

“Vayyakheil: The holiness of work”

by Rabbi Dr Jeffrey M Cohen

The importance of hard work is expressed at the very beginning of the sidrah *Vayyakheil* where we are told, *Sheishet yamim tei'aseh melachah uwayom ha-shevii yihyeh lachem kodesh, shabbat shabbaton la-Shem*, ‘For Six days shall work be done and the seventh day shall be holy unto you, an intense rest in honour of the Lord.’ Now according to some rabbis the first part of the instruction is as much a mitzvah as the second. In other words, it is God’s wish not only that we keep the Sabbath, but also that we work hard on the other days of the week.

There is a profound lesson to be taken away from the fact that the Torah inserts into the context of Shabbat a reference to the working week, thereby raising the status of work to the category of holiness. The Torah is telling us here that our working week - our attitude to work as well as the way we work - should be motivated and inspired by the way we observe Shabbat, and that just as Shabbat observance is tightly regulated and hedged in with discipline so must we be equally disciplined and meticulous about our responsibilities at work.

If we are employers we must care deeply for the welfare of our employees. Just as Shabbat affords us time to cement a closer relationship with our family, our friends and the people around us in synagogue, so must we attempt to create an atmosphere of fraternity within our workplace, minimising the stress, and promoting the well-being of our employees. Similarly, just as on Shabbat, if we observe it properly, it is almost impossible to waste time - since every part of that day is structured and fully taken-up with prayer, study and family *se'udot* –

so must employees make every minute count, giving of their best, neither wasting the time for which they are being paid nor misusing or misappropriating the raw materials and resources supplied to them. Again, just as Shabbat provides an opportunity for physical and mental refreshment, so is the employee entitled to some time off during the course of the working day, for mental and physical relaxation.

With Shabbat as a paradigm for the rest of the week, it is clear that Judaism goes far beyond the Health and Safety at Work Act (1974), viewing most unfavourably the growing number of firms that impose such an unremitting burden of work on their staff as to undermine, if not destroy, family life.