

# The Parsha Discussion

TORAH TO DISCUSS WITH TEENS AND ADULTS AROUND YOUR SHABBAT TABLE

## Vayetze: Yaakov's Work-Ethic



Jacob, a foreigner, arrives in Haran and sees a well in a field. Shepherds and their flocks have gathered at the well-side, but the shepherds cannot draw water for their sheep as the mouth of the well is blocked by a large stone.

He said, "It is still broad daylight, too early to round up the animals; water the flock and take them to pasture." (29:7)

Rashi Comments:

"Since he saw the flocks lying down, he thought that they were returning home and that they would no longer graze that day. So he said to them: "The day is yet long," i.e. if you have been hired for the day, you have not completed the day's work, and if the animals are your own, it is, nonetheless, not the time to take in the livestock"

What is bothering Jacob? It seems like he simply cannot fathom the notion of wasting work-time; as long as there is still daylight, one should be working.

At the close of the parsha we again see Jacob's work ethic. He looks back over his years working for Lavan:

"These twenty years I have spent in your service, your ewes and she-goats never miscarried, nor did I feast on rams from your flock. If an animal was torn by beasts, I never brought it to you; I myself made good the loss; you exacted it of me, whether snatched by day or snatched by night. Often, scorching heat ravaged me by day and frost by night; and sleep fled from my eyes." (31:39-40)

Jacob professes his hard work and his honesty as a shepherd. This conscientiousness, a hallmark of Jacob's behaviour, reflects a certain idealization regarding the notion of work and use of time.

But why work so hard? Why not relax?

"This notion of the centrality and importance of work, as opposed to pursuing a life of leisure and hedonism, runs counter to the message that is inundating the Western world. The implicit idea in all the advertising you see is that, ideally, you shouldn't work at all; ideally, you would

# The Parsha Discussion

TORAH TO DISCUSS WITH TEENS AND ADULTS AROUND YOUR SHABBAT TABLE

retire when you're eighteen. Small wonder that many people have reached the conclusion that the less they work, the better off they are... work is perceived as a necessary evil, and not as spiritually redemptive." (Rav Aharon Lichtenstein. <http://etzion.org.il/en/cultivate-and-guard-universal-duties-mankind>)

"Love work." (Avot 1:10) How? ... Just as the Torah was given through the covenant, so too, work was given through the covenant, as it says, "**Six days you shall labor and do all your work**, and the seventh day is a Sabbath to your God... Rabbi Yehuda ben Betera said: What should a person do who has no work? If he has an uncultivated courtyard or a fallow field, he should occupy himself with it, as it states: **Six days you shall labor and do all your work**" (Avot d'Rabbi Natan, 1:11)

## So please discuss

- Is there a value to work? What sort of work? Is work just to finance our lifestyle, or to prevent idleness and boredom, or are there higher reasons for working?
- In our parsha, Jacob is suggesting that a person should maximise his or her day. What is the best way to do that?
- If one inherited millions and didn't need to work a day in one's life, why might we still want to see the hereditary millionaire busy himself or herself in productive activity?
- What is the correct balance between work and leisure?
- Do you feel happier when you are busy and filled with activity or when you are at rest and idle?

"...in a purely psychological sense, in terms of mental health, one's self-fulfillment comes through work. For instance Rabban Shimon b. Gamliel says: "A husband who takes an oath that his wife should do no work, should divorce her and pay her *ketuba*, since idleness leads to *shi'amum*" (Talmud Ketubot 59b). *Shi'amum* can be understood either as insanity or as boredom, ennui, a sense of spiritual degradation. Even if she's as wealthy as Midas, she has to do some kind of work, lest idleness lead to psychological and spiritual problems.

There is also, of course, a social basis to our emphasis on work. The fact is that work needs to be done. A society in which people work is, in terms of its basic structure and values, very different from one in which they do not.

... a third basis as well to the emphasis on work, and this is more specifically religious in nature. A person who works is a partner to God in *ma'aseh bereishit* (creation). In this respect, he is imitating God.

In Thomas Carlyle's early work *Sartor Resartus*, he describes his own spiritual crisis. He speaks first of what he describes as 'The Everlasting No,' the voice of cynicism and scepticism, but even beyond that of *ennui*, of a sense of the lack of purpose, meaning, direction and substance in life. From there he ... progresses to 'The Everlasting Yea,' that which is assertive and positive in relation to the world and human existence. At the heart of the chapter on 'The Everlasting Yea' is the notion of work." (Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, *ibid.*)

Shabbat Shalom!