Student Rabbi David Segal
Princeton University, Reform Jewish Services
Erev Rosh Hashanah (Shabbat) 5770
September 18, 2009

Who Do You Work For?

One evening, a Hasidic rebbe was walking in a neighboring village late at night, when he came across another man who was walking alone. They nodded in greeting and, for a while, the two men walked together in silence. Eventually, the rebbe turned to the man and asked, "So, who do you work for?"

"I work for the village," the man answered. "I'm the night watchman."

They walked in silence a while longer, until the watchman asked the rebbe, "And who do *you* work for?"

The rebbe stopped in his tracks, then answered, "I'm not always sure. But this I promise you: Name your current salary and I'll double it. All you have to do in return is walk with me and ask me, from time to time, 'Who do you work for?'"[1]

This existential question, which gave the rebbe pause to examine his spiritual foundation, confronts all of us. Where we work, what we *do for a living*, in some way defines our place in the world, how we contribute to society, and what we leave behind when we die. To even begin to answer such a question, we first need to understand what work really means.

In Hebrew, the common word for work is *avodah.* Its range of meanings includes *work, labor, service,* and *worship.* Avodah is the rabbinic term for the Israelite sacrificial system in the Temple, and it defines the 17th blessing of the Amidah, conceived as a rabbinic stand-in for Temple worship after the Temple's destruction. Avodah is the Hebrew name of Israel's Labor Party, from their Socialist Zionist pre-State roots, when kibbutzniks "made the desert bloom." Avodah begins the title of the Israeli Reform Movement's prayerbook, *Avodah ShebaLev*, "Service" or "Worship of the Heart." It is the basis for calling what we're doing here tonight a "service."

Avodah, as you can see, has a rich history; but what does it mean to us today? In the face of economic turmoil, corporate greed, job insecurity, and unemployment, how are we supposed to feel about work?

For starters, I think we rabbis and other clergy often do you a disservice. Research studies -- including that of Dr. David W. Miller at Princeton's Center for the Study of Religion[2] -- have shown that *we* rarely speak about business from the pulpit and, when we do, it's usually to denounce free-market capitalism, greed, and corruption. This research has shown that "many Christians and Jews hunger for more support from their religious communities in relating their faith to their work lives."[3] This silence or negativity from the bimah leads many in the pews to feel what is known, in Christian circles, as the "Sunday-Monday" gap.[4] We might call it the Shabbat-Workweek gap.

Now it's true, of course, that there's plenty in the way of corporate greed, corruption, and instability to denounce with a prophetic voice from the pulpit. This week's one-year anniversary of the collapse of Lehman Brothers is just one of many reminders. Merrill Lynch, AIG, Bear Stearns, Wachovia, General Motors ... the litany goes on, making our heads swim in a sea of irresponsible and unethical lending practices, sub-prime mortgages, government bailouts, and billion-dollar bonuses. Not to mention the exploits of Bernie Madoff, whose devious scheme devastated the Jewish community in particular, both financially and, of course, emotionally.

Even with all that has been happening around us economically, a prophetic call to justice is only part of the proper response. Denouncing unethical behavior is important, but it is only reactive, decrying an ethical catastrophe after the fact. We need a more proactive, holistic religious voice -- one that not only denounces the kind of work that brings our society down, but also lifts up a different approach to work that is life-affirming and ethically sound. Religious leaders, instead of speaking only as prophets against the villains and villainies of the marketplace, should also speak as pastors in support of a spiritually enriching, ethically ennobling workplace.

To do this will require reclaiming the concept of avodah for the modern Jew. To this end, another Hasidic tale:

> A modern man, succeeding in business and trying to be a good Jew, complained to his rabbi: "I'm frustrated that my work leaves me no time for study or prayer."
> The rabbi thought for a moment and then replied: "Perhaps your *work* is more pleasing to God than study or prayer."[5]

This is a good place to start, since work has a bad theological reputation. Some of its bad rap can be traced to the pervasive influence of the Christian interpretation of the Garden of Eden -- the so-called Fall of Man. We have to work, says this version, because Adam and Eve disobeyed God. Therefore, God punished Eve with labor pains and Adam with painful labor. This version

rests on an assumption that the Garden of Eden was a work-free zone. But a careful reading challenges its validity.

Indeed, work was already part of the routine *within* the Garden of Eden. As early as Genesis 2:15, God placed Adam in Gan Eden *l'ovdah ul'shomrah*, to work it and keep it (or, more commonly, "to till and to tend"). The Hebrew *ovdah* shares a root with *avodah*, meaning here the work and service of the land. Later, when God sends Adam and Eve out of the Garden, we learn: "Adonai Elohim sent him out of the Garden of Eden *la'avod et ha'adamah*, to work the ground from which he was taken" (Genesis 3:23). Work itself, then, cannot be a curse or a punishment but is rather a divine mission, and a quintessentially human act. Adam the Gardener of Eden became Adam the Gardener of the world.

As Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin wrote in his book *Being God's Partner*:

> Adam's punishment was not necessarily *labor* since he had already worked in the Garden. His curse was that he would have to do sweaty, tiring, often frustrating toil to bring forth bread from a sometimes uncooperative earth. In essence, this is the Jewish spirituality of work. Work, which would no longer be easy, would be how humanity could make the world more holy and complete the work that God had started.[6]

In Gan Eden, Adam's tilling and tending went along smoothly. You might say he had a very green thumb. After leaving the Garden and settling East of Eden, in the world as *we* know it, Adam's avodah didn't always produce the results it deserved. And yet, he knew for whom he was working. Just like him, we are sent into the world as an emissary from the Garden, with a message: avodah means partnering with our Creator in the ongoing and, yes, difficult creation of the world.

In his book *God at Work,* Dr. Miller writes, "our work can be a means of honoring God and serving our neighbor, thus providing greater meaning and purpose to our work while also providing the conditions for our basic living and leisure."[7] This echoes what the Laity Lodge, a Texas-based Christian retreat center, refers to as "the high calling of our daily work."[8]

It would be ironic if we Jews, who often pride ourselves on Judaism's emphasis on deeds and action in this world, shied away from exploring the spirituality of work. You don't have to look very far in our tradition to find it. For example, the sages of the Talmud knew the value of a day's work. "Rabbi Judah ben Ilai said: A man who does not teach his son a trade, teaches him

robbery."[9] In the rabbinic mind, Deuteronomy's call, *u'vacharta bachayim,* "choose life" (30:19), meant: *choose a trade that will be your livelihood.*[10]

If you are a tailor or textile-maker, you create garments that "clothe the naked" -- just as God did for Adam and Eve. One of the names we invoke to praise God daily in the morning blessings is *malbish arumim,* "who clothes the naked."

Doctors and therapists heal the sick in body and mind, often comforting the scared or bereaved -- just as God is the eternal healer, *rofeh hacholim*.

Artists, architects, and builders, like Bezalel, the Israelite craftsman in charge of building the original tabernacle in the desert, use their hands and their creative impulses to form beautiful objects and spaces. They imitate God the Creator, Maker of heaven and earth.

Lawyers help bring justice into the world. Chefs and waiters help feed the hungry. Teachers enlighten the eyes and empower another generation of learners.

To the students here, I encourage you to think about your work as a student, and ask a variation of the night watchman's question: who do you *study* for? To what higher purpose are your efforts at school directed? If you are to live out the motto of "Princeton in the nation's service, and in the service of all nations" -- truly a call to avodah! -- how will that guide you?

An NYU doctoral student in religion and Jewish mysticism was recently reported in *The Jewish Week* as saying, "Especially in this economic climate, it's thrown the university into a state of self-consciousness or crisis about its role. Hopefully, this time of economic hardship can give us the opportunity to clarify and refine what we're trying to accomplish."[11] Rabbi Aaron Panken, Vice President of HUC, my rabbinic school, was also quoted: "When Wall Street is going well, people may be swayed [to make money] [*sic*]. Now that that incentive has waned people recognize [religion as] something they may have wanted to do anyway, so they go in our direction instead.... With an economic downturn we see a return to core values, ethics, spirituality and things that make life worth living."[12]

These two observers are right about the effects of the economic crisis in causing a return to fundamental values, but you don't have to go to seminary to live a life of service. Now, if you're skeptical, you're not alone. Studies show that many Americans "ponder if it is possible to be a data entry clerk or an investment banker or a CEO and still serve God. They wonder if sacred

purposes can be found as a sales representative or advertising executive. They question whether they must leave the for-profit sector to enter the so-called caring professions as the only way to do full-time ministry, to view their work as a calling, and to find meaning in what they do."[13]

One summer, while working in Boston, I had the privilege of joining a monthly Torah study group. The participants included: a rabbi, a Jewish day school principal, a CEO, and an investment banker. They first met because their children went to the same school. They began meeting regularly to read Torah because they sought fellowship and purpose. They found themselves in the text, each in unique ways. Lessons about their work and life jumped off the pages of Torah when they jumped in to learn. Each of *us* can seek this kind of community and purpose-driven learning in our own lives. And then when, God forbid, times are tough, as when we're out of work, we have a network we can turn to for support and guidance.

Voices of Jewish tradition can help you orient your life toward service regardless of your career choice. Whatever your job, you can infuse it with a sense of vocation, spirituality, and a purpose higher than your own immediate gain. Martin Luther King, Jr., said it well:

> Whatever your life's work is, do it well. Even if it does not fall in the category of one of the so-called big professions, do it well.... If it falls to your lot to be a street sweeper, sweep streets like Michelangelo painted pictures, like Shakespeare wrote poetry, like Beethoven composed music; sweep streets so well that all the host of Heaven and earth will have to pause and say, "Here lived a great street sweeper, who swept his job well."[14]

Another tale of our Hasidic rebbe illustrates this idea:

> One day the rebbe came across three stonecutters working in a quarry. Each one was cutting out a block of stone. Curious, the rebbe asked the first stonecutter what he was doing.
>
> "What? Are you blind?" the stonecutter shouted impatiently. "Can't you see, I'm cutting this stupid piece of stone!" Taken aback, and still no wiser, the rebbe turned to the second stonecutter and asked him what he was doing.
>
> "I am cutting this block of stone to make sure that its sides are straight and even so that the builder can stack it with others." Feeling better, but still not sure what was going on, the rebbe turned to the third stonecutter, who seemed to be the happiest of the three, and asked him what he was doing.
>
> The stonecutter replied, "I am building a cathedral."[15]

The third stonecutter is not only the happiest, but also likely to be the most productive. Moreover, I believe he will be less prone to corruption, less gripped by greed, and more invested in and rewarded by his work because he sees the bigger picture, the "God's-eye view."[15] The question for each of us, on this threshold of a new year, is: what kind of cathedral are you building? What does your work look like from God's perspective?

Conclusion

As we began, so should we end: with the night watchman's question, *who do you work for?* What a blessing it would be if we each had our own night watchman, standing by our ear like a shoulder angel, asking us that question from time to time.

And then it occurred to me, that is precisely the blessing Shabbat is meant to bestow on us. One day each week, Judaism commands us to refrain from work -- not because work is evil, but because it is not everything. On Shabbat, we are called into community to consider the grounding and purpose of our existence, the meaning underneath our material lives. Shabbat has holiness at its center, not to be bounded by that day but to be carried with us into the rest of the week. Take this Shabbat, which is also Rosh Hashanah, to frame not just the coming week but also this new year with the question, *Who do you work for?*

May each Shabbat offer you a moment's pause to consider this ultimate question, helping you shape a life of service. In your work, be not a slave to the bottom line, but a faithful servant to your spiritual bottom line -- a higher purpose, a calling, perhaps a path to God.

Shabbat shalom and shanah tovah.

Selected Bibliography

Marques, Dr. Joan, Dr. Satinder Dhiman, and Dr. Richard King. *Spirituality in the Workplace: What It Is, Why it Matters, How to Make it Work for You.* Fawnskin, CA: Personhood Press, 2007.

Salkin, Rabbi Jeffrey. *Being God's Partner: How to Find the Hidden Link Between Spirituality and Your Work.* Woodstock: Jewish Lights, 1994.

Slutsky, Carolyn. "Search for Meaning Leading Back to School," *The Jewish Week*, September 1, 2009.

King, Martin Luther, Jr.; James M. Washington, ed. "Facing the Challenge of a New Day" in *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992.

Miller, David W. *God at Work: The History and Promise of the Faith at Work Movement.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Endnotes

[1] Paraphrased from *Being God's Partner*, Salkin, 29.
[2] Miller, *God at Work,* 2007.
[3] Miller, 103, quoting Hart and Krueger, "Faith and Work: Challenges for Congregations," *Christian Century*, July 15-22, 1992, 684.
[4] See esp. Miller, 9-10.
[5] Hasidic tale, paraphrased from Salkin, 29.
[6] Salkin, 39.
[7] Miller, 6.
[8] Quoted in Miller, 139.
[9] Tosefta Kiddushin 1:11. See also Talmud Bavli, Kiddushin 29a.
[10] Talmud Yerushalmi, Kiddushin 19a. See also Salkin, 43.
[11] Slutsky.
[12] Slutsky.
[13] Miller, 135.
[14] Martin Luther King, Jr., "Facing the Challenges of a New Age," *I Have a Dream,* 20.
[15] Paraphrased in Marques, Dhiman, and King, *Spirituality in the Workplace*, 5.
[16] Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath*.