

BILLING HOURS WORKED

by Rabbi Yisroel Belsky ztl

QUESTION 72:

I'm an attorney. I have to record my hours for each case I work on. Although I try to be strict with my billing, I'm far from exact. For example, I'm not equally productive on all days. Also, when I have less work to do, I might spend more time on a case than I would otherwise - with the result that the client will be billed for more hours. Another difficulty is that when I am in the middle of working on a case I may be interrupted by a phone call or distracted by some other matter. I don't usually work on one case nonstop. I might be interrupted by phone calls or speak about other matters. Can you give me guidelines for recording my time?

RABBI BELSKY

Matters such as these are not exact and precise. Even though you've dedicated your time to a certain case, there are usually interruptions and other work that present themselves. A person should try to make an accurate estimate. Everything is an estimate - there's nothing that's really 100% precise.

But the estimate should be somehow consistent with reality. You can't be too generous to yourself. There are certain people who will always estimate things in a very inflated way - any sofek (question) is accrued to themselves. Other people are much more careful.

It's a mark of a person's character to be careful. When one person takes his timesheet and tries to make an assessment and says, "Well, it probably was about 3-1/2 hours. No, perhaps it took longer. I'll put down 4 hours", and so on. This could indicate a character problem. A person should be careful and honest.

On the other hand, people can try to be so careful that they end up spending a good deal of time figuring out the exact time spent on each activity, which itself adds to the expense of the service that they're giving. They may hand in timesheets that are pages and pages long, filled with nonsense. I've seen one that said they they spent 8-1/2 minutes sharpening pencils.

When you hand in your time sheets, you will be making a cheshbon (calculation). But it's always something of an estimate and the estimate has to be done with guardedness. Always remember that mezonoso shel odom kasuv in lo m'Rosh Hashonoh v'ad Rosh Hashonoh (the sustenance of a person is inscribed for him from Rosh Hashanah to Rosh Hashanah). If you try to grab a dollar here

and there more than you should, the Ribono Shel Olam (The Master of the World) has many ways of grabbing the dollars back from you.

If a person is not such a kleptomaniac - someone who grabs things whenever it seems to be to his advantage - then in the long run, he'll get much more of his allotted portion. It will come much more easily, and in a much more b'kovodik (honorable) way, than having to chisel the money a minute here, and a half hour there, by exaggerated estimates.

So the bottom line is that there has to be an estimate. But try to be careful not to exaggerate the estimate.

One may follow what is known as "standard practice." Of course if standard practice is to cheat and to overly inflate estimates, then don't follow it. But if standard practice is to round things off to the nearest couple of minutes, to basically include things such as the time that you go to the washroom, then that's acceptable. You don't have to deduct a minute here and there, such as for answering the telephone.

Being extra strict would be considered lifnim mishuras hadin (doing more than the law requires). It's a middas chasidus (extra-righteous behavior) to deduct a minute from the estimate because you blew your nose or something like that. A person should be strict, but not overly strict. There is a whole range that is acceptable. There are two extremes. Going beyond one extreme is gezel (theft), and going beyond the other is lifnim mishuras hadin, or middas chasidus. But between the two extremes there is quite a range, and the person should tend towards the more strict side of the range, rather than towards the more lenient - or one could say, imaginative - side.

NEXT WEEK'S QUESTION 73: RESPONSIBILITY FOR BOSS THAT INFLATES HOURS

Am I responsible, in any way, if my boss bills my time for hours that are inflated? How obligated am I to make sure that my boss does not inflate my hours?

Participate in the [Honesty Forum](#), and discuss the issues we confront in this class!

Subscribe to *Honesty* and receive this class via e- mail.

[Honesty Archives](#)

Honesty, Copyright © 2002 by Rabbi Yisroel Belsky Shli"ta and Torah.org.