

It would be impossible to think of a spiritual giant greater than *Moshe Rabenu*, Moses our Teacher. As Scripture describes him in at the very close of the Torah, “ולא קם נביא עוד בישראל” -- Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses -- whom the Lord singled out, face to face” (*Deuteronomy* 34:10). So important did this belief seem to Maimonides that he enshrined Moshe’s singularity as one of his thirteen fundamental principles of Judaism, a notion that also finds expression in *Yigdal*, the hymn we sing at the conclusion of our Friday evening services here at the Center: “לא ם בישראל כמשה עד נביא, ומביט את תמונו” -- In Israel none arose like Moses, a prophet whose visions stretched the limits of humanity.”

In so many ways Moshe is larger than life, yet there is also a dimension to his personality that is all too human, an aspect that the Torah never seeks to hide. At the very beginning of today’s *sedra*, Moses receives word that his father-in-law, Yitro, is enroute to the Israelite encampment in the wilderness. He is accompanied by Tzipporah, Moshe’s wife, and their two children, Gershom and Eliezer. Earlier in the book of *Exodus*, we know that Moses’ family traveled with him to Egypt from the land of Midian, yet at some unspecified point in time, they must have returned to Yitro’s home. Did Moshe wish to protect them from the unknown dangers of Egypt? Was Tzipporah homesick or fearful of the children’s safety? Is it possible that the pressures of Moses’ new job as God’s agent put a strain on their relationship, one that led to a temporary separation?

Whatever the answer to these questions, we know that absence makes the heart grow fonder. We can imagine a husband and father, eager for the moment of re-union, pacing back and forth at the Greyhound Camel Station in the wilderness of Sinai, impatiently peering into the trackless desert awaiting the arrival of his loved ones. And then the moment arrives . . . it’s them, yes, he sees them off in the distance, tiny figures on the horizon that gradually grow in size as they approach. Moshe runs toward them eagerly, and unable to contain his emotion, he bows low and kisses . . . his father-in-law. וישאלו איש לרעהו לשלום ויבא האהלה -- Yitro and Moshe ask after one another’s welfare, and they enter the tent where Israel’s greatest seer relates to his father-in-law everything that God had done to Pharaoh and the Egyptians.

The Torah’s narrative style is frequently elliptical, omitting all sorts of descriptive details that might still have happened, even if left unrecorded. Perhaps Moshe did embrace Tzipporah, maybe he

gave his sons a bear hug or twirled them around in joyful greeting. And even if he didn't do any of these things, we could still argue that it's anachronistic to judge Moses by today's standards of normative spousal and parental behavior.

Yet if we consider the larger picture, a disturbing pattern of disconnect between Moshe and his family emerge. Earlier in the book of *Exodus*, as Moses and his family travel toward Egypt, it is Tzipporah who averts the tragic death of her son by circumcising him herself. Moshe is nowhere to be found at this moment of peril -- would not an Israelite father of Moses' stature *not* concern himself with arranging his own son's *brit milah*? Later on in the Torah, Miriam cryptically complains about her brother's relationship to his wife, a complaint that *Midrash* interprets as criticism of Moshe for neglecting his spouse in order to be available at any hour of day, should God summon him (*Sifre Bamidbar, B'ha'alotekha, siman kuf*).

It's certainly no stretch to see Moses' disengagement from family as a result of total commitment to his work. This unyielding devotion to the cause of the Israelites is found clearly in today's *sedra*. Yitro looks on his son-in-law sits as a magistrate for the entire people, hearing cases and rendering judicial decisions from early morning until night. He is astounded by what he witnesses and exclaims, “לא טוב הדבר אשר אתה עשה! נבל תבל גם אתה גם העם הזה אשר עמך, כי כבד ממך, לא טוב הדבר, לא תוכל עשה לבדך -- “What you are doing is not good! You will surely wear yourself out, and these people as well. The task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone” (*Exodus 18:17-18*). Indeed, Moshe himself will later echo these very words in complaining to God about the carrying the crushing burden of responsibility for the entire people. When overwhelmed, Moses is not too proud to accept help from others, but only when he's pushed to the breaking point. Is it really so surprising that he had little time, energy or patience left for his family?

In contemporary terms, Moshe had many of the symptoms of a workaholic. It is significant to note that the Torah neither conceals nor rationalizes the enormous toll Moses' work took on his personal relationships. One could make a legitimate claim that we should read his personal biography prescriptively, but rather as a cautionary tale about what happens to families when a career eclipses all else.

In our society, too many of us ultimately judge ourselves by what we do, what we produce. To accomplish more is to be more. Yet when work becomes an end in and of itself, it begins to define who we are. Instead of being a vehicle for the expression of meaning, work can become the master of our souls, a form of slavery that chains our self-worth to productivity.

I imagine that if we were to chronicle the number of waking hours we spend at work versus the number of hours we devote to leisure activities with loved ones over the course of a week or a month, we might be shocked at our findings. How would you answer the following questions: Do you think about your work while driving, falling asleep or when others are talking? Is the future a constant worry for you, even things are going well? Do you believe it's OK to work long hours if you love what you're doing? Have your family or friends given up expecting you on time? Are you afraid that if you don't work hard you will be a failure?

Some of you will smile when I tell you that I obtained these questions from the website of Workaholics Anonymous, a twelve-step program of recovery with group meetings in 18 states and 9 countries. But if we chuckle or roll our eyes, it is certainly due, in part, because our society views a life of constant busy-ness as an admirable trait; as if incessant list-making and an inability to say "no" to the demands of self and others were something to feel good about. No drug addict or alcoholic would ever boast about his or her habit. Yet the term workaholic is not only socially acceptable, it is often a badge of pride that a person wears -- because to be a workaholic means that you are productive, and therefore, are worthwhile.

Judaism has an innate respect for work and for living a productive life. We are all familiar with the commandment to rest on Shabbat, but may not remember that the Torah also states, "Six days you shall labor and do your work." And inasmuch as Judaism refuses to attenuate the sacred from the ordinary, any honest work that benefits others in some fashion and is performed in an ethical manner partakes of a holy character. Sloth is hardly a Jewish virtue.

The question isn't finding meaning and satisfaction in what we do; rather, it's when identity and career become synonymous and co-dependent. There is a price to pay when the workplace itself becomes a lifestyle. Some of those costs are physical: hypertension, exhaustion, gastric problems, heart disease; others are emotional and spiritual: feelings of emptiness and detachment, burnout,

compassion fatigue. Still other costs are managed in terms of the damage we do to our relationships with spouses, children and friends. After a lifetime of work there may be the dread of retirement, the fear of no longer having any meaning in one's life. For those so afflicted, even vacations can become times of anxiety or impatience, interludes of nothingness to be endured until one can resume work rather than opportunities for rejuvenation.

Rabbis are no less vulnerable to workaholic tendencies than others; on the contrary, they are probably more susceptible. I know that I am myself very guilty, and if I don't boast about how hard I work and the average number of hours I put into my job each week, it is precisely because I'm not so sure it's something I should be proud of. Some years back, a member of my former synagogue expressed disappointment that, several months of the year, I did not routinely attend evening *minyan*. She felt it was important for the rabbi to read the *yahrzeit* list rather than just an ordinary congregant. She also thought it significant for the rabbi to be at every service, just in case -- what if someone who had come to say Kaddish suddenly felt sad and in need of pastoral care?

My first impulse was to agree. Rabbis are people oriented; our desire to help others imbedded somewhere in our DNA. But that day I stopped myself, and explained that, given the necessity of returning to the synagogue most weekday evenings to teach or attend meetings, whenever the time of *minyan* conflicted with our family dinner, I felt that I owed it to my loved ones as a father and as a husband to be at the table, especially since more often than not I wouldn't get home until well after my children were already asleep. The woman paused and then responded, "Thank you, rabbi, for telling me that. I think a person can't be a good rabbi at the expense of his family."

Nearly twenty years ago when I first applied to rabbinical school, I remember writing in one of my admission essays that the rabbinate appealed to me because it was a career that was also a calling, a vocation in which life and work were not attenuated from one another by the hands of the clock. For many years, that sentiment meant that my work could and should encroach upon my personal life anytime it did. But as I married, had children, and grew a little wiser with age, I came to believe that a vocation in which life and work aren't attenuated from one another by the clock really means that you strive to live by the same value system at home as at work. If I stand on this *bimah* and preach about the importance of family, then I must try to embrace those values myself. If I counsel adults to not always put their professional responsibilities ahead of everything else, I must heed my own words.

I'd be less than honest if I told you I've always succeeded at putting family first. There are times when I sneak into the office on my day off, or burn the midnight oil, or have allowed meetings and appointments to trump tucking in my children. Yet I have hope for myself, if only because I want my children to think of me as a nurturer and a teacher, and not simply a provider, or the man who gave of his time to everyone else's family except his own.

There is a short story by the Russian author, Leo Tolstoy, entitled, "How Much Land Does A Man Need?," in which a rich fellow travels to the Bashkirs, a tribe living in the hinterlands of Russia. The tribesmen offer the stranger to deed him as much land as he can cover on foot in the course of a day. Excited at the prospect of gaining so much property, he runs at breakneck speed, and despite hunger, thirst and fatigue, refuses to stop. At day's end, he collapses from exhaustion and dehydration and dies. The amount of land that he receives is ultimately no more than a six-foot plot of earth as a final resting place. Sometimes to strive for too much is to end up with the least possible.

We are all destined for the same place, but how we travel there, and what we create of lasting value will not depend on our income, or the number of plaques and productivity awards we receive. We need to move from a life of coercion to one of covenant, but to do so we must be willing to listen to the still small voice within ourselves, and to have the courage to see what is beyond us while sensing what is most deeply within us. To get a life means to find inherent beauty in the one we already have, to appreciate the rhythm of time God implants in each of us, to experience the counterpoint of Shabbat rest to the labor of the work-week. It requires that we find time every day to thank God for the miracle of living, refusing to define ourselves by our jobs or careers, to stop trying to be perfect, to accept failure as simply a part of life, to acknowledge boundaries and limits. Above all, it is to remember that the things we need to attain significant beings are always in reach: God, a soul and a moment. As Abraham Joshua Heschel once wrote, "Just to be is a blessing. Just to live is holy." May the good Lord help us earn a living, but also teach us how to earn a life. Amen.