

A Jewish work ethic? - Ask the Rabbi

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Q. Does Judaism have ideas about a work ethic?

A. Paradoxically, at the same time as so many are unemployed, others who have jobs want more money for less work. There are arguments for and against their claims, but let's ask the moral question: Have I a right to seek more pay or a shorter working week, unless I use my working hours, long or short, fully, honestly, and with good grace?

I must in conscience be able to say I cannot expect a reward unless I have earned it. The world owes me nothing unless I deserve it. "Six days shalt thou labour" is a pre-condition to the Sabbath day of rest.

I must be able to say I take pride in my work. A passer-by asked workmen on a building site what they were doing. "I'm stone-cutting," said one. "I'm marking time till a better job comes along," said the second. The third thought a moment and said, "I'm building a cathedral!" Whatever my particular task may be, without me there would be no cathedral. I'm proud of what I do.

If I work shoddily and give less than my best, it's not only my employer who suffers, it's not only the community who lose; I harm myself too. I compromise my character, I give my children a bad example, and I injure my own self-respect.

*"To each man is given a day and his work for the day;
And once, and no more, he is given to travel this way.
And woe if he flies from the task, whatever the odds;
For the task is appointed to him on the scroll of the gods.*

*"There is waiting a work where only his hands can avail;
And so, if he falters, a chord in the music will fail.
We may laugh to the sky, he may lie for an hour in the sun;
But he dare not go hence till the labour appointed is done.*

*"To each man is given a marble to carve for the wall;
A stone that is needed to heighten the beauty of all;
And only his soul has the magic to give it a grace;*

And only his hands have the cunning to put it in place... "
(Edwin Markham)

There is another problem – not merely the ethic of work, but the ethic of leisure. What do I do with my spare time? Leisure is gradually replacing work as the basis of culture. One result is Sunday Syndrome – the problem of having a Sunday, a weekend, a holiday with no idea of what to do with it.

In Hebrew there are three terms for leisure. There is *sechok*, or play – using leisure for pleasure: that's nothing short of debilitating. Not that pleasure is wrong in itself, but if it's pleasure as a means of killing time, that is a problem.

There is *shevitah*, or rest, using leisure time to disengage from the punishing pace of workaday life (though in modern Hebrew *shevitah* means to go on strike). *Shevitah* allows a person to rediscover himself and other people and to be surprised by both.

The third term is *nofesh* – re-creation, stretching your mind through intellectual and cultural pursuits, discovering an exciting cause and serving it with energy and exhilaration. *Nofesh* is the best way of using one's leisure. Just as morality stands for the highest kind of work ethic, so does it guide a person to use his leisure usefully and well.