

Rabbi Seymour Rosenbloom

I once opened a session with a men's group by asking, "What do you do? Let's go around the room and tell me."

The first guy said, "I am a lawyer," and proceeded to tell us his firm name and specialty. The second said, "I am a cardiologist" and told us the name of his practice and hospital. One man was a teacher, and another an investment counselor.

Now I had been meeting with these men for some time on a monthly basis. The fifth guy was catching on. "Maybe this is a trick question. He asked us what we do. We're telling him our jobs!"

Well, it was a trick question. And they responded exactly as I expected they would. The answer to "What do you do?" is most often one's profession.

But is it the right answer? A commercial for the National Football League begins with a hulking team member saying "I am a player in the National Football League. But that is not who I am!" He then goes on to tell something about his family and volunteer activities in the community.

The truth is most men define themselves by their work. It is subtler than in our fathers' generation. For the generation that grew up in the early to mid-twentieth century, role definitions were clear. Men were the "providers." Speaking to their children today when these men pass away, they will tell me that their fathers showed their love by providing well for the family; they worked long hours; they had little time for the family. Sometimes it is said with understanding, sometimes with bitterness.

One would think that today this would have all changed. Most of us live in two career families. Often the wife earns more than her husband does. However my experience is that this does not alter a man's perception of the place of work in his life. Where a woman may elect to take time off from work to raise a family, or because her husband's career provides sufficient income for both to live on, a man would rarely do that. When he does, it is news.

One man once told me that his wife makes considerably more money than he does, enough for the family. But the idea of not working had never occurred to him. Indeed, in his mind, he still was the one the family would have to rely on to be the earner. His self-definition could not be separated from his work.

Consciously or unconsciously, men learn very early that to be a successful man, they must have a career. Their being is identified with their job.

But is this healthy? The Torah says "A man does not live by bread alone." A man cannot only be his work. A man cannot only be driven by what he earns, and the status or power his position confers.

Work can often become a refuge for avoiding nurturing the relationships that make a group of individuals into a family. And work can often be a source of dissatisfaction when we lose interest in what we are doing but can't figure out what else to do, and are afraid of humiliation. Or when we are laid off, and have no income coming in, and feel humiliated.

What is the proper place of work in our lives? How do we create lives that are more than our work? How do we define our worth in other than economic terms? How do we balance work, family and other interests?

That is not to say that work is not important. In America, we must keep in mind that work will always be part of the definition of what makes a man and identifies who he is. We need to figure out how to make that work the most fulfilling; ideally, not just an economic necessity, but a venue for soulful fulfillment. We need to strike a balance between how we make a living and how we make a life.

What kinds of issues has work raised in your life? With your employer, or employees? With your wife and kids? Deep within your soul? How have you dealt with it?

I was struck by actor Daniel Day-Lewis musing about the place of work in his life. He confided to an interviewer, "I secretly long to wake up one day and find a reason not to carry on with this work. Unfortunately, I'm bound to it. Maybe on my deathbed I'll know whether or not the thing I spent my life doing was keeping me alive or killing me. I certainly don't know now."

This question is one we all need to face. Is how I make a living keeping me alive, or robbing me of my life?

What do you do? I know you are more than your job. Who are you?