Jewish Lessons on Meaningful Work

By Rabbi Dan Judson, PhD

Jewish Lessons on Meaningful Work

By Rabbi Dan Judson, PhD

Everything I learned about work I learned from a probation officer. It wasn't my probation officer, thank goodness — it was a probation officer in my congregation where I served as a rabbi. My synagogue was not a wealthy congregation with doctors and corporate lawyers: we were a regular community with nurses, teachers, "mom and pop" store owners and probation officers. But when the recession of 2007 came to my synagogue there was a lot of pain due to job cuts. One Shabbat evening, while everyone was milling about after services, I saw the probation officer and asked her how work was going and she said she had been laid off. The department told her it would hopefully be temporary but couldn't guarantee anything. I told her how sorry I was to hear that because I knew she liked her job, and she said she was okay. It had been three weeks since she got laid off and she was okay. I asked her how she was spending her time, and she said she was going to work. This was a confusing answer because she had just told me her job had been eliminated.

"Sorry, I thought you said you were laid off three weeks ago. You mean they gave you a few weeks notice to close out your job?" I asked.

"No, they told me they were going to stop paying me immediately a few weeks ago," she said.

"Okay, so I was asking what you did last week given you don't have a job."

"Yeah," she said somewhat sheepishly, "I kind of went to work last week even though they weren't paying me."

She could tell from my look of incredulity that I needed more explanation.

"I just like what I do. I mean probation officer is not so exciting, but I feel like I am good at it, I like the other people in my office, and you know I really feel like I help people. I'm useful there."

"Did they say that they are more likely to hire you back if you do this?

"Nope."

"So just to be clear, you are going to work every day at the same job you used to get paid to go to, but now you are not getting paid, because you just want to work?"

"Yep."

It's not the idea of volunteering which was so surprising to me...but I have never volunteered for the job that *was* my job.

It's not the idea of volunteering which was so surprising to me. I have volunteered for all sorts of jobs in my life that I didn't get paid for – soup kitchens, political advocacy groups, last place seventh grade boys basketball coach – but I have never volunteered for the job that *was* my job. But what was so striking to me about the probation officer was the obvious sense that work was more than a pay check for her. Work was about being in an environment where you feel useful. People need to feel useful. Terry Gross, the long-time host of the NPR show Fresh Air, was interviewed recently and asked about when she would retire having worked on the show for 30 plus years. She responded by saying that she

had no plans to retire anytime soon. She would work for as long as she could. She cited the old adage which everyone has heard that “no one on their death bed wishes they could have spent more time at work.” The problem, she pointed out, was that the adage is totally wrong. There are some people who do regret that they didn’t work more. Or at least some people wish that they could have had worked more in jobs that mattered. No one on their death bed wishes they could have put in more hours at a job where they didn’t make a difference, but people often wish they had a job where they felt useful, where they could make a difference.

People often have a misunderstanding about Jewish tradition’s understanding of work. Judaism places at the pinnacle of Jewish observance the Sabbath, a day where absolutely no work is permitted. But this doesn’t mean that Judaism diminishes the value of work or the importance of material concerns. On the contrary, it takes as a given that work is valuable but places such an emphasis on Shabbat to teach something of the great balance between work and rest. There is a famous story in the Talmud where a king becomes so enamored with the Sabbath that he decrees it should be Sabbath every day. But pretty soon of course with no one working, there is no food, and nothing gets fixed or accomplished. People need to rest, but just as crucially they need to work.

The difficulty of course can be finding a job where one feels useful. It used to be that one had to decide when they were 18 or 22 years old what field they wanted to enter and had to live with that decision for the rest of their lives. And of course this is still true to some extent, but the world has changed in this regard. As someone who counsels Jewish professionals on their career paths, I can attest to the fact that people now change their careers midstream pretty regularly. To use the contemporary idiom, people are reinventing themselves regularly. And at least from my small vantage point, the reinvention is often about a search for usefulness. People want to feel about their work. like the probation officer in my congregation felt about her work, they want to feel useful. They don’t need to save the world, they just want to be useful. Because there are some people who on their death bed wish they could have spent more time at work.

Rabbi Dan Judson, PhD | Dean, Rabbinical School of Hebrew College

Prior to joining Hebrew College in 2007, Dan Judson served for 10 years as the spiritual leader of Temple Beth David of the South Shore in Canton, Mass. In 2003, he was the Daniel Jeremy Silver Fellow at Harvard University. Judson’s latest book, “Pennies for Heaven: The History of American Synagogues and Money” (Brandeis University Press, 2018), has earned critical acclaim and he has co-authored a number of books on Jewish rituals, including "The Rituals and Practices of a Jewish Life: A Handbook for Personal Spiritual Renewal" (Jewish Lights Publishing, 2002), "The Jewish Pregnancy Book: A Resource for the Soul, Body and Mind During Pregnancy, Birth and the First Three Months" (Jewish Lights Publishing, 2003) and "Meeting at the Well: A Jewish Spiritual Guide to Being Engaged" (URJ Press, 2002). His articles on American Jewish history have appeared in various journals. Judson earned his doctorate in Jewish history at Brandeis University, where his research focused on the history of synagogues and money.