

TORAH TABLE TALK – PIRKE AVOT

Who Do I Work For?

Finding Meaning in Livelihood

Parshat Va'yetze, Genesis 28:10 – 32:3

Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt

With love to their grandchildren

Elka, Joshua, Lindsay, Oren z"l, Jenny, David, Lauren, Kayla, Zenna, and Emily

When you look in a *Torah* scroll, the first thing you notice about *Parshat Va'yetze* is that there are no breaks in the way it is laid out. Most *Torah* portions are broken down into sections which have spaces between them called *petuchot* and *stumot*. *Petuchot* (singular is *petucha*) are empty spaces which extend from the final word of a verse to the end of the line; *stumot* (singular *s'tuma*) are shorter spaces on a line which separate one section from the next section. There are hundreds of these spaces throughout the text. In the case of *Parshat Vayetze* there are simply no breaks in the text from the moment Jacob flees from his home to avoid his brother's wrath until he returns to the land of Canaan some twenty years later. These years represent a self enclosed unit in the life of our forefather –his years of flight, of building a family and working for his duplicitous father-in-law, Laban. For Jacob these are the years of adulthood. He learns the hard lessons of life living in Haran. But he also marries Rachel and Leah, grows a family and builds up a considerable fortune before returning to the land of his father.

Like many people, Jacob may have seen the years of laboring and parenting as a separate entity in his life. His life is divided into three separate periods: the early years when he lives in the home of his parents, the middle years when Jacob pursues family and career, and the final years when Jacob has grown older and wiser if not a bit disillusioned by life's cruelties and uncertainties.

Like Jacob, sometimes we lose sight of the purpose and meaning of our lives during this middle period when we are too busy raising children and earning a livelihood. We look at life as the long period of years between youth and retirement. We measure life by looking back or anticipate the golden years. And yet, I would suggest that it is in these middle years that we are most in need a spiritual compass. We must ask ourselves: who do I work for? Is there spiritual and moral meaning in the work that I do? The sages recognized the spiritual importance of our working years and addressed this topic in *Pirke Avot*.

Pirke Avot 2:2 Rabban Gamliel the son of Rabbi Judah the Prince said: Great is study of the Torah when combined with a worldly occupation, for toil in them both puts sin out of mind.

Pirke Avot 2: 19 Rabbi Elazar said: Be eager to study the Torah. Know what to respond to a heretic. Know before whom you toil and who is your employer who shall pay you the reward of your labor.

Sources

Genesis 29:15, 19-20

Laban said to Jacob: "Just because you are a kinsman, should you serve me for nothing? Tell me what your wages shall be?" ...Jacob loved Rachel; so he answered: "I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter, Rachel." Laban said: "Better that I should give her to you than I should give her to an outsider. Stay with me." So Jacob worked seven years for Rachel and they seemed to him but a few days because of his love for her.

Babylonian Talmud, Baba Kama 30a

Rav Judah said: He who wishes to be pious must [in the first instance particularly] fulfill the laws of [Seder] *Nezikin* (Which deals with criminal and civil law as well as damages). But Raba said: The matters [dealt with in the Tractate] *Pirke Avot* (a comendium of aphorisms dealing with moral and spiritual matters); still others said: Matters [dealt with in] *Berachot* (which deals with prayer and blessings).

Quoted in, Being God's Partner by Rabbi Jonathan Salkin

Bishop John Lancaster Spaulding: To test a man's worth do business with him. (Page 125)

Hasidic Tale: A man lamented to his rabbi: "I'm frustrated that my work leaves me no time for study or prayer." The Rabbi replied: "Perhaps your work is more pleasing to God than study or prayer." (Page 29)

Commentary

Jacob was a business man; he was a wheeler and dealer. He bargained with his brother and won his birthright, he wasn't above trickery in obtaining his father's blessing, he negotiated for his wife's hand in marriage and he used his business knowledge to gain a good portion of Laban's herd before leaving Haran. Like some people Jacob was not always proud of his own behavior but he was out to win, even if it means lowering his standards and resorting to subterfuge. Jacob even bargained with God when he fled from his home; he promised to take care of God if God promises to take care of him. We are troubled by Jacob's behavior but we are also aware that he suffered for his own actions. He not only victimized others with trickery but he was tricked by others as well: Laban, his wives, and even his sons. "The world is a jungle," he might have said. "It's a dog eat dog world." This is the old Jacob; he has not yet become Israel, one who honestly wrestles with God.

Yet there is another side to Jacob as well. He understands that work that has purpose and meaning can be rewarding. He serves for seven years and another seven years to gain the woman he loves in marriage. These years are long but for him they are but a few days. When we believe in what we are doing, the work we do becomes more than just a life sentence but a pursuit of a higher spiritual goal.

The sages understood this. They believed that Torah study must be combined with a "worldly occupation" In Hebrew the expression is *derech erez*, literally, "the way of the world." We have come to associate *derech erez* with menschlichkeit but in *Pirke Avot* the expression is connected with the work place. Work can ennoble a person if it has meaning. There is no such thing as noble or dignified work as opposed to menial work. All work is noble to the extent that it provides for our needs and allows a person to live in the world independently. All of the sages of the Talmud had occupations that helped them support their families. Rabbi Joshua was a blacksmith. Rabbi Akiva started out as a shepherd. Rabbi Tarfon was a land owner and wealthy in his own right. They understood that the real test of piety exists not in the ivory tower of academia but in the real world of the market place. It is here that we must ask ourselves who we work for!

Questions to Ponder

1. Why do you think *Parshat Vayetze* is recorded as a separate literary unit from the rest of the life of Jacob. What is the Torah saying about his years in Haran?
2. The three periods of Jacob's are divided from each other by encounters with God: the first when he leaves home and he sees a ladder ascending to heaven and the second when he and wrestles with an angel/God. How did these two events influence Jacob and change his life? Have you ever experienced a moment of clarity and insight which influenced the way you saw your place in the world?
3. In what ways should God be present in the market place (or in the office for that matter)? How should your beliefs influence the way you practice your profession or perform your work?
4. Who do you work for? Who do you ultimately answer to in your daily life?
5. Note that there are three parts to Rabbi Elazar's statement above. What does each one mean? What is the connection between them? In what way is Rabbi Elazar's statement similar to and different from that of Rabban Gamliel?
6. How can you combine a 'worldly occupation' with the study of Torah? How should one influence the other? How might your 'work' be more pleasing to God than study or prayer?
7. If you could do any type of work in the world what would it be? How can you find deeper spiritual meaning in the type of work you are presently doing?

Torah Table Talk is a weekly e-publication of Rabbi Mark B Greenspan sponsored by the Oceanside Jewish Center in New York. For more information on TTT contact me at Haravmark@optonline.net. If you would like to subscribe to Torah Table Talk please send an e-mail to Tabletalk@oceansidejc.org. To remove your address from this list, send a blank email to tabletalk-unsubscribe@oceansidejc.org. To see an archive of TTT go to <http://www.oceansidejc.org/rebmark/RabbiGreenspan.html>. To download TTT you need Adobe Acrobat Reader; <http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/readstep2.html>

***"All it takes to study Torah is an open heart,
a curious mind and a desire to grow a Jewish soul."***

Copyright 2008 Rabbi Mark B Greenspan