

The Origin of the Jewish Work Ethic

By [Mendel Kalmenson](#)

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In a twist of fate, a recent news item claims that many universities are now soliciting a particular student body they once sought to bar from their study halls.

"College counselors and colleges alike are reporting explicit efforts to attract more Jewish applicants or build Jewish student life on campus."¹

"Outside of the stereotypical or the standard colleges that already have strong Jewish populations, we're seeing a lot of other schools recognize the value and recognize the contribution that these students are making to a college campus."²

But what contribution is that? Many see it as a reference to the admirable work ethic Jewish people seem to possess.

But is there really such a thing as a "Jewish work ethic"? If yes, where did it originate?

A Successful Jew

Arguably, the most successful Jew to have ever lived was Joseph, viceroy of the mightiest empire of his time. "By the throne alone shall I outrank you," said Pharaoh.³ The title of king alone stood between him and that exalted position.

By examining Joseph's dreams, we will understand his secret to success In fact, careful study of the Bible produces one solitary mention of the term "a successful man"—and it is in reference to Joseph.⁴

How did Joseph achieve such success?

Working Dreams

"A person dreams at night what he thinks about by day," says the Talmud.⁵ In other words: one's daydreams become one's night dreams.

By examining Joseph's dreams, and specifically by analyzing how they differed from Pharaoh's, we will better understand his secret to success.

The following is an excerpt from Joseph's first recorded dream: "There we were, binding sheaves in the midst of the field..."⁶

While most people dream about vacation; Joseph dreamt about work.

Pharaoh's idea of a dream differed greatly: "Seven good-looking, robust cows emerged from the Nile River and started grazing in the marsh..."⁷

A nice warm bath followed by a solid meal.

Also, the protagonists of Joseph's dream were people, who were "created to toil,"⁸ while Pharaoh's dream featured cows—born with contempt for just that, as per the expression "a lazy cow..."

Moreover, while cow-chow is available free of labor, sprouting naturally without the need for cultivation, man must toil to produce his sustenance. Grass may grow, but bagels do not.

So if dreams tell us anything about their dreamer, work was an integral part of Joseph's lifestyle, perhaps even his passion. To Pharaoh, however, work was a nuisance that only got in the way of pursuing his passions.

Work in Progress

Another difference between their dreams:

Joseph's vision symbolized continuity, progress, and betterment, while Pharaoh's spoke of regression and eventual termination.

"There we were, binding sheaves in the field...your sheaves formed a circle around my sheaf and prostrated themselves before it."

On a simple level we see growth in monetary value: single stalks turned many. But the metaphorical journey of unity also implies spiritual improvement and growth; many isolated entities being brought together. On both levels, we see progress.

Pharaoh's fantasy starts off as a story of comfort and abundance and quickly turns into a tale of ruin Furthermore, Joseph's second dream replaces earth with heaven as its backdrop and is acted out by constellations instead of men and grain. What greater advance is there than the adoption of spirit over matter? Again, we track improvement.

Conversely, Pharaoh's fantasy starts off as a story of comfort and abundance and quickly turns into a tale of ruin.

"Behold out of the canal there emerged seven cows, of beautiful appearance and robust flesh, and they were grazing in the swamp..." A depiction of serenity and luxury. But that desirable picture quickly changes: "Behold, seven other cows emerge after them out of the canal, of poor appearance and gaunt flesh...and they ate the seven cows of beautiful appearance."

On the banks of the once mighty Nile now stand the forlorn and pitiful skeletons of an abundant era gone by; a disturbing reminder of the good life that once was. Alas, the years of plenty have become a painfully distant memory.

No Pain, No Gain

The second difference is a result of the first.

Since Pharaoh preferred no pain, he was therefore left without long term gain. He failed to realize that the way things come they go: with ease or with difficulty. The choice is our own.

In this vein our sages teach: "If someone tells you he has achieved without effort, don't believe; if he says he's achieved with effort, believe."⁹

Put differently, it is said that the only place where success comes before work is in the dictionary.

This was Joseph's contribution to our people, an unwavering work ethic. It can be recognized in his teenage years as he serves his Egyptian master conscientiously. And it manages to withstand his trying adult years, as we watch him devotedly tend to prisoners in a forsaken jail. Clearly a constant

in his life, Joseph retains this character trait even as he becomes royalty in Pharaoh's luxurious palace.

Like Father like Son

But where did Joseph come up with the idea that work is a Jewish thing? Apparently from his father Jacob, the paradigm of a hard-working man.¹⁰

Is it a wonder that Jacob produced a diligent son like Joseph? Jacob's devoted service to Laban – a notorious scam artist – was legendary. Jacob told his wives, "Now you have known that with all my might I worked for your father..."¹¹ A short while later he described to Laban his *two decades* of service: "Heat and dryness consumed me by day, and the frost at night; my sleep drifted from my eyes..."¹²

Is it a wonder, then, that he produced a diligent son like Joseph? And is it a wonder, then, that this ethos was transmitted to his descendents, eventually becoming a "Jewish gene"?

A Means or an End

Was Joseph a workaholic who considered the workplace central to his life, or a career-freak who sought self-expression and meaning at the office instead of at home?

A further study of his nocturnal visions is necessary.

As mentioned, Joseph's first dream unfolded here on earth and was acted out by physical agents, while the second dream takes place in spiritual galaxies, stars and constellations its cast.

From the first dream we are given to understand that work was important to Joseph, in the second dream we are taught why.¹³

In the first we are instructed to engage the physical world wholeheartedly, in the second we are informed the purpose: to arrange the marriage of heaven and earth.

Each dream is incomplete without the other; without either party the wedding is off.

So, as it turns out, Joseph didn't live to work; he worked to live. He worked for a higher purpose: to refine himself and his surroundings by infusing all of existence with meaning and purpose.¹⁴

The Sexton and the Wagon Driver

The children of Rabbi Shmuel of Lubavitch, the fourth Chabad-Lubavitch Rebbe, once debated Judaism's contribution to "living life." Their father, weighing in on their discussion, summoned his simpleminded sexton, Bentzion.

The Rebbe inquired: "Bentzion, did you get a chance to eat yet today?"

"Yes."

"And did you eat well?"

"I'm not sure about the meaning of 'eating well,' but I am satisfied, thank G-d."

"I'm not sure about the meaning of 'eating well,' but I am satisfied, thank G-d..." "And, why, might I ask, did you eat?"

"Why, in order to live!"

"And for what purpose do you live?"

"In order to be able to serve G-d."

"Thank you Bentzion, you can go now," said the Rebbe.

The Rebbe then sent for Ivan, their Russian Yiddish-speaking wagon driver.

"Ivan, have you eaten today?"

"Sure!"

"Have you eaten well?"

"And how!"

"Tell me, Ivan, why do you eat?"

"In order to live!"

"And why do you live?"

"Well, I'd say it boils down to a good drink."

With that, Ivan was off.

The Rebbe then turned to his young children who had listened in fascination to the exchange, and said: "This is the Jewish contribution to life; we work to live, and we live for a higher purpose."¹⁵

What's in It for Me?

Some have dubbed our generation the "instant gratification generation." A famous American retorted: "Instant gratification is not soon enough..."

Is there any connection between this phenomenon and the skyrocketing divorce rate that plagues our world?¹⁶ What about the plummeting birthrate? Is that also related?

(In America the average household has 2.3 kids. If that number sounds staggering, you might be from Europe, where the average household has a whopping 1.3 children! In many nations of the European Union, the death rate already exceeds the birthrate.

If that doesn't frighten you, how about this: There are now 59 nations – that's 44% of the world's population! – that have below-replacement fertility rates.¹⁷)

Good marriages and rearing children take lots of time; time most of us claim we don't

haveThe connection seems obvious. Both good marriages and rearing children take lots of time and even more work; time most of us claim we don't have, and effort we frankly don't want to expend. Bombarded by ads introducing the quickest paths to pleasure, and news items featuring overnight business success stories, our generation has been trained to think that a successful life comes "quick and easy."

It's false advertising. The opposite is true: the greatest things in life take lots of time and lots of effort.

(Have you ever wondered why they haven't yet come up with ways to expedite pregnancies?)

It's time to get back to the basics. It's time we went back to dreaming like Joseph.

FOOTNOTES

1.

"For instance, Washington and Lee University, a decidedly Southern-influenced institution in Virginia, has identified 'recruiting and supporting Jewish students at W&L' as a fundraising priority, and is constructing a \$4 million Hillel House. In 2001, we were one percent Jewish here at Washington and Lee and now we're almost four percent," says Joan Robins, who splits her time directing the university's Hillel chapter and working in university development.

2.

Bruce Sher, co-chair of the national Association for College Admission Counseling's special interest group for Jewish students.

3.

Genesis 41:40.

4.

Ibid., 39:2.

[5.](#)

Berachot 55b.

[6.](#)

[Genesis 37:7.](#)

[7.](#)

Ibid., 41:2.

[8.](#)

[Job](#)

[5:7.](#)

[Rabbi Zev Segal](#), a well know activist, was once asked by the Rebbe to undertake a particular mission in a country he was traveling to. When he returned and reported to the Rebbe about his success, he told the Rebbe that it hadn't been an easy task. The Rebbe asked him with a smile, "Rabbi Segal, since when did you make a contract with the Al-mighty for an easy life?" This exchange, he later said, became a guide to him throughout his life.

[9.](#)

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

[10.](#)

"These are the offspring of Jacob: Joseph"—[Genesis 37:2](#) (and see Rashi ad loc).

[11.](#)

[Genesis 31:6.](#)

[12.](#)

[Genesis 31:40.](#)

[13.](#)

This is one of the reasons we are told of Joseph's second dream—for, one could ask, what does it add on the message of the first dream? There was an explicit need for the repetition of Pharaoh's dream, namely, to impress upon him the urgency of the message (see [Genesis 41:32](#))—a reason that doesn't apply to Joseph's dreams.

[14.](#)

Our sages teach that after studying Torah in the morning 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" (Code of Jewish Law, Orach Chaim 156).

[15.](#)

Likuttei Diburim, vol. 3, pg. 421a.

[16.](#)

50% percent of first marriages, 67% of second and 74% of third marriages end in divorce. That means that, sadly, the marriage of one out of two Americans will end in divorce! This according to Jennifer Baker of the Forest Institute of Professional Psychology in Springfield, Missouri. See [divorcerate.org](#).

[17.](#)

Among these countries is Russia, at a fertility rate of 1.17. In Russia today, almost as many children are aborted as are born alive. The overall European rate is 1.3 with Italy at 1.2, meaning that Italy will lose almost half of its people in every generation. That means that the average Italian child born today won't have brothers or sisters. Most also won't have cousins, aunts or uncles.

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