How to Make Work Meaningful for Ourselves: Exploring the Value of Work in Biblical and Rabbinic Sources

Rabbi Eliezer Diamond, PhD

Dr. Eliezer Diamond is the Rabbi Judah Nadich Associate Professor of Talmud and Rabbinics at The Jewish Theological Seminary. He teaches courses in rabbinic literature and introductory, intermediate, and advanced Talmud studies.

Dr. Diamond is the author of a chapter on the rabbinic period in the Schocken Guide to Jewish Books, and entries in the Reader’s Guide to Judaism and The Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception. He is the author of Holy Men and Hunger Artists: Fasting and Asceticism in Rabbinic Culture (Oxford University Press, 2003). The book provides a thorough reassessment of the role that asceticism plays in rabbinic Judaism, suggesting that asceticism is more pervasive than is generally thought. Dr. Diamond has written on prayer, asceticism, and issues of environmental law and ethics. He is currently editing a commentary on Yerushalmi Pesahim written by the late Professor Louis Ginzberg, as well as a book on prayer. The prayer volume will address the problem of cognitive dissonance for the contemporary worshipper and will offer readings of traditional liturgy that use midrashic methodology to find meaning and relevance in these prayers for the modern Jew. Dr. Diamond has taught in a variety of settings, including Stern College, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, the 92nd Street Y, and several Ramah camps. Dr. Diamond was ordained at the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary of Yeshiva University and received his doctorate in Talmud from JTS.
1. Genesis 2:15

The Lord God took the man and placed him in the garden of Eden, to till it and tend it.

בָּנָהּ לָעֲבָדָה וּלְשִׁמְרָה.

2. Genesis 3:17-19

To Adam He said, “Because you did as your wife said and ate of the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ Cursed be the ground because of you; By toil shall you eat of it All the days of your life: Thorns and thistles shall it sprout for you. But your food shall be the grasses of the field; By the sweat of your brow Shall you get bread to eat, Until you return to the ground— For from it you were taken. For dust you are, And to dust you shall return.”

וַלְאָדָם אָמַר כִּי־שָׁמַﬠְתָּ לְק֣וֹל אִשְׁתֶ֒ךָ֝ לֵאמֹ֔ר לֹ֥א וַתֹּ֙אכַל֙ מִן־הָﬠֵ֔ץ אֲשֶׁ֤ר צִוִּיתִ֙י תֹאכַלְתָּ מִמֶּ֔נּוּ אֲרֻרָ֤ה הָֽאֲדָמָה֙ בְּﬠִצָּבוֹן֙ תֹּאכְלֶ֔נָּה כֹּ֖ל יְמֵ֥י חַיֶּֽי בְּזֵﬠַ֤ת אַפֶּ֙י יָפָ֣ר אַתָּה הָ֣אֲדָמָ֔ה כִּ֥י מִמֶּ֖נָּה לֻקָּ֑חְתָּ וְאֶל־ﬠָפָ֖ר תָּשֽׁוּב׃
3. Tosefta Shabbat 1.21

“Six days you shall labor; you shall do all of your work” (Exodus 20:9)...

And Bet Hillel says: “Six days you shall work”; you shall work all six days.

4. Babylonian Talmud Kiddushin 82b

It is taught in the Tosefta (5:12): Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Nasi says: There is no trade that disappears from the world. Fortunate is he who sees his parents in an elevated trade; woe is he who sees his parents in a lowly trade. It is impossible for the world [to exist] without a perfumer and without a tanner. Fortunate is he whose trade is as a perfumer, and woe is he whose trade is as a tanner.
5. Babylonian Talmud Sota 11b

The verse concludes: “In all their service, wherein they made them serve with rigor” (Exodus 1:14). Rabbi Shmuel bar Naḥmani says that Rabbi Yonatan says: The meaning of *befarekh* is that the Egyptians would exchange the responsibilities of men and women, giving men’s work with the women’s and women’s work with the men’s, [requiring everyone to do work to which they were unaccustomed].


If your kinsman under you continues in straits and must give himself over to you, do not subject him to the treatment of a slave.

He shall remain with you as a hired or bound laborer; he shall serve with you only until the jubilee year.

Then he and his children with him shall be free of your authority; he shall go back to his family and return to his ancestral holding.

For they are My servants, whom I freed from the land of Egypt; they may not give themselves over into servitude.

You shall not rule over him ruthlessly; you shall fear your God.
### 7. Sifra Be-Har Parasha 6, end of Chapter 7, Paragraph 2

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<td>“You shall not rule over him ruthlessly”:</td>
<td>לא תרדה בו בפרך, שלא תאמר בו המח את הכס הזה והאוה אניכן צורק, אתיי ל את הכס הזה אניכן צורק...</td>
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<td>[This means] that you should not say to him/her, “Warm this cup,” when you did not need it; “Cool this cup,” when you do not need it...</td>
<td>שמא תאמר לזרור עצמי אני шועה, וורה הרבח מסור לעל שמעי, יירת מהלאים ה=all דדבר חודה מסור לעל נאמר בו יירת מהלאים.</td>
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<td>Perhaps you will say [falsely], “I am requesting this for myself.” Behold, this is the matter found in the heart, as scripture says, “You shall revere you God” (Leviticus 25:43). Behold, regarding all matters found in the heart it is said, “You shall revere you God.”</td>
<td>שמא תאמר לזרור עצמי אני шועה, וורה הרבח מסור לעל שמעי, יירת מהלאים ה=all דדבר חודה מסור לעל נאמר בו יירת מהלאים.</td>
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### 8. Deuteronomy 5:14-15

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<td>but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your ox or your ass, or any of your cattle, or the stranger in your settlements, so that your male and female slave may rest as you do.</td>
<td>יוהם השבטי שבת ליהוה אלהיך לא תעשה כל מלאכה אהת ובניך ובנהר爱你, אWrites אושרしていないי_and יאת ברשותי שלום יוהם爱你, אWrites אושר בשתירך.</td>
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<td>Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt and the LORD your God freed you from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore, the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the sabbath day.</td>
<td>זכרתי כי-עבדתי בﳛו אבאר מעילים ויצאתי יוהו אלהיך משם ביד מנה יאת ברשותי, יואים爱你, אWrites אושר בשתירך, לא שותא את-יומם השבת.</td>
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9. Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 31a

Rava said: [After departing from this world,] when a person is brought to judgment [for the life he lived in this world,] they say to him: Did you conduct business faithfully? Did you designate times for Torah study? Did you engage in procreation? Did you await salvation? Did you engage in the dialectics of wisdom? Did you understand one matter from another? And, nevertheless, beyond all these, if the fear of the Lord is his treasure, yes, he is worthy, and if not, no, none of these.

10. Exodus 35:33

[God inspired Bezalel] to cut stones for setting and to carve wood—to work in every kind of designer’s craft—

11. Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 62b

One who absent-mindedly performs forbidden labor on Shabbat is exempt from punishment because the Torah forbade [only] “Intentional work” (Exodus 33:32; rabbinic translation)
12. Psalms 100:2

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<td>Worship the Lord in joy; come before Him in song.</td>
<td>בָּדָּיְנִי בְּשִׂמְחָה בֹּאוּ לְפָנָיו</td>
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13. Mishnah Avot 4.1

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<td>Ben Zoma says...Who is wealthy? One who rejoices in one’s portion, as Scripture states: “You shall enjoy the fruit of your labors; you shall be fortunate, and it will be good with you” (Psalms 128:2). “You will be fortunate” – in this world; “and it will well be good with you” – in the next.</td>
<td>בן זומא אומר...איהו עשיר השמחה בחולו שיאמר &quot;גנуй כפר כי טובך אשריך וטוב לך&quot; (תהלים כקח) אשריך בעולם זה ואבורך לעולם הבא</td>
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The Sages taught: What is the meaning of that which the verse states: “And you shall gather your grain”? Because it is stated: “This Torah shall not depart from your mouths, and you shall contemplate in it day and night” (Joshua 1:8). I might have thought that these matters are to be understood as they are written; one is to literally spend his days immersed exclusively in Torah study. Therefore, the verse states: “And you shall gather your grain, your wine and your oil,” assume in their regard, the way of the world; set aside time not only for Torah, but also for work. This is the statement of Rabbi Yishmael.

Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai says: Is it possible that a person plows in the plowing season and sows in the sowing season and harvests in the harvest season and threshes in the threshing season and winnows in the windy season, as grain is separated from the chaff by means of the wind, and is constantly busy; what will become of Torah? Rather, one must dedicate himself exclusively to Torah at the expense of other endeavors; as when Israel performs God’s will, their work is performed by others, as it is

עמדת ב donna'. דנאו' בהנהתה,دونא' אספת דנן. דנאו'! - לא קשיא: كان בדמף ישיא. דנאו' רגון של לחומש. דנאו' בדמף שיא. רבנן: אספת דנן, מה תלמוד לומר. ליפו שיאמה: לא ימוש ספר ההלכה. דנאו' מופר, יוי דבי' תלבוב? תלמוד, לומר: אספת דנן - הנה יובה. דר' אריה. דר' ריב שמעיאל; רבי שמעון בן יוחאי אומר: אפשר אדם חורש בשעת בחירה, וזורע בשעת זריעה, וקוצר בשעת קצירה, ודשת בשעת דישה, וזורע בשעת הרוח. כרבי יושע בן נון. תנו רבנן: אספת דנן, מה תלמוד לומר. דנאו' - לא קשיא: כאן בזמן שישראל עושין רצון של מקום, כאן בזמן שאין ישראל עושין רצון של מקום. תנו רבנן: אספת דנן, מה תלמוד לומר. ליפו שיאמה: לא ימוש ספר ההלכה. דנאו' מוף, יוי דבי' תלבוב? תלמוד, לומר: אספת דנן - הנה יובה. דר' אריה. דר' ריב שמעיאל; רבי שמעון בן יוחאי אומר: אפשר אדם חורש בשעת בחירה, וזורע בשעת זריעה, וקוצר בשעת קצירה, ודשת בשעת דישה, וזורע בשעת הרוח. כרבי יושע בן נון. תנו רבנן: אספת דנן, מה תלמוד לומר. ליפו שיאמה: לא ימוש ספר ההלכה. דנאו' מוף, יוי דבי' תלבוב? תלמוד, לומר: אספת דנן - הנה יובה. דר' אריה. דר' ריב שמעיאל; רבי שמעון בן יוחאי אומר: אפשר אדם חורש בשעת בחירה, וזורע בשעת זריעה, וקוצר בשעת קצירה, ודשת בשעת דישה, וזורע בשעת הרוח. כרבי יושע בן נון. תנו רבנן: אספת דנן, מה תלמוד לומר. ליפו שיאמה: לא ימוש ספר ההלכה. דנאו' מוף, יוי דבי' תלבוב? תלמוד, לומר: אספת דנן - הנה יובה. דר' אריה. דר' ריב שמעיאל; רבי Shimon ben Yoḥai says: Is it possible that a person plows in the plowing season and sows in the sowing season and harvests in the harvest season and threshes in the threshing season and winnows in the windy season, as grain is separated from the chaff by means of the wind, and is constantly busy; what will become of Torah? Rather, one must dedicate himself exclusively to Torah at the expense of other endeavors; as when Israel performs God’s will, their work is performed by others, as it is
stated: “And strangers will stand and feed your flocks, and foreigners will be your plowmen and your vinedressers” (Isaiah 61:5). When Israel does not perform God’s will, their work is performed by them themselves, as it is stated: “And you shall gather your grain.” Moreover, if Israel fails to perform God’s will, others’ work will be performed by them, as it is stated: “You shall serve your enemy whom God shall send against you, in hunger, in thirst, in nakedness and in want of all things” (Deuteronomy 28:48).

Summing up this dispute, Abaye said: Although there is room for both opinions, many have acted in accordance with the opinion of Rabbi Yishmael, and combined working for a living and learning Torah, and although they engaged in activities other than the study of Torah, were successful in their Torah study. Many have acted in accordance with the opinion of Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai and were not successful in their Torah study. They were ultimately forced to abandon their Torah study altogether.
Rabbi Meir says: A person should always teach his son a clean and easy trade and pray for success to the One to Whom wealth and property belong, as ultimately there is no trade that does not include both poverty and wealth, since a person can become rich from any profession. Poverty does not come from a particular trade, nor does wealth come from a particular trade, but rather, all is in accordance with a person’s merit. Therefore, one should choose a clean and easy trade, and pray to God for success…

Abba Guryan of Tzadyan says in the name of Abba Gurya: A person may not teach his son the trades of a donkey driver, a camel driver, a pot maker, a sailor, a shepherd, or a storekeeper. The reason for all these is the same, as their trades are the trades of robbers; all of these professions involve a measure of dishonesty and are likely to lead to robbery.

Rabbi Yehuda says in Abba Gurya’s name: Most donkey drivers are wicked, since they engage in deceit, and most camel drivers, who traverse dangerous places such as...
deserts, are of fit character, as they pray to God to protect them on their journeys. **Most sailors are pious**, since the great danger of the seas instills in them the fear of Heaven. **The best of doctors is to Gehenna, and even the fittest of butchers is a partner of Amalek.**

Rabbi Nehorai says: I set aside all the trades in the world, and I teach my son only Torah, as a person partakes of its reward in this world and the principal reward remains for him in the World-to-Come, which is not true of other professions, whose rewards are only in this world. Furthermore, **if a person comes to be ill, or old, or undergoes suffering, and is unable to be involved in his trade, behold, he dies in hunger. But with regard to the Torah it is not so**, since one can study it under all circumstances. **Rather, it preserves him from all evil and sin in his youth, and provides him with a future and hope in his old age...**