Rabbis Pass Living Wage Measure

By Anthony Weiss
May 29, 2008

The Conservative movement's policy body on Jewish law has passed a legal opinion arguing that Jewish employers should pay their workers a living wage and strive to hire union workers.

The opinion, written by Jill Jacobs, a rabbi in residence at Jewish Funds for Justice, was passed by the Rabbinical Assembly's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards with 13 votes, easily surpassing the six votes necessary to gain legal standing. A previous version of the opinion had been rejected in 2006. With the vote, the opinion gains stature as a valid legal opinion, though it is not considered binding.

Labor rights have become a signature issue for the Conservative movement as part of its Hekhsher Tzedek initiative, which would certify kosher products that meet acceptable standards for labor conditions and environmental impact. Jacobs, a former labor activist who has been involved with Hekhsher Tzedek, has pushed for the Conservative movement to take stronger stands on social justice issues.

Jacobs's legal opinion on the obligations of Jewish employers had sparked debate in the law committee, as some members had argued that its provisions would place an undue burden on Jewish employers and might even cost workers their jobs. Committee chair Rabbi Elliot Dorff told the Forward that the final opinion ultimately gained support because its recommendations were not too stringent and because it also covered a host of other important workers' rights issues, such as prompt payment for workers.