

My Son, the Shepherd By Rabbi Joshua Cypess

It has become apparent of late that we need more shepherds in the Jewish community. Our tradition describes that profession as a training ground for deep thinking, self-sacrifice and communal responsibility. Moses, King David, and Rabbi Akiva's great leadership is attributed to their training as shepherds.¹ That is why Israel's top university has started a doctoral program in Livestock Engineering—a program to bring the most Jewish of professions into the 21st Century.

Of course, this is a joke. But the creation of a Ph.D. program would be necessary to persuade many Jewish parents to contemplate allowing their children pursue such an “alternative” profession. There is ample anecdotal evidence that Jewish parents want their children to become doctors or lawyers. Other professions will do for such parents, as long as they require graduate degrees or culminate with impressive business cards.

This is, however, an overly harsh view of the Jewish world. Doctors and lawyers are preferred because they follow well-worn paths leading to financial success. Yet, Jewish parents who want security and material success for their children will discover that Torah and tradition have set guidelines to direct career planning. Almost all professions can be consonant with Torah values, and the best professions are those that use our particular talents while maximizing the opportunity to continue our Torah learning and practice.

When choosing a profession, my father advised me to keep three things in mind: "Do what you like, do what you are good at, and do what helps others." These three simple rules are more than good advice; they are informed by Jewish common sense that comes from a life of practical Torah application.

The first rule, "Do what you like," is a recipe for a happy life. There is a great difference between dragging oneself to the office for a day of drudgery, and bounding out of bed to continue doing what one enjoys. "Do what you are good at" is connected to this. We enjoy doing things at which we excel. The last rule, "Help society," means to build a life of Torah through your profession, while also contributing to the greater community.

Scripture does seem to prefer some professions to others. If we had to identify the first profession, we would see Adam and Eve as our paradigm. Technically, they were farmers, though in reality, they had little to do, as the Garden of Eden was self-tending. Read in the right light, the Torah states that the need to work was a punishment (*Genesis 3:17*).

The two sons of Adam and Eve chose different professions. Cain went into the family farming business; Abel invented the field of animal husbandry (*Genesis 4:2*). Considering that the Earth was the only source of food (meat was still forbidden), and yet recently cursed, Cain had the odds against him. Abel had a much simpler time—the Earth produced only thorns and thistles (*Genesis 3:18*), on which sheep thrive. Little effort was required for him to succeed.

Cain and Abel had a labor dispute over different modes of working the earth—Cain brought his produce, Abel brought his. When God chose sheep over fruit, was He choosing shepherding over farming?² Dr. Atkins may agree with the diet, but we cannot live on mutton alone!

Rashi (France, 1040-1105) points out that Abel brought the best of his flock, while Cain consigned his worst produce (on *Genesis* 4:3). Through Cain and Abel, God taught us the lesson that no matter the occupation, all work should be used to serve God. A person can be a doctor, rabbi or firefighter as long as he dedicates the best of his or her labor to Godly purposes. Dedication and direction is how God recognizes success.

However, in choosing a career that we enjoy, not all professions seem equal in the Torah's eyes. Even if we allow Cain his fruit, and accept farmers and shepherds alike, the Torah disdains the hunter. Two evil characters, Nimrod and Esau, are described as hunters.³ Ishmael, a man of dubious character, takes the related profession of the archer (*Genesis* 21:20).

The Bible does not consider violence a good career path. Even one of our greatest heroes, King David, was considered unworthy to build the Temple because of the blood on his hands: "Blood in great quantity you have shed and great wars have you waged, you will not build a house in My Name because great blood have you shed to the earth before Me" (*I Chronicles* 22:8).

David's warlike nature prevented his life's goal to build God's House, and could have doomed him to an even worse fate. The *Midrash* (*Genesis Rabbah* 63:8) tells us that David was destined to be a man of blood. David is described as *admoni* ("ruddy")—either red-skinned or red-haired—and this is what kept the prophet Samuel from seeing the young David as a potential king (*I Samuel* 16:6-13).

The Talmud (*Shabbat* 156a) states that a baby born under the *mazal* (zodiac sign) of Mars will be "ruddy." Leaving aside the larger question of fate and determinism, the Talmud explains that being born into the destiny of blood can be directed several ways: "Rav Ashi said 'He will be either a blood-letter [i.e. a doctor], a robber, a butcher or a *mohel*.' Rabbah said: 'I was born under Mars [and I am not of these professions].' Replied Abaye: 'You, too, shed blood, [as a judge]: you punish people and have them executed.'"

David was destined to be a man of violence, but he channeled his proclivity to become a mighty warrior-king. Taken further into our modern context, this murderous nature is even seen by the Talmud as the basis for our "noble" professions of medicine and law. A dark destiny can be sublimated into a higher calling. And if blood-lust, conceivably the worst of all natures, can lead a person to be as great as King David, then possibly all negative traits at birth can be directed to a higher purpose.

The book of *Proverbs* emblazons the concept that every person can be taught if his individual strengths and weaknesses are taken into account: "*Hanokh la-na'ar al pi darko* (educate a child according to his nature)" (22:6). This wisdom from King Solomon is useful guidance for our schools and especially for our homes.

A great example of *al pi darko*—where even a base, violent, nature can be sublimated to a higher purpose—is the case of King David's foil, Esau. They are the only two characters described in the Bible as *admoni*, ruddy. Esau's capacity for violence may have even been greater than David's, and so too his potential to be uplifted.

Isaac knew his son's bestial nature. Isaac saw that his son—through abiding parental love and attention—could be transformed into a moral person. The *Midrash* (*Deuteronomy Rabbah* 1:15) tells us that nobody on earth fulfilled the commandment of honoring parents as did Esau. When Isaac asked Esau to hunt for food, it was to enable Esau to excel with the only skills the

violent boy had. Esau's difficult nature was thus directed toward the service of God in this instance.

Ultimately, one's choice of career, and a parent's role in advising that decision, should be one that maximizes Torah observance with one's given abilities and strengths.

The Talmud discusses this issue at length at the end of the Tractate *Kiddushin*. After the basic moral strictures of avoiding a career that may lead to immorality, the authoritative Rabbi Meir states his opinion: "A parent should always teach his child a **clean and easy craft**; and he should pray to the One to Whom riches and possessions belong; because there is no craft in which there is not poverty and wealth, for poverty does not come from the craft, and wealth does not come from the craft, but everything is according to [God's determining of] merit" (*Kiddushin* 82a).

Rabbi Meir says that all professions are equal in their potential to bring wealth and security. Because there is no objectively successful profession, every individual should choose what he considers "clean and easy." It seems Rabbi Meir is primary source for the three rules I learned from my father. If you enjoy medicine, pursue it; if you prefer numbers, follow that path. Do what you enjoy and what you are good at—and pray to God that you will be successful in whatever you do.

In true Talmudic fashion, however, we are presented with a debate. Rabbi Nehorai presents the final opinion in the Mishnah: "I left aside all the crafts in the world, and I taught my son only Torah, because humanity eats of its dividends in this world, and the principal is in the World to Come. No other profession is like this: when a man is ill, old or in distress, he cannot do his job and will starve to death; not so with Torah—it protects him from evil in youth and it provides a future, and hope, in his old age."

While Rabbi Meir recognizes the necessity of working, Rabbi Nehorai seems to disagree. If the Torah is the yardstick we use to determine all our worldly values, then it follows logically that we should focus entirely on Torah. The modern debate within the Orthodox community is only an echo of this Talmudic source.

What makes this debate even more complex is that according to another opinion in the Talmud (*Eruvin* 13b), Rabbi Nehorai and Rabbi Meir are one and the same person! After the entire discussion, and possibly after all the difficulties Rabbi Meir faced in his life—including the early death of two of his sons—he takes on a new identity to disagree with himself.

We can reconcile Rabbi Meir versus Rabbi Meir (Nehorai) with a third view from Rabbi Meir. In *Pirkei Avot* (4:12), Rabbi Meir elaborates on the battle between Torah and Profession: "Reduce your business activities and occupy yourself instead with Torah, and be humble before all people. If you neglect the Torah, you will face many excuses to neglect it; but if you toil in Torah, God has much reward to give you."

Rabbi Meir does not advocate a life of Torah alone. Rather, it must be one's primary concern. Whatever one's profession, it should not take away from studying and practicing Torah.

The advice and guidance from the Torah and Talmud advocate choosing a profession that allows you to act in a Godly manner and grow in Torah study and observance. According to Rabbi Meir, taken as a whole, all occupations—doctors, lawyers and others—hold equal weight

as long as they are "easy and light." "Easy" – do what you are good at, "light" – do what you enjoy, and ultimately help society when you direct your work, and direct your life, in Torah.

BIO:

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¹ *Exodus Rabbah* 2:2 for Moses and David; *Nedarim* 50a for Rabbi Akiva.

² It is noteworthy that no sacrifice is brought from fruit; see *Leviticus*, 2:11-12 and Rashi there. Other produce (e.g. grain, wine, frankincense, incense) so accompany the sacrifices.

³ *Genesis*, 10:9 and 25:28. In both cases, Rashi quotes the *Midrash* that they were hunters with words (lies) as well as with weapons.