**THOUGHTS ON THE PARASHAH**

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**Keeping Busy**

In the past decade, the rapid pace of technological change has had a dramatic impact on the economy.  In all likelihood, the near future will bring further automation as computers replace human beings in many fields.  It will become increasingly difficult to find a commercially relevant niche for oneself.  And, yet, people need a steady stream of income to survive and the economy needs a robust class of consumers to keep functioning.  One proposed solution, which presupposes sufficient resources in the treasury, is for the state to provide all citizens with a universal basic income.  A proposal greatly to expand the welfare state is sure to elicit a wide range of political reactions, from enthusiastic support to vitriolic condemnation.  From a Judaic perspective, it is worth examining the Biblical and Rabbinic attitudes toward work and to question the desirability of a society in which, due to the superfluity of their labor, the masses do not toil.

In the Decalogue, the verse preceding the ban on Sabbath labor states: “Six days you shall labor and do all your work (Exodus 20:9).”  Rabbi Judah the Patriarch read the verse as a prescriptive, not descriptive.  Just as Israel was commanded to rest on Saturdays so, too, was it commanded to work on the other days (Mekhilta d’Rashbi 20).  Alternatively, just as the Torah was given in the context of a covenant, so, too, did Israel enter into a binding Divine covenant concerning labor (Avot d’Rabbi Natan 11).

The sages turned to Scripture and halakhah to support their contention about the importance of physical labor.  Rabbi Simon ben Elazar, citing the sequence of God’s actions recorded in Genesis 2:15-16, said that Adam was forbidden to eat anything in the Garden of Eden until he had first toiled.  Rabbis Tarfon and Elazar ben Azariah cited the verse, “And let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them (Exodus 25:8)” as proof that God would not make His Presence felt in Israel until after the Israelites had physically exerted themselves by constructing a house of worship.  Rabbi Akiba noted that one is guilty of misappropriation and liable to pay a financial penalty and bring a sacrificial guilt offering for illicitly benefiting from even a small amount of Temple property, yet artisans toiling on behalf of the Temple take their full wages from consecrated coins.  Rabbi Jose, citing the description of Jacob’s passing (Genesis 49:33), claimed that God punishes someone with death only after the person turns idle.

Rabbi Judah ben Bathyra advised that one who has no work to do should labor to restore his derelict properties.  Essentially, one should create work for oneself rather than remain idle.  The modern American equivalent is the man who spends his weekend tinkering under the hood of his old car rather than wiling away his time on the couch watching countless hours of football.

Judah ben Bathyra’s advice applies well to gentiles.  After the deluge, God promised: “So long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night shall not cease (Genesis 8:22).”  The sages interpreted “shall not cease” as a command that humankind must never cease working.  Since Jews are required to rest on Sabbaths and holidays, perforce the command continuously to maintain one’s earthly toils must devolve onto non-Jews.  Resh Lakish rules that a gentile who observes the Sabbath is deserving of death (Sanhedrin 58b).  One explanation for Resh Lakish’s harsh opinion is that the exclusively Jewish character of the Sabbath, itself an eternal sign of the covenant between God and Israel, must be preserved, and was then threatened by heathens who were copying the Jewish tradition of resting one day in seven.  Another explanation is that non-Jews never are allowed to be entirely idle on any day of the week because it is the will of God for humankind to be perpetually busy with productive exertions.

Even discounting the issue of Sabbath and holiday rest, Jews have a reason not to artificially create for themselves opportunities to engage in physical labor.  Jews are bidden to spend their spare time immersed in Torah study, a spiritual-intellectual endeavor largely forbidden to non-Jews.  Torah Temimah was troubled by the incompatibility between Judah ben Bathyra’s make-work doctrine and the often-emphasized rabbinic demand that one not waste precious moments away from religious studies.  He resolved the difficulty by suggesting that Judah ben Bathyra was addressing an audience of Amei Ha-Aretz, unlettered masses, who are incapable of, and uninterested in, textual learning.

The sages feared for the moral and mental wellbeing of those who do not need to earn a living.  A wife was expected to perform certain household chores and to supplement the family’s income by engaging in small-scale home-based manufacturing.  If a husband was wealthy enough to afford domestic help, the wife’s workload was reduced accordingly.  If there were four household servants, the wife could “sit on her chair” and do nothing all day.  Rabbi Eliezer disagreed and insisted that the wife do a modicum of work because idleness leads to unchastity.  Rabbi Simon ben Gamliel insisted that the wife do some work because idleness leads to boredom and lowness of spirit (Mishnah Ketuboth 5:5).  The Talmud wonders whether there is a practical difference between the opinions of Eliezer and of Simon ben Gamliel.  Answer: Frivolous entertainment (e.g. card playing) will stave off the damaging physiological consequences of ennui, though such pastimes can exacerbate the problem of licentiousness (Ketuboth 61b).

The sages recognized the importance of physical labor as a distraction from and deterrent against the temptations of sin.  Rabban Gamliel III said: “It is good to combine Torah study with a worldly occupation, for the effort involved in both makes one forget sin (Avot 2:2).”  Bartenura explained that the exhaustion brought on by a full day of learning and intensive manual labor negates the power of the evil inclination.  Late night athletics for troubled youth serve the same purpose.  If people are continuously busy and physically spent, they are less likely to get themselves into trouble.

Beyond the prophylactic function of physical labor, the sages regarded it as inherently virtuous.  In the words of the Psalmist, “You shall enjoy the fruit of your labors; you shall be happy and you shall prosper (128:2).”  The double language of happy and prosper was understood to mean that such a person will merit life in both this world and the World to Come (Avot 4:1).  Ulla homiletically expounded that he who benefits from his own handiwork is regarded even more highly than someone who fears Heaven (Berakhot 8a).  Shemaya instructed his disciples, “Love work!” (Avot 1:10).  Rabbis Judah and Simon were proud that they personally carried on their shoulders baskets to be used as seats in the study house.  They exclaimed, “Great is work, for it brings honor to the worker (Nedarim 49b).”

The Tannaim disagreed whether it is appropriate to eulogize one’s deceased slaves.  The majority opinion opposed the practice.  Rabbi Jose said that upon the demise of a “kosher” slave one could say, “He was a good and trustworthy man who derived satisfaction from his toils.”  The sages retorted that were one to say such things about a slave there would be nothing more to add upon the death of an upstanding free citizen (Berakhot 16b).  Jose did not advise that one heap glowing praise upon the dead slave.  His suggested verbiage is rather limited.  But, in the viewpoint of the sages, deriving satisfaction from one’s labor is indeed a lofty virtue.

In order to find meaning in life, one needs to derive satisfaction from one’s labors.  Except for the independently wealthy, employment is a necessary aspect of human existence.  Some people regard their career as a higher calling and find comfort in the thought that their work helps improve the lives of others.  Other people view their jobs as endless drudgery devoid of this-worldly significance or spiritual worth.

In an affluent futuristic society, where the individual has no need to join the labor force, it would be necessary to find alternative ways for people to occupy their time.  Some would say that that sort of freedom poses no difficulty.  People have hobbies and interests that they would be free to pursue without the nagging worry that they were spending too much time away from “work.”  But the counter argument is that much of today’s entertainment is either mind-numbing or lewd, the two concerns expressed by the Mishnah in preferring unnecessary work over idleness and downtime.  Moreover, a life of pure leisure is without meaning.  A person who recognizes that he is economically and socially superfluous is apt to question the purpose of his existence.

We cannot ever know what the future holds.  All we can do in the present, aside from continuing to earn a paycheck by toiling in our office cubicles, is to use our limited spare time to cultivate intellectual, spiritual, and philanthropic interests so that when our working years are behind us life will still have meaning as we derive satisfaction from new endeavors.