

“Six Days Shalt Thou Labor...”
(Genesis 1:26-2:3; Psalm 90)

My classmate, Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin tells the story of his move from Pennsylvania to New York. One of the moving men looked exactly like Willie Nelson. He poured over each piece of furniture with such joy and care, that Jeff just had to comment on how much he seemed to love his work. The man said, “Well, it’s like this. Moving is hard for most people. They’re nervous about going to a new place. They’re worried about strangers packing their possessions. So, I think God wants me to treat my customers with love and to make them feel like I care about their things and their life. God wants me to help make their changes go smoothly. If I can be happy about it, maybe they can be too.”

Wouldn’t you love to hire this man to do your next move? He understands his work as God’s work, and so he performs it, not only with enthusiasm, but with care, with honesty, and with integrity. We can be pretty sure that this guy goes to church on Sunday, but it’s clear that he also feels God’s presence on Monday through Saturday.

How we understand labor is inextricably linked with the story of creation. We imitate God. Just as God created the world in six days and rested on the Sabbath, so we are commanded “Six days you shall labor and do all your work”. Not only Shabbat, but the six days which lead up to it are filled with the sacred.

The student of mythology, Joseph Campbell, noted that, in medieval times, the tallest structure that could be seen on the horizon of a city was the church and steeple. As the power and influence of the church gave way to that of kings and rulers, the castle replaced the steeple as the most visible part of the skyline. Today, the skyscraper has replaced the castle. The skyscraper, the cathedral of modern business, is our defining metaphor.

Few of us live our daily lives with the perspective of the moving man--that religion and work go hand in hand, that our livelihood is part of what God wants of us. For most of us, the skyscraper is unrelated to the church or synagogue. For most of us, the world of religion and the world of work are completely discrete.

But religion is concerned with the world of work. Jewish tradition envisions the scene on the Day of Judgment when we come under Divine scrutiny. God will ask, “Were you honest with weights and measures?” The ethics of our work concerns God.

The first task God gives to Adam after he is created and placed in the Garden of Eden is “Leovdah v’leshomrah”---to work it and keep it. The Hebrew word for human being-Adam- is related to the word for soil-adama-- suggesting that Adam’s work and his identity are connected.

There are two Hebrew words for work. One is avodah. It is also the word for “worship”. The other is melacha or labor. The rabbis make a pun-melacha, work is like melucha--royal -- melacha, melucha--work is royal--making us like God.

In our culture, too, work is valued. The skyscraper dominates. We prepare ourselves for work by getting an education; we work; we recover from work; we try to

raise children who can successfully enter the work world. But too often we do not feel God's presence in our work, too often our work is not vital. Physician Larry Dossey notes that more heart attacks occur between 8 and 9 on Monday mornings than any other time during the week. He contends that job dissatisfaction causes more heart attacks than high cholesterol.

Studs Turkel interviewed ordinary people about their work and discovered that people are searching "...for daily meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash, for astonishment rather than torpor; in short, for a sort of life rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying." We value work, and we want our work to be meaningful, pleasurable and enlivening as well as lucrative.

Interpreters of the Bible ask us to see our work as even more. Just as God created on six days, so do we labor for six days, Our work can be avodah--filled with worship. Our work can be melacha--helping us to imitate God. Work can be a manifestation of our creativity and uniqueness. Work can be an expression of our gratitude for the gift of life. It is through work that we can become like God. The psalm reminds us, "Teach us to treasure each day that we may open our heart to your wisdom. "U'masey yadenu connenu: May the work of our hands be established."

But there is much that can get in the way of our work being established. Money, for example. We work to earn money. How much money we think we need has been steadily increased as advertising convinces us that more and more products are essential. Work enables us to be better consumers. Remember the bumper sticker, "I owe, I owe, so off to work I go?" Shabbat itself has been transformed from the day of being to the day of consuming, par excellence. We have to work to be able to afford to buy more.

Leo Tolstoy wrote a short story challenging the drive to acquire called, "How Much Land Does a Man Need?" A Russian man travels to a tribe in the hinterlands. They offer to give him as much land as he can cover on foot in one day. The man starts his frenetic journey. As the sun sets, he collapses in exhaustion and dies. The amount of land that he ultimately gets is a six-foot plot of earth as a final resting place.

Both Jews and Christians are familiar with the blessing from Leviticus known as the Priestly Benediction. "May God bless you and keep you. " This blessing asks for God's generosity and presence. But, unlike another bumper sticker popular in the 80's "Prosperity, Your Divine Right," the rabbis interpret this blessing as a caution about overvaluing money. "May God bless you", they explain means, "May God bless you with wealth and possessions". But "May God keep you " they interpret, "May God keep your wealth and possessions from possessing you!" If the value of your work is only the value of your paycheck, then your work is neither avodah nor melacha but a kind of "Monday through Friday sort of dying".

Not only does money overshadow the intrinsic value of work for some of us, but we also deem certain kinds of work as "worthy" and others are not. Mierle Laderman Ukeles was a well-established artist with a fine reputation when she became a mother. As she walked her baby in the stroller in Riverdale NY, she felt as if she had become invisible. As an artist, she was a somebody. As a mother, she had become, in the eyes of those around her, only a maintenance worker. She was responsible for maintaining someone else. This insight led her to create a new piece of performance art. She created a ritual where she circled every sanitation truck in the city of New York, shook the hand of the sanitation workers, and said, "Thank you for saving New York City. It took her

two years to complete this project. At the end of it, the Sanitation Department was so grateful to her for valuing their work that she was made the Artist in Residence of the Sanitation Department of the City of New York.

I tell you this story for two reasons. First, Laderman Ukeles identified with those whose work is undervalued in our society and appreciated their importance. She brought respect and gratitude to them. Second, it was her work as a mother, which provided insight for her work as an artist. Sometimes the most important labor we do is work for which we receive neither a paycheck nor recognition. And yet, for most of us, the work of our hands as fathers, mothers, and friends is far more lasting--and far less visible--than our labor in the workplace.

Along with money and social judgment brings another obstacle to seeing our work as avodah or melacha. That is the inability to leave it. Our work is so essential that we must give it our attention above all else. Workaholism is the only addiction in our culture which fills the addict with pride and recognition. Workaholism is socially promoted because it is seemingly socially productive. But if this is worship, what is being worshipped? This work is not avodah or melacha, worship or royalty, but slavery. The Pharaoh has been internalized.

The Hafetz Hayim- whose name means the One who Delights in Life, tells the story of a boast by a man of means. "God had granted me such great wealth and there is nothing that I lack. The Hafetz Hayyim responded, "You should therefore devote a few hours daily to Torah study." The man replied, "But, I don't have the time for that." "If so, the Hafetz Hayim retorted, "then you are the poorest of the poor, because if your time is not your own, what do you have? There is no person who is poorer than one who is poor in time."

When not only Torah study, but all it represents--family, emotional intimacy, exploration of the unknown, connection to the Divine, appreciation, introspection and Shabbat rest are abandoned because of work, then we are poor indeed.

For work to be avodah or melacha, for work to be the labor that God envisioned at creation, we need to understand it as contributing to God's work of creation. The Talmud teaches in the name of Rav Huna, "Just as God clothed Adam and Eve when they were naked, so we clothe the naked. Just as God visited Abraham when he was healing from his circumcision, so we should visit the sick. Just as God buried Moses, so we must bury the dead. Just as God comforted Isaac after the death of his mother, so we should comfort mourners." (Sotah 14a)

Not only those in the garment industry, the medical profession, mortuary workers and those in the helping professions, but all of our work can be seen as imitating God. It is not what we do to earn a livelihood, but how we understand it that makes the difference. This is what the moving man teaches us.

Brother Juniper's Cafe was a restaurant that existed for three years in Forestville in Sonoma County. Peter Reinhart and his wife, Susan, were members of a religious order. They wanted their work to reflect their religious values. They created an environment in which people felt welcomed, received good meals in carefully decorated surroundings with thoughtful service. Patrons experienced the care of their body and souls. When Peter and Susan put out a "Poor People's Cup", people contributed in such abundance that they were astonished. Peter and Susan came to recognize that their generosity was the patron's way of expressing gratitude for what Brother Juniper's Cafe

was trying to accomplish. Peter and Susan believed that, more than affording a livelihood; the purpose of Brother Juniper's Cafe was to help those in need and to touch the hearts and souls of all who came through the door. Their work was intentionally a religious enterprise, an expression of their souls, which filled them with gratitude and aroused gratitude in others.

Episcopal Priest Matthew Fox creates rituals to honor work. He describes a ritual in which a doctor showed his colleagues images of our internal organs and explained with each image how it serves us. The group bowed to an image of the lung and chanted a thank you to the lung and its Maker. After doing this for twenty-six organs of the body, there was deep silence. Finally, one man spoke. "I have been a doctor for twenty-five years. This is the first time in my life that I have experienced the sacredness of the body. You must take this ritual to every medical school in the country, telling young people that this is why one becomes a doctor."

After Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin was established in his new congregation in New York, he discovered that the cabby taking him to Kennedy Airport used to belong to his congregation. "So Rabbi, what do you say to a guy who hasn't set foot in synagogue since his bar mitzvah?" Jeff knew from Hasidic folklore that the forerunner of the cabby - the wagon driver, was an honored profession. So he responded, "You're a taxi driver. But you are also a piece of the tissue that connects all humanity...I heard on your two-way radio that you are going to pick up a woman from the hospital and take her home. That means that you'll be the first non-medical person she encounters after being in the hospital. You will be a small part of her healing process, an agent in her reentry into the world of health. "

"You may then pick up someone from the train station who has come home from seeing a dying parent. You may take someone to the house of the one that he or she will ask to join in marriage. You're a connector, a bridge builder. You're one of the unseen people who make the world work as well as it does. That is holy work. You may not think of it this way, but yours is a sacred mission."

Doing our work as God's work, doing our work as worship, does not require that we find a different livelihood that is outwardly more meaningful or valuable. If we see ourselves as connected--to one another and to the Divine, then every day can be an opportunity to be God's partner. As the psalm says, "Teach us to treasure each day that we may open our hearts to Your wisdom", and by doing so, "May the work of our hands be established".

Labor Day weekend symbolized the end of summer, the beginning of a new year of labor. May this labor day, may this new year be the beginning of a new relationship to our work as well, a relationship in which we treasure the opportunities manifest each day to become like God, to worship the Divine, and to be a partner with God in doing our six days of labor. As we return from our summer mentality, let us pray with the Psalmist, U'Maase yadenu conneha alenu, U'Maase yadenu konenhu." "May the work of our hands be established for us, May the work of our hands be established".

Special thanks to Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin for his book, Being God's Partner: How to Find the Hidden Link Between Spirituality and Your Work.