

In the latter part of this week's sedrah, we read of Lavan's chasing after Yaakov and apprehending him, and of his accusing Yaakov of theft – both of his “heart”, ותגנב את לבבי (Gen. 31:26), and of his תרפים (31:30), of his “gods”. Yaakov Avinu quickly dismisses the first accusation (כי יראתי כי אמרת כי פן תגזול את בנותיך מעמי) [“I was afraid lest you steal your daughters from me”], 30:31) but takes the second much more seriously, granting Lavan permission to rifle through all of his and his family's belongings. After Lavan fails to locate the תרפים, (and indeed, as the Torah tells us explicitly – ולא ידע יעקב כי רחל גנבתם [“For Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen them”], 31:32) - Yaakov himself was not involved nor in the know about Rachel's actions), Yaakov – after having put up with Lavan's chicanery and deceit for twenty years, capped off by the ultimate *chutzpah*, i.e. Lavan accusing Yaakov of stealing from *him* – finally explodes at Lavan. He asserts that he had served Lavan faithfully for twenty years, despite having been cheated by Lavan, numerous times, too numerous to even count.

זה עשרים שנה אנכי עמך רחליך ועזיך לא שכלו ואילי צאנך לא אכלתי.

[“This is twenty years that I was with you, your ewes and goats did not miscarry, nor did I eat the rams of your flock.” (31:38)]

He never stole a penny from Lavan.

טריפה לא הבאתי עליך אנכי אחטנה מידי תבקשנה גנבתי יום וגנבתי לילה.

[“One which had been torn apart I never presented to you, I would replace it, from me you would demand it; also that which was stolen by day or night.” (31:39)]

If something happened and he didn't do a perfect job, he made good.

הייתי ביום אכלני חרב וקרח בלילה ותדד שנתי מעיני.

[“I would be eaten by the heat during the day and the frost at night, and sleep departed from my eyes.” (31:40)]

He never slacked off in the watching of the sheep – regardless of the weather or the time.

As Yaakov had said earlier to his wives (31:6), כי בכל כחי עבדתי את אביכן – I served your father with every ounce of my strength.

Yaakov's behavior serves for us as the paradigm of a worker's responsibility to his or her employer. The Rambam near the end of הלכות שכירות (13:7), the laws of employment, discusses the obligations – legal and ethical – of an employer to his or her employee. But he then transitions and concludes the book as following:

כדרך שמוזהר בעה"ב שלא יגזול שכר עני ולא יעכבנו כך העני מוזהר שלא יגזול מלאכת בעה"ב ויבטל מעט בכאן ומעט בכאן ומוציא כל היום במרמה

Just as the employer is warned to not steal or (temporarily) withhold the wages of the poor person, so to the poor person is warned to not steal from the work of the employer by wasting a little time here and a little time there, and thus whittling away the entire day with deceit.

אלא חייב לדקדק על עצמו בזמן שהרי הקפידו על ברכה רביעית של ברכת המזון שלא יברך אותה,

Rather, he is obligated to be meticulous with time – as we see that the Sages were particular to exempt him from the fourth blessing of ברכת המזון, which is only a Rabbinic obligation.

וכן חייב לעבוד בכל כחו שהרי יעקב הצדיק אמר כי בכל כחי עבדתי את אביכן,

Similarly, he is obligated to work with all of his “strength” as we see that Yaakov the Righteous one said, “For with all of my strength I served your father.”

Rambam here speaks of two obligations of the worker to his or her employer. The first is to not waste any time of the employer, and the second is to not steal any attention from one's work, to not fail to be properly focused on one's work, to not work כחו בכל.

The first is, of course, only relevant to those who work on the clock, be it hourly, or salaried where there is an expectation of a minimum number of hours. The latter applies to everyone working for someone else – even if their wages are not tied to the clock – they still must give their full focus and attention to the work they do.

There has been much talk in recent months about “quiet quitting” on the one hand and “hardcore workers” on the other. While those terms may encompass a broad range of meanings, depending on who is using them, it's quite clear from a halakhic and philosophical perspective that a Torah-true employee is supposed to be “hard-core” in one sense, that is that once the terms

and expectations of the employment have been made clear, the employee is obligated to meet those terms – he may not be מבטל מעט כאן [“waste a little time here”] and is obligated to work בכל כחו [“with all of his being”] to meet those obligations, and if one cannot be exact, then he or she must err slightly on the side of caution – אנכי אהטנה מידי תבקשנה [“I would replace it, from me you would demand it”]. The fact that everyone else does or doesn’t do a particularly thing, doesn’t render it halakhically or ethically permissible – if others are pilfering small amounts of company resources for personal use, that does not render לא תגזול [“thou shall not steal”] permissible. And if others are slacking off and wasting time, or even engaged in “side hustles”, as they are called, which diminish their ability to properly and fully focus on their regular work, that does not render לא תגזול permissible.

This should not be taken to mean that there should be no boundaries of work; as a values proposition, we believe that one’s מלאכה [“work”] is, on some level, supposed to be עראי [“secondary”] and one’s Torah, which one might construe broadly for all of our spiritual obligations including spending time with our family, קבע [“primary”]. As Shlomo haMelekh tells us in Kohelet, לכל זמן [“there is a time for everything”] – for everything in life we can find time in a haphazard fashion, but ועת לכל חפץ תחת השמים [“and a time for everything under the heavens”], there must be a set time for that which is תחת השמים, that which relates to God; hence we say that we must be קובע עתים לתורה [“designate עתים for Torah-study”] and not simply find the זמן. Nonetheless, once an individual has accepted employment, they must fulfill those obligations wholly and faithfully,

While core of halakhah fundamentally never changes, its challenges manifest differently in every era. In the case of an employee’s responsibility to his employer, the core obligations of being careful with the employer’s time as well as the focus have not and do not change. But the challenges certainly have – and here I refer to the advent of digital technologies, and perhaps nothing more so than the smartphone (made worse with social media, but problematic even without.) These new technologies have been designed to suck us into the vortex of their world, robbing us both of a massive amount of precious time and just as much, destroying our focus. As I think that most of us understand (and there is research to support this impression), when we are focused on any task that requires concentration and then are interrupted, the time lost is not

just the time wasted on the interruption, but also the time that is required to re-achieve the state of focus that we were in before being interrupted. I am hard pressed to imagine anything more fitting of the Rambam's description of:

שלא יגזול מלאכת בעה"ב ויבטל מעט בכאן ומעט בכאן ומוציא כל היום במרמה.

He shall not steal from the work of the employer by wasting a little time here and a little time there, and he ends up whittling away the entire day with deceit.

And it is worth acknowledging, that the challenge is even more daunting, because the very same technologies that can allow us to whittle away time, also can, are and must be used for work purposes to do things more efficiently. As with all new technologies, there can be good uses and bad uses. But as an employee, one is not allowed to average out the good uses with the bad uses. The time still belongs to the employer.

But I didn't choose to make this focus of the sermon on behalf of the employers of America, even though that might be worthy in its own right. I chose this topic to focus on a different employer, and the theft of His time.

The Mishnah in Avot (2:15) tells us that היום קצר והמלאכה מרובה והפועלים עצלים והשכר הרבה ובעל הבית דוחק. "The day is short and there is much to do, but the workers are lazy, and the wages are potentially great, and the בעל הבית, the employer, is pressing." In this mishnah, we are the indolent workers, the *Ribbono shel Olam* ["Master of the Universe"] is the pressing employer and the short day refers to our lifespan. In words of Job (7:1), הלא צבא לאנוש עלי ארץ וכימי שכיר ימיו, we have a designated time on this earth and our days are like the days of a hired worker. We ought remember that we are merely employees in the service of God, כי עבדי הם ["For they are my servants", Lev. 25:42], and behave accordingly. From the perspective of a genuine spiritual being, our sole purpose in this world is to serve God – in all of the manifold ways of service. In the world of the Beit Midrash, one sin that is spoken about often is ביטול תורה, wasting time that could be used for Torah-study. But in the rest of the world, we should not speak about so much of ביטול תורה, but rather of ביטול זמן – wasting time. Most of us have multiple responsibilities in this world – from Torah and mitzvah, to family (also a significant mitzvah) to earning a living (also a mitzvah) – and anything which distracts us from our work is stealing from our employer, from the Almighty himself.

King Solomon tells us in Kohelet (10:7), ראיתי עבדים על סוסים ושרים הולכים כעבדים על הארץ, I have seen servants riding on horses and the nobles walking on the ground, leading the horses, in the manner of servants. The purpose of technology, ostensibly, is to serve our needs, to make our lives easier, more efficient, so that we can use our time for more noble and sublime purposes. We are supposed to be the שרים, the nobles, and the technology our עבדים, our servants. Unfortunately, unwittingly on our part, but by design of those promoting the technology, we have become the servants and it has become the master. If our struggle to remain engaged in our work we would be likened to a knife-fight, it is as if the other side, the creators of this technology, has brought guns. So often these technologies rob us of time that is needed for far more productive things, and rob us of the human interaction that we would be better served by engaging in.

If I stopped here, I know that most people would leave nodding their heads (because this isn't really news), and a few people would take the time to explain to me the truly valuable uses of the new technology - and if so, this would be a waste of my time and your time. I am also cognizant of the probability that this problem does not affect all of us in the same way; and that on average (obviously, there are many exceptions), the younger one is – or more specifically, the younger the age where the technology has entered one's life - the more one is affected by this problem. But as I chose this topic probably a month and a half ago, I realized that it would be a good idea that instead of just ranting about the big bad new technologies, to actually come to you with an ask.

The ask that I decided upon was to pick a specific period in which to never pull out one's phone, and that time was going to be the mealtime. Based upon the verse in Ezekiel (41:22) describing the dimensions of the altar as shown to the prophet where it is said, 'זה השלחן אשר לפני ה' ["This is the table which is before God"], our Sages are puzzled by the fact that the altar is referred to as the שלחן, the table. The takeaway from this is that when there is no altar, no Temple, one's table atones for a person. The gemara explains that this comparison is in relationship to the commandment of גמילות חסדים, of feeding people at our table who otherwise wouldn't have food. But the comparison has been taken further – the *Shulhan Arukh (Orah Hayyim 180:5)* mentions

that the practice is to cover the knife during ברכת המזון [“Grace after meals”]. The *Beit Yosef* offers as the reason that iron was not allowed to come in contact with the altar as it would disqualify any stone which it even touched, and thus during the blessing our table becomes elevated into an altar and therefore no iron implement should be seen on it. In a similar vein, I would suggest that the way we choose to eat speaks volumes about our spiritual disposition, that is whether we are able to elevate what is on the surface the most mundane and earthly of activities and make it holy. So if our table is supposed to be like an altar, I thought that would be a good place to start.

Since I knew that I was planning to make this ask weeks ago, I also understood that נאִים הם, words are more acceptable when they emerge from the mouths of those who do them, and so I realized that I needed to introduce it into my life before making a pitch for it. For a few weeks, I avoided dealing with this – each time I wanted to check my e-mail or catch up on the news, I said “tomorrow”. But about three weeks ago, I realized that הַיּוֹם קָצֵר [“the day is short”] and so I started (or better said, stopped.) And I have to tell you, it was not easy (it’s easier now, having become habit.) But my rule has become that I do not do digital at the table. If no one is present I either read hard copy or just eat, and if someone else is, I just eat and will converse. And I actually think that my life is better for it - I make conscious choices of what I want to catch up on – be it a *sefer* [“book of Torah”] or other reading that I wish to catch up on (rather than going down the rabbit hole of news – where I am taken in the direction of some algorithm) or I talk to someone. I would also say that if this doesn’t speak to you, then find another regular time-period or activity in your life to make it phone-free.

Permit me, if I may, to make one other observation. Instead of looking forward, look backward for a moment – if we think about the time that we might have wasted in the last week, what might have we accomplished during that time if it hadn’t been wasted. How much Torah we might have studied or what kind of other productive things might we have done during that time; how much quality interaction might we have had with our children, siblings, parents, spouse or friends. Now multiply that by fifty-two and consider what valuable things we might have accomplished in the past year if we hadn’t wasted that time. And now multiply that by several ... I think that you can see where I am going.

There is an expression in English which I don't think has a good analogue in the Rabbinic tradition, and that in itself speaks volumes – “killing time”. We believe differently. If you will permit me the license of the darshan – לכל זמן ועת there is a חפץ תחת השמים. There is never a time that we don't have a task in the service of God (that service may even sometimes be leisure) – we are placed on this earth with a job, God is our employer, and we are not allowed to waste the precious time he has given us. We should always remember the example of our Patriarch Jacob, כי בכל כחי עבדתי את אביכן. And in our case the employer is not אביכן, your father Lavan, but our father in Heaven.

Good Shabbos.