

The Jewish Ethicist: Ethical Work

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Ethical Work

Judaism does not view work as the center of life or as its primary source of meaning.

Q. What does Judaism say about the work ethic?

A. The term "work ethic" conjures up the image of legions of devoted and diligent workers. But a closer analysis reveals that this phrase actually has two distinct meanings.

On the one hand, we use it to describe someone who has good work habits: when at work, he or she works hard and conscientiously. But we also use it to describe an ethic towards life as a whole, a worldview in which the individual finds meaning in life through work and professional achievement. Jewish tradition promotes the first kind of work ethic, but not the second.

Diligence at work is consistently praised in our tradition. Already in the book of Genesis we find Jacob's devoted service to Laban. Jacob tells his wives, "I served your father with all my might" (Genesis 31:6). And he tells Laban, "Thus I was: in the daytime the dryness consumed me, and the frost at night; my sleep fled from my eyes" (Genesis 32:40).

Afterward we learn of Joseph's diligent service first to his master, then to the jail-keeper, and ultimately to Pharaoh.

And in the book of Proverbs we learn that "One who works his land will be sated with bread, but one who runs after empty things lacks understanding" (Proverbs 12:11), and "The slothful person desires but has nothing; but the soul of the diligent will be sated" (Proverbs 13:4).

Maimonides states: "Just as the employer is warned not to steal the wages of the poor and not to delay them, so is the poor person warned not to steal the work of the employer by idling a little here and a little there, until he passes the whole day in deceit. Rather, he must be scrupulous with himself regarding time." (Laws of hire 13:7)

However, Judaism definitely does not view work as the center of life or as its primary source of meaning. Rather, the rule is "Make Torah primary and work secondary." Work, like any other area of human endeavor, gives us the opportunity to express our Torah values in our everyday life, but our ability to do this is mainly dependent on our devotion to cultivating these values in the first place. This requires diligent study and solemn commitment.

Our Code of Jewish Law states that a person should work for a living, but he should "work to live," and not "live to work." After morning Torah study, a person "should go to work, for all Torah which is not accompanied by work is destined to be nullified and in danger of causing transgression, because excessive poverty may cause him to deviate from the will of his Maker. But even so, a person should not make his work primary, but secondary, and his Torah the center; in this way both will succeed. And he should deal faithfully." (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 156.)

Today, when the work ethic has become an overriding compulsion, this seems like a distant dream. Yet a look at Jewish history reveals that a way of life that esteemed work but put Torah study at the center was a living reality for Jews around the world, even where economic conditions were grim. For example, a prominent 16th century commentator, Rabbi Yehoshua Katz, remarks that in his time an ordinary householder is unable to devote a solid nine hours to study, but "only three or four hours" per day. (Drisha Yoreh Deah 246.)

Economic life, including both production (work) and consumption, are an important part of our existence. The Torah acknowledges this importance and encourages us to work diligently and to enjoy life in appropriate moderation. But the material dimension is not the center of our existence; indeed, it only acquires meaning as an opportunity for us

live out values of God's service. Judaism definitely demands that we be ethical at work, but doesn't really square with a "work ethic."

The Jewish Ethicist presents some general principles of Jewish law. For specific questions and direct application, please consult a qualified Rabbi.

The Jewish Ethicist is a joint project of Aish.com and the Business Ethics Center of Jerusalem. To find out more about business ethics and Jewish values for the workplace, visit the JCT Center for Business Ethics website at www.besr.org.

This article was written with my father, Chaim Benyamin ben Esther, in mind. May he have a refuah shlaimah.

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Rabbi Dr. Asher Meir is Research Director at the Business Ethics Center of Jerusalem (www.besr.org). He studied at Harvard, received a PhD in Economics from MIT, and rabbinic ordination from the Israeli Chief Rabbinate. Prior to moving to Israel, he worked at the Council of Economic Advisers in the Reagan administration. Rabbi Dr. Meir is also a Senior Lecturer in Economics at the Jerusalem College of Technology and has published several articles on business, economics and Jewish law. He is the author of the two-volume, "Meaning in Mitzvot (Feldheim), and his Aish.com columns form the basis of the "Jewish Ethicist" book (ktav.com).

