

Rabbi Howard Lifshitz

Have you noticed the changed behavior of people at the airport? Many people no longer chat with each other or read the paper while waiting to begin their flight. Instead there is a constant stream of chatter on cell phones. Once my wife and I listened to a man on his cell phone loudly dealing with his stockbroker, his attorney and his secretary, oblivious to anyone around him, putting his business into our minds when we had no wish to know any of it. At other times, no sooner do I get on the airplane than I hear laptop computers being opened and the keys starting to clatter - there is work to be done; even while flying to another destination, there is not time to pause or relax.

Surely we live in a work obsessed age. Americans are working more hours- the average time spent at a full time job has risen from 43.6 hours to 47.1 hours per week over the past two decades. We are taking fewer vacation days - the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that since 1985 paid vacation time has actually declined.

All of this leads us to ask, "What is the proper place of work in men's lives?" and "How are we to find a proper perspective in which to view the role of our jobs in our own lives?"

According to the Torah, human beings have been working since the very first week of creation. Even in the very first chapter of Genesis, God gives us a work assignment: "Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky and all the living things that creep on the earth."

In the second chapter we come to the Garden of Eden story. Here we come to the blessing of free will, the dawning of human responsibility, and the realization that consequences do flow from our capacity to make meaningful choices. Having made the wrong choices, Adam and Eve are given much harder work as a consequence of disobeying God and from that point forward work becomes a crucial aspect of human identity formation.

Two different stories and two different views about work. In one, work is positive; in the other, work is clearly a negative imposed upon us. In a similar manner, modern writers also view work from different perspectives.

Our own experiences show us both sides of this debate. Sometimes work bring us great joy. From our work we find ourselves pleased with our accomplishments, proud of the skills we have developed, and delighted with the fellowship that work brings. But there are other times when we are so weighted down by work that we can barely move or breathe. We are frustrated, isolated from others, overwhelmed with responsibilities and driven to despair by the pressures and uncertainties of our jobs. Isn't it time that we reconsider the place work has in our lives? In doing so, can we be guided by our tradition?

In the Ten Commandments, "Six days shall you labor, but the seventh day is a Shabbat of the Lord your God." Here we see that just as we are required to follow God's example of resting on the seventh day, so too are we commanded to follow His example of being creative. Just as we are to rest on Shabbat, so are we to engage in creative and productive work during other days of the week. As we do this, we share with God the holiness of wisely making use of all that is present in our world.

Yet we are never to forget that God has demanded of us that we set limits to the work we do and that we keep work in its proper perspective. That is why there is more to living than being workers, why there is more to our humanity than simply producing goods and churning out work product. Above and beyond our work are the ideals by which we are to function and the human concerns that link us with our fellows.

If we do the reverse, if we put work above all else, we are in danger of being idolaters, worshipping the work of our hands, rather than God and His teachings that are to be our ultimate concerns. If we find the proper place for work in our lives, if we avoid confusing the method with the goal, we can find our core identities and we can live with more dignity and function as the glorious human beings God intended us to be. When we are able to separate who we are from what we do – when we can distinguish between the ethical values that should determine our choices and the mechanisms by which we contribute to the gross national product – we are more able to become human beings whose minds and hearts, whose souls and spirits, will be directed beyond the realm of work, whose primary yearning will be to be relationship with others and with God.

What does that mean for men today?

The first thing it means that we need to develop a means for judging how to do our work and how we make choices at work. When there is a conflict between what we are told to do and what we believe is the ethical thing to do, how shall we behave? Can we perform our jobs with God in mind for, as Jeffrey Salkin says, we are always God's partner and we can partner with Him in doing whatever our work is with integrity, with honesty, with righteousness and kindness?

A second implication is realization that we are not defined by the jobs and that we have more value and greater significance than any particular job. While the jobs we hold are important and do partially define who we are, they are not - and should never be - the source of ultimate meaning in our lives nor should we consider them the "be all and end all" of our existence. Instead of letting our job title determine how much we think of ourselves or letting the absence of work make us feel worthless, we should remember always that it is our character and beliefs, the quality of our deeds and the nature of our relationships, our values and our commitments, that really define us.

Are we more than our jobs? Are our identities found in the behaviors that reveal our true commitments, more than whether we have a particular career or office? We must realize that overworking, putting too much time or attention into our jobs, leaves us frustrated and anxious, overly critical of others and increasing lonely, alienated from those who care about us and distant from God.

How would you answer these questions: Do you get more excited about your work than about family or anything else? Do you take work with you to bed? On weekends? On vacation? Is work the activity you like to do best and talk about most? Do you work more than 40 hours a week? Have your family or friends given up expecting you on time? Do you believe that it is okay to work long hours if you love what you are doing? Are you afraid that if you don't work hard you will lose your job or be a failure? Is the future a constant worry for you even when things are going very well? Do you get irritated when people ask you to stop working so you can do something else? Have long hours hurt your family or other relationships?

What is the place of work in our lives? Let me use three Hebrew words: eved, oved, and avodah. Are you or I an eved, a slave, or an oved, a worker, or are you and I engaged in avodah, in sacred tasks? The choices we make provide the answer and make clear where we place our priorities and where we put work in our lives.

We are slaves if we are enslaved by others' expectations, by other's values and by what others deem important, or by our own avarice and greed, by our ego needs and materialism. On the other hand, if ethical values have a high priority, then we understand that we always have to choice whether or not to act with integrity, accountability, forgiveness, love and respect as we do our job. We can live wisely at work and, if we perform it with integrity and

enthusiasm, loyalty and skill, we can make holy even the simplest of work. That is how we can find dignity in whatever we do.

Our task then is to think about ourselves and about the place of our jobs in our lives. We must understand that self-respect and a sense of self-worth are really to be found in our relationships with our fellow human beings, with our community and with God. When that determines our personal behavior, our sense of purposeful living and personal value will endure no matter what our state of employment. We will be ready to perform our jobs and judge our work assignments from the perspective of kedusha, of holiness, and by abiding ethical standards.

There are positive counterweights to work to be found to work in building better relationships within our families, with other men and within the Jewish community. There are connections with our intellectual and emotional dimensions, with our spiritual natures and with God. There is avodah, sacred work for us to do at home, in the community and the synagogue; holy work to be done that fashions bonds that will link us more firmly with those who matter to us and to those whom we can touch.

As we fashion relations with spouses, with our children, with our parents and other relatives, we engage in work that adds richness to our lives. Instead of taking hours away from them because we have more work to do, we need to give them more hours of our lives so that together we will have many more moments that enrich our lives. It is an old truism, but as we review our lives as we grow older, it is unlikely that we will say, "I wish I had put in more hours on the job." As I have spent hours with those who are seriously ill, who know that their days are limited, what I hear them most often saying is, "I wish I had spent more time with my family."

If Men's Club programs encourage members to do that, to support each other in taking the risks that come with saying "no" to work at appropriate times, then we will begin to alter our behavior. We will begin to say "yes" to our families, giving our personal lives and personal relationships a higher priority than our jobs. This will benefit our families; it will also benefit us because those are the connections that will remain with us, that are far more enduring than the jobs we hold.

In today's world, men often feel isolated and have few really meaningful friendships with other men. Many of us lack any interests other than our work and far too many of us find that little energizes us other than the pressures and demands in our jobs. This anomie, this lack of meaningful connection, is really an illness than can be treated by reaching out to others. To do this we have to structure settings in which to share experiences. In corporate culture we may call this team building; in our real lives we call it building relationships and friendships that are more substantive than mere acquaintances. Real friendships, sustaining relationships, can flourish when men take the risk of talking with each other, when we become more open to expressing our feelings and become ready to ask for assistance when it is needed or to offer help when that is possible for us to do so.

And lastly, but perhaps most importantly, there is the sacred work of Jewish living that helps us find our worth and find meaning and direction in life, independent of the labor we are hired to do. Men exploring Jewish values and Jewish practices together will become better Jews and will also become more confident that in God's sight they are precious and valuable because they are His creation and beloved by Him. That is because they are endowed with dignity and the capacity to make a difference in the world whether or not they have paying jobs.

Men's Clubs can play an important role by providing opportunities for investing time and effort in Jewish learning and Jewish practice, making it more natural and easier for

individuals to overcome the embarrassment some feel for lacking much knowledge of Judaism. In the process new relationships are established with those with whom we share a background and common heritage. When we observe Shabbat or put on Tefillin with a group of our fellow human beings, we connect with God and the Jewish people and with our inner yearnings and concerns. That is avodat ha-kodesh, holy work, which elevates and inspires, helping us to believe in our innate worth as human beings. That is work that frees us from being enslaved to the work ethic because it gives internal meaning to our lives and a framework higher than any work place manual or policies by which to pattern our lives.

Dah lifney me atah omed – “Know before whom you stand” – is often found inscribed on the Ark in the synagogue. Let me suggest that we keep one similarly simple question before us as we go about our lives. That question is, “For Whom Do I Work?”

If I work for God, then I will work honestly and with integrity. I will stand for fairness and understanding as I deal with customers and with employers, with colleagues and the public. If I work for God as I relate to my family and to other people, I will make them the higher priorities in my life and be connected with them. I will act with thoughtfulness and compassion, forgiveness and understanding, love and sensitivity. When I work for God as a Jew, I will do so with all my heart and soul, with faith and commitment. I will yearn to draw close to Him by upholding his Mitzvot, and doing my part to insure Jewish continuity and by treating all others as children of God. Only then I can become His partner, working for and with the Almighty to increase human dignity, righteousness and compassion in all that I do.