RABBINICAL ASSEMBLY כנסת הרבנים

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With All My Might: Responsibility and Righteousness

Parashat Vayetze 2026/5787 | Rabbi Noam Kornsgold*

A. Jacob the Righteous Worker

1. Genesis 31:6-7	1. בראשית לא:ו–ז
(6) As you know, I have served your father with all my might; (7) but your father has cheated me, changing my wages time and again. God, however, would not let him do me harm.	(ו) וְאַתֶּנָּה יְדַעְתֶּן כִּי בְּכָל־כֹּחִי עָבַדְתִּי אֶת־אֲבִיכֶן: (ז) וַאֲבִיכֶן הֵתֶל בִּי וְהֶחֱלֵף אֶת־מַשְׂכֻּרְתִּי עֲשֶׂרֶת מֹנִים וְלֹא־נְתָנוֹ אֱלֹקִים לְהָרַע עִמָּדִי:

2. Babylonian Talmud, *Ta'anit* 23b	2. תלמוד בבלי, תענית דף כג עמוד ב
"Why is it that when we greeted you, Master, you did not greet us with a pleasant expression?" [Abba Ḥilkiyya] said to them, "I was a day laborer, and I said to myself: I must not neglect my work."	מַאי טַעְמָא כִּי יָהֲיבְנָא לְמָר שְׁלָמָא לָא אַסְבַּר לַן מָר אַפֵּיהּ? אֲמַר לְהוּ: שְׂכִיר יוֹם הֲוַאי, וְאָמֵינָא: לָא אֵיפַּגַּר.

3. *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Sekhirut* 13:7 [R. Moses b. Maimon (Rambam), 12th century, Spain/Egypt]	3. משנה תורה, הלכות שכירות יג:ז
Just as an employer is warned not to rob a poor laborer of his wages or withhold them, so too is the poor laborer warned not to rob his employer of his labor by idling a little here and a little there, thereby spending the entire day deceitfully. Rather, he is obligated to be scrupulous with his time, for the Sages were so particular about this matter that they ruled that a laborer should not recite the fourth blessing of *Birkat ha-Mazon* [which is a rabbinic obligation]. Likewise, he is obligated to work with all his strength, for Jacob the righteous	כְּדֶרֶךְ שֶׁמַּזְהָר בַּעַל הַבַּיִת שֶׁלֹּא יִגְזֹל שְׂכַר עָנִי וְלֹא יְעַכְּבֶנּוּ כָּךְ הֶעָנִי מֻזְהָר שֶׁלֹּא יִגְזֹל מְלֶאכֶת בַּעַל הַבַּיִת וְיִבָּטֵל מְעַט בְּכָאן וּמְעַט בְּכָאן וּמוֹצִיא כָּל הַיּוֹם בְּמִרְמָה אֶלָּא חַיָּב לְדַקְדֵּק עַל עַצְמוֹ בַּזְּמַן שֶׁהֲרֵי הִקְפִּידוּ עַל בְּרָכָה רְבִיעִית שֶׁל בִּרְכַּת הַמָּזוֹן שֶׁלֹּא יְבָרֵךְ אוֹתָהּ. וְכֵן חַיָּב לַעֲבֹד בְּכָל כֹּחוֹ שֶׁהֲרֵי יַעֲקֹב הַצַּדִּיק אָמַר "כִּי בְכָל כֹּחִי עָבַדְתִּי אֶת אֲבִיכֶן" (בראשית לא:ו). לְפִיכָךְ נָטַל שָׂכַר זֹאת אַף בָּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר "וַיִּפְרֹץ הָאִישׁ מְאֹד מְאֹד (בראשית ל:מג).

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[*ha-tzaddik*] said, "I have served your father with all my might" (Genesis 31:6). Therefore, Jacob received a reward for this even in this world, as it is said, "And the man prospered exceedingly" (Genesis 30:43).	

***Discussion Questions*:**

- Does Jacob's treatment by Laban change how we understand his declaration that he worked "with all his might" (source #1)? Should an employee's obligations depend on whether the employer treats them fairly?
- Based on the Talmud (source #2) and the *Mishneh Torah* (source #3), under what circumstances would one not interrupt one's work? Which types of actions would or would not override the requirement to fully commit to one's work?
- Does the story of Abba Ḥilkiyya (source #2) describe an ideal to which all workers should aspire, or an extraordinary standard that goes beyond what might reasonably be expected? How do later sources understand this exemplar?
- What is odd about the epithet attached to Jacob's name in the *Mishneh Torah*? What epithet is typically associated with Jacob?
- Why might the Rambam have opted to utilize a different epithet when describing Jacob from the conventional one?
- Although the Rambam quotes Genesis 30:43 as a prooftext, how does Jacob (source #1) already demonstrate the reward principle at play?

B. The Meaning of *Tzaddik*

4. *ha-Maspik le-'Ovdei ha-Shem*, p. 13 [R. Abraham b. *ha*-Rambam [12th-13th centuries, Egypt]	**4. המספיק לעובדי השם, עמ' יג (דורי, תשל"ג)**
Thus, if a person knows what he is obligated to do and does it, he walks upon the straight path that the Lord, may He be exalted, has set before us to follow. One who conducts himself according to these principles in fulfilling the commandments is called righteous [*tzaddik*], blameless [*tam*], upright [*yashar*], and one who turns away from evil [*sar me-ra'*], or, in	ובכן, אם יודע הוא את מה שהוא מחוייב לעשות ועושהו הרי זה הולך בדרך הישר אשר נתן לפנינו ה' יתעלה ללכת בה. ומי שנוהג על פי חוקות אלו בקיום המצוות נקרא צדיק ותם וישר וסר מרע ובלשון חכמים "כשר." אך הנאה מכל השמות הללו הוא "צדיק" שנגזר ממלת צדק אשר פירושה יושר ושילום החובות. כי קיום המצוות החיוביות הוא חוב שאנו חבים לו יתעלה, כחובת העבד למלא

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the language of the Sages, proper [*kasher*]. Yet the most fitting of all these designations is righteous [*tzaddik*], which is derived from the word justice [*tzedek*], meaning uprightness and the fulfillment of obligations. For the performance of the positive commandments is a duty that we owe to Him, may He be exalted, just as a servant is obligated to fulfill the commands of his master.	מצוות רבו.

***Discussion Questions*:**

- According to R. Abraham b. *ha*-Rambam (source #4), what qualities does the *tzaddik* possess? How does R. Abraham's definition shed light on his father's usage of that same word to describe Jacob (source #3)?[1]
- According to R. Abraham b. *ha*-Rambam, is righteousness defined by what a person does or by the intentions and values motivating those actions? Can someone fulfill all their obligations without being a righteous person?
- Does R. Abraham's definition of righteousness suggest that ordinary professional responsibilities can possess the same religious significance as explicitly ritual commandments?
- If righteousness consists of fulfilling one's obligations, how should we understand situations in which two legitimate obligations conflict?

C. The Limits (?) of Professional Responsibility

5. *Toledot Yitzḥak*, Genesis 32:4 [R. Isaac Karo, 15th-16th centuries, Spain/Turkey]	**5. תולדות יצחק, בראשית לב:ד**
"I [Jacob] sojourned with Laban and remained there until now" (Genesis 32:4). The commentators have offered no satisfactory explanation of this verse. It seems that Jacob spoke in this way because he had sinned against Esau, and it would have been	עם לבן גרתי ואחר עד עתה (בראשית לב:ד). המפרשים לא אמרו בו דבר המתיישב. ונראה שאמר כן לפי שהוא חטא לעשו והיה ראוי שישאל מחילה אחר שנה או שנתיים ולא יתאחר כ' שנה לזה. אמר הטעם לזה שעם לבן גרתי, לכן נתאחרתי לשאול בשלומך שמי שהוא שכיר אין ראוי שילך למקום

[1] Although R. Abraham b. *ha*-Rambam is not specifically referring to Jacob, it is notable that elsewhere, in Genesis 25:27, he is referred to as *tam*. The Maharal, in *Tiferet Yisrael* 11, explicitly connected Jacob with the word *yashar*. I have not identified classical sources associating Jacob and *sar me-ra'* or *kasher*.

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appropriate for him to seek forgiveness after a year or two, rather than delaying for twenty years. He therefore explained the reason for this delay by saying, "I sojourned with Laban." Therefore, "I delayed in inquiring after your welfare because one who is a hired laborer ought not to go elsewhere, but rather must remain continually engaged in his employment." And it is not even appropriate for him to write a letter, as in the incident involving Abba Ḥilkiyya, when the Sages greeted him and he did not return their greeting because he was a day laborer and did not wish to interrupt his work, as related in tractate *Ta'anit*.	אחר אלא שיהיה לעולם בשיכרותו. ואפילו אגרת אין ראוי שיכתוב כההוא מעשה דאבא חלקיה שחכמים נתנו לו שלום ולא החזיר להם שלום לפי שהיה שכיר יום ולא יבטל ממלאכתו במי תעניות.

6. ***Haggahot Maimuniyyot, Hilkhot Sekhirut* 13:6** [R. Meir *ha-Kohen*, 13th century, Germany]	**6. הגהות מיימוניות, הלכות שכירות יג:ו**
And so it is written in *Aviasaf* [R. Eliezer b. Joel *ha-Levi* (Ra'avyah), 12th-13th centuries, Germany] that a teacher is forbidden to remain awake at night beyond his usual bedtime, because the following day he will be too sluggish to teach. Likewise, he should not restrict his food and drink, if he is responsible for providing his own sustenance, because he will be unable to exert himself in teaching, as stated there. Similarly, he must not indulge excessively in food and drink. Anyone who deviates from these requirements is at a disadvantage [in any resulting dispute], and we may remove him from his position. Thus concludes the quotation from *Aviasaf*.	וכ"כ באביאסף שאסור למלמד ליקץ בלילה יותר מעונתו מפני שלמחר עצל ללמוד וגם אין לעצור במאכל ומשתה אם הוא בפרנסת עצמו מפני שלא יוכל לטרוח ללמוד כדאיתא התם ודכוותיה אין לו להרבות במאכל ומשתה. וכל המשנה ידו על התחתונה ומעברינן ליה. עכ"ל אביאסף.

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***Discussion Questions*:**

- Having seen *Toledot Yitzḥak* (source #5), would you need to modify your answer about the types of actions that one might need to ignore in service of not interrupting one's work? In other words, does *Toledot Yitzḥak* seem to raise the threshold of impermissible activities while working?
- This specific passage from the *Mishneh Torah* (source #3) is the final *halakhah* of *Hilkhot Sekhirut* (the Laws of Hiring). What message did the Rambam try to convey by concluding his treatment of this area of *halakhah* in this manner?
- According to Ra'avyah (source #6), how encompassing is the concern that one not compromise one's work?
- Ra'avyah extends a teacher's professional responsibilities into their personal life. Where should we draw the line between an employer's legitimate expectations and an employee's personal autonomy?
- If we were to apply the principles of these sources to contemporary professional life, would they lead us toward a healthy ethic of responsibility or an unhealthy expectation of constant availability?
- Is the ideal of Jacob the righteous someone who gives everything to his work, or someone who understands how to fulfill his obligations faithfully and responsibly?