

NEW JERSEY

# Jewish Standard

## Fair trade gets boost in Teaneck

Lois Goldrich | Local |

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Bruce Prince's family has been in business for many years. The owners of Prince Embroidery, founded in Hudson County in the 1920s, they watched as the once-thriving garment industry became "uprooted."

With the price of labor far less overseas, said Prince, a Teaneck resident and owner of the Teaneck General Store, manufacturers began to send their business elsewhere.

"People there were working for small amounts of money," he said. As a result, "the industry here shut down."

Recently, the Teaneck shopkeeper realized that this was not just a matter of business.

"The reality hit us that people weren't being given fair wages," he said. "The people we employed here were unionized. We were mindful of labor practices. Now it's cheaper, but for what reason?"

The reason, suggested Prince — who serves on the Fair Trade Teaneck Steering Committee together with other Teaneck residents and business owners — is that employers are engaging in unconscionable labor practices.

According to the group's fact sheet: "Hundreds of thousands of pre-teen children are victims of trafficking and forced labor; impoverishment is notably the result of exploitation by local middlemen; predatory farming methods are destroying indigenous environments; [and] hazardous labor conditions expose workers to toxic chemicals, compel them to accept low pay, and prevent them from asserting their rights."

That can be changed, says Dennis Klein, a Teaneck resident and professor of history at Kean College in Union.

Klein, director of Jewish studies at the college, organized the steering committee in the hope that Teaneck might become a fair trade town. According to the committee Website, "Just five establishments selling at least two fair trade product lines will raise Teaneck's profile as an enlightened business and consumer community."

The Kean professor said he has long been involved in social change initiatives. A chance encounter with Tim Blunk, owner of Teaneck's Tiger Lily Flowers, "piqued his interest" in fair trade.

It's a case where "folks at the local level can do something to help people far away," he said, explaining that while the local group is part of a national and international movement, the issue is truly an opportunity to "think globally and act locally."

"I like that approach," he said, noting that in his visits not only to merchants and public organizations but to synagogues and Jewish schools as well, "we alert people to problems behind the products they're buying and empower each one of us as local consumers to make choices."

The idea of "making an ethical choice appeals directly to the Jewish community," he said.

The steering committee fact sheet notes that "just by purchasing fair-trade certified products, consumers can tip the balance of market share that will favor just labor practices, fair prices, and sustainable farming methods ... [defeating] the sources of the present human rights crisis."

To help bring this about, the American Jewish World Service recently formed a partnership with Equal Exchange, a fair trade product supplier and worker-owned cooperative founded in 1986.

Announcing the partnership, AJWS issued a statement noting that "big companies can afford to significantly undersell smaller growers, who are then forced to lower their prices to the point where they can no longer remain in business." Members of fair trade cooperatives, however, "receive fair prices for their crops and enjoy long-term trade relationships with trusted partners."

The AJWS-Equal Exchange venture, Better Beans, was created to sell and distribute fairly traded kosher coffee and chocolate. Such programs exist to "create a global market for these farmers and provide them with access to the financial resources and assistance that they need to operate," said the AJWS statement, adding that the project "allows congregations, community organizations, and individuals to order high-quality coffee and chocolate while supporting small growers and community-owned cooperatives in the developing world."

To further this effort, the organization is encouraging the Jewish community to serve only Better Beans coffee and chocolate at their synagogues, schools, and local events. In addition to supporting small farmer co-ops, a portion of every pound of coffee or chocolate purchased through Better Beans will support the AJWS Fighting Hunger from the Ground Up campaign.

Klein pointed out that the Teaneck steering committee "actively visits and provides information" to the groups it hopes to recruit.

"We presented a pitch to the Teaneck Jewish Community Council and got some wonderful responses," he said. "We're also visiting Temple Emeth and Cong. Beth Sholom and will go to Orthodox shuls and yeshivas as well."

So far, he said, 25 groups have said they're interested, and five have already agreed to promote fair trade products.

While those he visits have been "very sympathetic" to the idea of fair trade, he said, "most are not aware of the movement. We bring them up to speed. Once they hear why this is such an important endeavor, they begin to understand that they can do something at the local level."

During his visits, he said, "I form a picture of the division of labor in the developing world [explaining that] coffee, tea, wine, and flowers are sometimes produced under impossible conditions of exploitation and child labor abuses."

Prince said he and Klein became interested in the issue at the same time. He recalled, however, that he had begun to learn something about the subject several years ago when he served as executive director of Temple Beth Or.

"The rabbi [then Peter Berg] was a social activist and began to buy fair trade coffee," he said, noting that it helped bring the issue to his attention.

Prince spoke positively of Equal Exchange, which embraces the "hierarchy of needs" espoused by Maimonides. "Their approach is to empower the growers," he said, "to help them become better farmers and lead better lives."

The shop-owner — whose store boasts a kosher, fair trade coffee counter as well as a variety of other fair trade products — said he visited an Equal Exchange café in Boston to learn how best to brew its coffee.

The extent of the composting and recycling was "breathtaking," he said. "We spent a full day and a half watching every

process.”

He added that not only does he serve the coffee, but he gives educational materials about fair trade to customers. Last month, he sponsored a lecture on the subject, attracting about 30 attendees.

“People do care about it,” he said, adding that his goal is to carry as many fair trade products as possible.

“The Jewish tradition teaches us that when we buy and sell goods, we must treat our partners fairly and honestly,” said Ruth Messinger, AJWS president. “One product at a time, choosing fair trade is a step toward building a global system that treats all producers equitably and embodies the Torah’s vision of a just society.”

All Better Beans products are certified kosher by the Orthodox Union, the Kashruth Council of Canada, or Rabbi Abraham Hochwald, chief rabbi of the Northern Rhine-Germany. For more information, visit [www.ajws.org/betterbeans](http://www.ajws.org/betterbeans).