

WORK AND LEISURE IN THE  
JEWISH TRADITION

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1. The theme of labor is important in every society:
  - a) early industrial society, and certainly in pre-industrial societies, where it is the major means of obtaining livelihood.
  - b) in the present period, despite our perceived loss of affluence, we are still sufficiently well-off to afford a great deal of leisure. Yet various forms of handicraft and other forms of labor are adopted by people, especially in the service-oriented professions and businesses, as a form of relaxation and creativity. This indicates not only a trend in avocational interests, but a fundamental need for manual expression.
  - c) in the era that is now emerging, many youngsters are abandoning those forms of employment that require a high and sophisticated degree of education; whether for ideology or for simple inclination, are opting for the older forms of work -- at the very time that "futurists" speak of "electronic Cottage industries."
  
2. In speaking of Work in the Jewish tradition, it is best to discuss it in tandem with "dignity" --  
 3120 , sense<sup>+</sup> self-worth, the experience of validity.

Indeed, Judaism requires of man imitatio Dei...  
and first thing Torah tells us of God is: He is a  
creative craftsman: *קטנטן קטן אלקים*

Interestingly, prophetic vision Messiah = Work, not  
leisure: *ובתנו חרבות סלחם ותחיתם  
למנוחות*

Thus, R. Judah: to work 6 days /week is a  
Mitzvah (Mekhilta de' R. ShY, 20:9)

Discuss Work & Dignity in 3 aspects.

### 3. The Dignity Attained by Work

Work leads to Dignity of self-sufficiency, self-reliance.

The theme repeated in <sup>*בבלי*</sup> ~~B.M.~~ esp. "Wisdom Lit" - as:

Psalms (128): *יגד כבוד כי תאכל מאד וישבע וישבע*

Proverbs (end): *אטת חיל*

So in Talmud:

Ber. 8 - *זבול הנפני משיח כבד יותר מיהל שמים*  
Sab. 118 - *ד"ע: עשה עבדך חכם ואל תצטרך לקרית*

### 4. The Indignity Avoided by Work

Kid. R. Judah: father who doesn't teach son a trade  
raises him to be a thief.

Ket. 59 רבי אליעזר אומר אם הכניסה לו מאה  
 שפחות כופה לעשות גזמא שפבטלה  
 מביאה לידי זימה. רשב"י אומר אם  
 גזמזיר את אשתו מלעשות מלאכה יוציא  
 ויין כתובתה, שפבטלה מביאה לידי פירוש

word פירוש: Rashi - פירוש; Maimonides - פירוש

i.e., either (מ"ה) moral or (מ"ה) psychological  
 breakdown

difference (acc. Talmud) - if she spends time at dog-races.

One may add that the Rabbis knew this from a careful  
 reading of history. They were not strangers to  
 Imperial Rome and its social and moral patterns.  
 And in Rome, the day's work was usually done at noon  
 or shortly thereafter, with the rest of the time  
 spent in pleasure and amusement. More than half  
 the days of the year were holidays. It is probable  
 that the Rabbis saw a cause-and-effect relation between  
 this excessive and misspent leisure and the immorality  
 of Rome which they so deplored. The relation between  
sehok and zimah is all too obvious.

##### 5. The Dignity of Work Itself

previous 2 categories - mere "profitable occupation."

Independent of nature of Work. This category -  
 creative Work -- one that involves self-expression  
 and is important per se, not because of what it leads  
 to or prevents.



This kind of Work, representing personal involvement and expression, is considered "great" and "beloved" (or: precious).

שלא תיחלץ ממנו (הוא) פקודתו (אשר) אצלך:  
 וכל הדין האמנה, ואם שמה שנים  
 שלוש, ואם ארבע, האמנה שם ויכח  
 שש וזו של האמנה ויכח ואם שש  
 וכי הדין שש, יכח ואם שש  
 השלש, ואם שש, שש ואם שש  
 שלש וזו של האמנה

Indeed, the personal dignity of this kind of Work is enhanced by its difficulty: Midrash Lam. -

ה"ע של מ"ק - מ"ק י"ג ע"ב...

even though labor in Eden too  $\frac{1}{2} \frac{1}{2} \frac{1}{2} \frac{1}{2}$ , and  
later:  $\frac{1}{2} \frac{1}{2} \frac{1}{2} \frac{1}{2}$

6. But: this valuation of Work comes into conflict with 5"5 !

דרכו...  
...  
מחנה צה"ל.

[illegible]



# 7. Compromises:

- שבת ימינו (above); and "שבת" (above)
- R. Gamliel (Avot 2:2) שבת היא זמן שבו  
שנינו מלמדנו ונלמד. וכן תורה ודבר  
מלאכה שבת קודש וזוהר ושלום.

# 8. Work-Leisure

Absence this kind Work in industrial and post-industrial society is what causes alienation -- and leads people to seek outside form of Work as part of leisure!

lends dignity to man as homo faber as well as homo sapiens.

the positive content of leisure;  
we find two words in Hebrew, both Sabbath-associated words. When the Torah describes God "resting" (which should never be taken anthropomorphically), it says: *shavat va-yinafash*. *Shavat* (He rested) is similar to the word *Shabbat*, and it means to refrain from work. *Shevitah* (the noun, which in contemporary Hebrew also means a strike) is a period in which we desist from work. The negative, passive aspect is immediately evident. The second word is *va-yinafash* (noun: *nofesh*). This signifies another form of leisure. *Va-yinafash* or *nofesh* comes from the word *nefesh*, the soul, the spirit.

Hence, the concept of *menuhah* contains one or both of these ideas. The negative understanding of *menuhah* (or leisure) we may call *shevitah*, cessation of activity. The positive we may call *nofesh*. (We are not using *shevitah* in a pejorative sense, because both of these signify proper uses of leisure.)

## Self-Expression

*Shevitah* means that a man ceases his usual labors, and this respite from routine activity allows him to rediscover himself by emerging from the work week. Over-involved in and overwhelmed by his set pattern of work, a man's dignity is threatened. He begins to identify himself by the functions he performs in society or family and turns into an impersonal cipher, like a beast of burden that can be just as easily replaced by another function-bearing animal that happens to be technologically efficient. By disengaging from his involvement with nature, with society, with business, man is permitted self-expression. His real "self" comes to the fore. He does not have to be busy taking notes or selling or buying or fighting. By means of *shevitah* on his Sabbath day of "rest," he can start expressing the real self that lies within. *Shevitah* is thus the use of leisure to restore my individuality in all its integrity. By pulling out of the routine of weekday involvement, I confront myself in order to find out who I am. Leisure helps me resolve my "identity crisis." (And what self-respecting adolescent doesn't have an identity crisis?) By getting away from my normal activities, which harness me into the measured responses of a Pavlovian, completely deterministic way of acting during the week, my inner, original ego emerges; I can rediscover myself when I am taken out of the matrix of these challenges and the responses which are expected of me. In this sense, *shevitah* exploits the limits of my character and my potentialities. (As we shall see shortly, it exploits them but it cannot expand them.) It is the desirable result of available time not wasted in *sehok*.

In practical terms, leisure is a time for games. Leisure refers not only to *time*, but also to the *nature* of the activity. You can drive a car and it is part of your work, because you are a cab-driver; but you can drive and consider it leisure. You can just think and regard that as work, if you are a professor or a student; but you can also think and feel it is a delight and a joy — whether you are a taxi-driver in the one case or an intellectual in the other. Leisure is a game-activity in the highest sense. We place a person in a new environment, in new conditions, allow him to bring out unsuspected skills that were heretofore latent in him, to express himself in new ways, whether of esthetics or athletics or any other way to which he is unaccustomed during the week.



## Self-Creation

From here we go to the next step, *nofesh*. *Nofesh* is more than self-discovery; it is the use of leisure for self-transformation. Paradoxically, it is in a sense more passive than *shevitah*. Instead of activity for the purpose of self-expression, it may require a certain kind of personal, inner silence in which you make yourself available for a higher impression. It is the incorporation of the transcendent rather than the articulation of the immanent. You try to respond to something that comes from without, from above. *Nofesh* means not to fulfill yourself but to go outside yourself, to rise beyond yourself; not to discover your identity, but rather to create a new and a better identity. (Incidentally, this is my usual approach to young people who come into my office with the lament, "Rabbi, I don't know who I am." My answer is, "You probably aren't! Your job is to create an I, to do something in order to make a self. You're not going to find out who you are by moping, 'who am I?', and by scrutinizing your face as you look into the mirror. Your task is not to discover but to invent an I. That's the real problem.") That is what *nofesh* is all about. *Nofesh* requires of us that we take our creative talents, which during the week are applied to impersonal Nature or unengaged society, and now turn them inwards and create a new, real self. This is the inner and deeper meaning of *menuhah*: it is re-creation, not relaxation.

Our tradition speaks of an interesting phenomenon concerning the Sabbath. During the week everyone has a *neshamah*, a soul. But on *Shabbat* we receive a *neshamah yeterah*, an "additional soul." This suggests that there is some kind of undeveloped facet of personality, a spiritual dimension, of which we remain unaware in the normal course of events. On *Shabbat* (in the *nofesh* sense of a *menuhah*) we are given the time to enrich ourselves by developing or creating this spiritual dimension.

Hence, whereas *shevitah* implies the development of a latent, pre-existent talent, *nofesh* means the creation of a novelty within the personality, bringing in something new, transforming the self by growing into a *neshamah yeterah*.