

CHAPTER 1, MISHNA 10: WORK MAKES EQUAL

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

Shemaya and Avtalyon received the transmission from them [the previous generation of scholars, listed in Mishna 8]. Shemaya said: Love work, despise high position, and do not become too close to the authorities.

This mishna offers us advice regarding the proper work ethic. First of all, we are to **love** work. We should not view work as a necessary evil, something we must suffer through in order to make ends meet. Work should ideally give our lives meaning and ourselves individuality. It affords us a sense of productivity -- that we are making a difference in the world -- and therefore it gives us our sense of existence.

As my teacher R. Yochanan Zweig explained, we tend to measure and value ourselves according to our G-d-given gifts -- our looks, height, intelligence, athletic abilities, wit, etc. But in truth, these are not ours. They are **G-d's**: gifts He handed us through no effort of our own. **We** are what we make of those gifts, how we develop our G-d-given talents and the extent to which we use them to better ourselves and mankind. G-d ends and we begin not with our gifts and bodies but with our achievements.

Further, it should not be our bottom line which gives us the feeling we have produced. We are to love work, not money. Money is a very poor gauge of productivity. The Talmud (Megillah 6b) tells us that when it comes to business (or to day-trading for that matter), one may very well meet with success without making any kind of concerted (or competent) efforts. (The Talmud contrasts this to Torah knowledge, which can only be acquired through serious study.) Ultimately it is G-d who grants us our paychecks, often in spite of our greatest efforts to the contrary.

Rather, our focus should be on productivity. The term used by our mishna for work -- "*melacha*" -- is the same the Torah uses to describe the types of labor forbidden on the Sabbath (Exodus 20:10). The connotation is thus work which produces and brings about a positive change in the world (such as planting, cooking, building, weaving). We should measure ourselves not according to our bottom line or how many people we manage, but according to our output and how productive are we as human beings.

On a practical level as well, work gives man a sense of contentedness. Human beings are most satisfied when they are productive. The Sages state that even one who does not need to work for income should keep himself occupied, for idling leads to madness and to lewdness (Mishna

Kesuvos 5:5). (We always hear stories of the fellow who wins x zillion dollars in the lottery, puts it in the bank, and continues being the window washer he always was. He was the lucky one. Most people are ruined for life being handed all the money they could ever dream of (though most of us would be happy to take the challenge... ;-))

The Talmud tells us further that G-d makes each person's job enjoyable to him -- or at least provides him with the set of talents to make one type of work most fulfilling (Brachos 43b). We can all contribute to mankind in one way or the other. Each of us must simply find his or her calling.

As always, what seems just the good practical advice of the Sages is in truth very much a religious issue. One who finds his job fulfilling will return from work energized. He will then be able to spend a part of his remaining time engaged in religious pursuits such as study and prayer. One, however, who is burnt out by the end of his day will have little energy and enthusiasm for extracurricular activities. Thus, productivity and excitement with life are not only psychologically beneficial; they are important for our religious well-being as well.

Lastly, work fosters an egalitarian attitude. We are all doing our part and making a difference to mankind. If we are each producing up to our capacity, we are all truly equal. And no one is above this very simple definition of equality. The Talmud writes: "One should flay carcasses in the marketplace and earn a living. He should not say 'I am a priest, I am a great man and such work is beneath me'" (Pesachim 113a). We measure ourselves not by our place on the totem pole or how well-networked we are with the powers that be, but by how much we are accomplishing. Of course, one who can be fully productive (and solvent) studying Torah alone is truly fortunate, as the Talmud writes: "Fortunate is he whose labor is in Torah" (Sanhedrin 99b). However, our primary concern must be if we are productive human beings, not if we are in the "right" circles, doing the "right" kind of work (my son, the doctor, the rabbi or whatever the preference may be), and certainly not if we're getting the "right" type of recognition. King Solomon said it best: "Whatever you do, do it with strength" (Koheles / Ecclesiastes 9:10).

Our mishna continues by telling us types of "labor" we should shy from -- ones involving high position and involvement with the authorities. Of course, a manager who organizes and orchestrates others' talents, creating teamwork and harmony within an organization is certainly "producing" himself, in very significant fashion. Likewise the public official who serves the many is in a way producing far more than an individual ever could.

However, our career goals should not involve recognition or being on top. Fame and public attention are hardly things we should wish for. Honor-seeking is practically antithetical to the Jewish virtues of modesty and humility. Further, public servants are almost invariably subject to public scrutiny and resentment, and must face the near impossible task of pleasing all the people all the time. Some of Israel's greatest leaders, such as Moses and King Saul, practically ran from the job only to have it forced upon them by G-d. Even until contemporary times, many of Israel's greatest rabbis were

humble and unassuming men who drew little attention to themselves. In spite of this -- or perhaps because of this -- they were recognized as people of exceptional worth and almost de facto became leaders and spokesmen of their generation.

At the same time, however, we will learn later, "In a place where there are no men, endeavor to be a man" (2:6). We do not seek public position, but we must know our own strengths. And if I sincerely realize I am most capable, I must rise to the challenge.

The Catch 22 we are presented with is that the people who are really fit to be leaders are those who do not want the position. Another way of saying this is that if someone actually **wants** to be President, going so far as to run for office, he is probably the last person we would want for the job. (I have fond memories of a coworker at a past job (a research center) who demoted himself from a management position (which he was performing quite well) so he could get back to the "real work." OK, it didn't involve a pay cut, but still...) The true stuff of leadership consists of a person of strong inner character, one who would much rather not lead but who reluctantly recognizes that he is most capable of serving his country and humanity. Throughout the course of history, Israel has hardly been immune to self-seeking leaders. Yet we have been blessed with many true leaders, both spiritual and temporal. And through this we have continued -- and may we continue -- to persevere.

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