

Choosing a Profession: Some Halakhic Considerations

In researching this subject, I was surprised by the relative absence of source material relating to it. Hazal simply did not discuss in a positive sense, either in the Gemara or in the *midrash*, those professions that they would encourage individuals to pursue. True, there is a discussion about the importance of having a profession in general and there are some statements which discourage involvement in certain fields, but there is very little written in the form of positive suggestions. [1](#)

Let us begin with that which is written. The Gemara states: גדול הנהנה מיגיע כפיו יותר מירא שמים. Why is this so? Because regarding *yir'ei Hashem* the *pasuk* says *only* "*ashrekha*," but regarding those who benefit from the labor of their own hands, it says "*arhrekha*" and "*tov lakh*": יגיע כפיו כי תאכל אשריך וטוב לך (Ps. 128:2). The Gemara interprets this

double blessing as follows: אשריך בעולם הזה וטוב לך לעולם הבא. [2](#) What

is especially significant is that neither Rashi nor Tosafot comment on this, indicating that *they take* the statement at *face value*. They *generally* feel the need to comment only when they offer interpretation which is different from the

simple *peshat*. This is particularly noteworthy because the Maharsha in his communcary on this Gemara cites a Talmudic passage in Hullin where the phrase is used in a slightly different context [.3](#) In any event, Hazal say that it is a wonderful thing for a person to earn his own keep. By speaking of a reward in both *'olam hazeh* and *'olam haba*, they indicace that such activicy does not merely have practical value, but it is endowed with *religious significance as well*.

Similarly, a Baraita in Kiddushin (29a) states that a facher is required to teach his son a trade or profession and no one disagrees. Rabbi Yehudah, in fact, takes it even further. He states that: כל שאינו מלמד את בנו אומנות מלמדו ליסטות. According to Rabbi Yehudah, if a father doesn't teach his son a profession, it is as if he is teaching him to be a robber. How? After all, he is not going to teach him the secrets of being a thief! Because, says Rabbi Yehudah, if the son has no means of earning a living, eventually he will turn to robbery.

The Yerushalmi, on the very first Mishnah in Pe'ah which deals with those דברים שאין להם שיעור, quotes Rabbi Yishmael as saying: ובחרת בחיים – זו אומנות [.4](#) By "choosing life" the Torah means to require that a person should learn a trade.

The one Tannaitic statement that *rashei yeshiva* love to quote which seems to contradict this emphasis on earning a livelihood is found in the last Mishnah in Kiddushin:

רבי נהוראי אומר מניח אני כל אומנות שבעולם ואיני מלמד את בני אלא תורה שאדם אוכל משכרה בעולם הזה והקרן קיימת לו לעולם הבא. ושאר כל

אומנות אינן כן כשהאדם בא לידי חולי או לידי זקנה או לידי יסורין ואינו יכול לעסוק במלאכתו הרי הוא מת ברעב. אבל תורה אינו כן אלא משמרתו מכל רע בנערותו ונותנת לו אחרית ותקוה בזקנותו.

This statement seems to argue against teaching any profession to children, only Torah. But the Maharsha in his commentary on that Mishnah maintains that Rav Nehorai is not disagreeing with the *previously cited Baraica*. Rather, one must pay attention to the context of each passage. Rav Nehorai is not suggesting neglecting a profession entirely but rather insisting that a person should put much greater effort into teaching Torah than teaching a trade because a trade is not permanent. The Maharsha says, "דה"ק מניח אני הקביעות של כל האומנות ואני מלמדו תורה בקבע ואומנות עראי. A person who is sick or old *will* stop working, and then what will he do for the rest of his life? But if he has studied Torah, that will last forever. Nevertheless, to be fair, not everyone agrees with the Maharsha's interpretation of Rav Nehorai.

These are some general statements. In terms of specific professions, let us begin with the statement by Rabbi Meir found in that same Mishnah. רבי מאיר אומר לעולם ילמד אדם את בנו אומנות נקייה וקלה - *A person should teach his son a clean and light profession.* Rabbi Yehudah interprets this as referring to a certain type of stitch done by tailors. 6

Nevertheless, I have yet to hear a rosh **yeshiva** or rav encouraging his talmidim to become tailors. Indeed, this statement of Rabbi Meir and this interpretation is not cited by any of the posekim.

There are other statements which indicate that various professions were discouraged. That same Mishnah

also states, ולא ילמד אדם את בנו אומנות הנשים, Work usually done by or for women was discouraged because of the potential immorality which may result from constantly associating only with them. For example, a person who sells perfume door-to-door and is always calling on women who are home alone would be putting himself in danger.

The Mishnah there also continues, לא ילמד אדם, את בנו חמר גמל קדר ספן רועה וחנווני שאומנתם אומנות ליסטים. These are professions where the majority of their practitioners are dishonest, and therefore a person who enters into any of these fields will be trained in dishonesty as the standard of the profession. After all, it is very difficult for a person to be honest in a society where no one else is. A person should be trained for a livelihood where he at least has "a fighting chance" to be honest.

Once again, however, Hazal here are not giving preference to one kind of profession over another but rather are pointing out that certain kinds of work are problematic because they lead to halakhic difficulties, either in the realm of morality or honesty. They present here the negative, rather than clearly stating, "We want you to become a . . ."

That same Mishnah continues with a further fascinating statement, טוב שברופאים לגיהנם והכשר שבטבחים, שותפו של עמלק. The *Tiferet Yisra'el* and already earlier Rishonim did not understand this Mishnah as reflecting a pejorative attitude towards doctors, but only to the excessive hybris of some of them. The "tov she-bi-rof'im" who thinks he has all the answers and doesn't consult with anyone else, who relies not on prayer but solely on his own wisdom, has the potential of being a murderer \emptyset "i.[7](#)

Clearly, the fact that a number of Rishonim were themselves doctors would seem to indicate that the profession was seen in a positive light, at least after the time of the Mishnah.

As an aside, let me just review the Tif'eret Yisra'el. The Mishnah here states that a person should not pick a profession for the anticipated level of its financial remuneration because wealth and poverty are not a function of any profession but rather reflect the zekhut a person has. Tosafot explains that "zekhut" here really means "mazal" as the Gemara says elsewhere that parnasah depends not on zekhut but on mazal.⁸ The Tif'eret Yisra'el provides a lengthy analysis of the concept of mazal and the saying, אין מזל לישראל. It is very fascinating but a bit afield. One point he makes which does apply here is that Mazal does not mean luck in the astrological sense, but skill-the skills which we inherit or in which we are trained. Zekhut and tefillah help too, but they are not the primary considerations.

There is another category of professions which should be avoided because they are considered "melakha bezuyah," lacking appropriate dignity. The Gemara in the same sugyah in Kiddushin quotes Rebbe, אין לך אומנות, שעוברת מן העולם. Every profession exists because it is necessary for society. Due to the laws of supply and demand, someone will always be available to do the work. Perhaps a greater degree of compensation will be necessary or financial hardship may force a person to do it for less. However, continues Rebbe, אשרי מי שרואה את הוריו (רש"י-יולדיו) באומנות פגומה. אי אפשר לו לעולם בלא בסם ובלא בורסקי אשרי מי שאומנתו בסם ואוי לו למי

שאוּמְנָתוֹ בּוֹרְסָקִי. The world needs people who will work with spices, but it also needs people who will work as tanners, even though tanners have a terrible odor which always lingers on them. Clearly, for reasons of personal dignity, it is much better to have a beautiful smell than an offensive one. מְלֹאכָה בְּזוּיָהּ הִיא. - it is embarrassing and undignified.

Related to this is the concept of *kevod ha-'Adam*. A person has a certain self-respect, and should seek a profession which preserves it. This does not necessarily mean a profession which others respect, for then everyone would become doctors, I suppose, in spite of the Mishnah that *טוֹב שְׁבֵרופָאִים לְגִיָּהֶנָּם* . . . It just means that one should not choose a profession which is not dignified. After all, the position recommended earlier by Rabbi Yehudah is that of a tailor, and surely that is not the most dignified of professions.

Aside from a profession's value as a source of income, work itself is seen as something positive. [9](#) The rabbis taught that even if someone has inherited a great deal of wealth, he should work anyway. Hazal give two reasons: avoiding "batalah" and being involved in 'yishuvo shel 'olam." [10](#) A person who does nothing productive can get into a lot of trouble. This morning, someone showed me an ad for the lottery: win \$5 million and quit your job! The will be wonderful! No. You can win \$5 million and quit your job and life will not be wonderful. You can become a person with no purpose in life. The Mishnah in Ketubot discusses a similar situation regarding a woman who comes from a wealthy family and brings to her marriage servants who will take care of all her work. She will be left with

nothing to do. But the Tannaim disapprove of such an arrangement and required her to work because doing nothing all day can be very dangerous. [11](#)

The second reason why unemployment is viewed negatively is because it does not contribute to *yishuvo shel 'olam*, the upkeep or maintenance of the world. The gambler is *pasul le-'edut* according to many views not because there is a concern about *gezeI* but because he is doing nothing productive. [12](#) Similarly, the *yoshvey keranot*, those who do nothing more than hang out on street corners, are *pasul le-'edut*.[13](#) . Non-productive members of society are not to be trusted.

Now, we do not find here a listing of degrees of productivity. We do not say that the president of General Motors, for example, has one level of productivity, and the fellow on the factory line, another. *All Hazal* tell us is that a person should not be lazy and unproductive and that his work should somehow serve the needs of society.

Interestingly, there is a listing in a Baraita of the type of father-in-law one should look for:

תנו רבנן לעולם ימכור אדם כל מה שיש לו וישא בת תלמיד חכם. לא מצא
בת

תלמיד חכם ישא בת גדולי הדור (רש"י- אנשי מעשה וצדיקים). לא מצא בת
גדולי הדור ישא בת ראשי כנסיות. לא מצא בת ראשי כנסיות ישא בת גבאי
[14](#) צדקה. לא מצא בת גבאי צדקה ישא בת מלמדי תינוקות .

These people are considered special because they are involved in noble work. Those who collect charity and give it to worthy causes are obviously honest since people trust them with their money. [15](#) However, in looking at this list, we must ask: What about the people who teach Torah-the rabbis and *rashei yeshiva*? Isn't that preferred to whatever

the *rashei kenesiyot* or *gaba'ei zedakah* do for a living? The answer is that the fundamental view of Hazal is that a person should not materially benefit from Torah.¹⁶ Despite all the *heterim*, a person should be earning his income in some other fashion.

There is a famous story related in a long Aggadic passage in Berakhot which discusses the removal of Rabban Gamliel from his position as *Nasi*. After a particular incident, Rabban Gamliel had gone to apologize to Rabbi Yehoshua, who was the oldest of the rabbis and had survived the Hurban with Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai. When he came to his house, Rabban Gamliel discovered for the first time that Rabbi Yehoshua was a blacksmith. The Gemara bemoans the fact that Rabban Gamliel, the head of the Sanhedrin, the *Nasi*, did not know how the great *zaddikim* supported themselves.¹⁷ What is relevant to our discussion is that underlying this statement is the assumption that *all* the great rabbis were involved in some kind of an activity to earn a living. They were not earning their keep from Torah. Being a *rav*, or a *rebbe*, or even working in a yeshiva as an executive director, were not considered professions by Hazal. They have tremendous value, but they are things which you do gratis. They would therefore never appear on any list of preferred occupations.

We do see from many other sources that Hazal greatly admired those who devoted themselves solely to the transmission of Torah or to communal endeavors. There is a special **`mi sheberakh`** for talmidei hakhamim and for people who are עוסקים בצרכי ציבור באמונה which is recited every Shabbat morning by the entire congregation, i.e., the Yekum Purkan. When we look at those whom Hazal

consider worthy of special praise, it is those people who are concerned with the needs of the community. But that activity does not appear in our context because they are not considered professions. For Hazal, that is not how one earns a livelihood.

Similarly, we do not find any mention of the fact that certain professions themselves are intrinsically involved with mizvot. A doctor who saves lives is performing a tremendous **mizvah** and yet this fact as militating in favor of a career in medicine does not appear in the literature. In fact, there is a very startling discussion in the Tif'efet Yilfa'el of whether a non-Jew can earn 'olam ha-ba. To illustrate his point that non-Jews can earn their share in the world-to come through service to humanity, the Tif'efet Yisra'el makes reference to Edward Jenner, the discoverer of the smallpox vaccine which saved many lives. There is no indication that the Tif'eret Yilra'el examined Jenner's character and found him to be noble or that he considered him to be an 'ohev Yisfael. No. He discovered a drug which saves lives and he therefore is to be considered me-hasidei 'umot ha-'olam. His merit outweighs any questions of character for he fulfilled the mizvah of **לא תעמוד על דם** (Lev. 1p:16).¹⁸ Yet, Hazal do not mention this criterion in this context.

There is one other approach which is discussed in a very strange and difficult Aggadic passage. The Gemara makes the initial claim that what a person becomes in life depends on which day of the week he or she was born. If one is born on the "right" day, he or she will become a great zaddik and everything will be wonderful. If one is born on the "wrong" day, his or her life will be a difficult one. Then the Gemara

says that it does not depend on the day of the week, but rather on the time of the day that a person was born.¹⁹ Furthermore the Gemara states that someone born in mazal ma'adim, when the sun is bright red like blood, will either become a butcher, a shohet, a murderer or a thief. But Raba says that he was born during that time and became a **rosh yeshiva!** Abaye answers, "Yes, but you're a pretty tough **rosh yeshiva!** When people don't do what you think they should, you use very strong words and cut them down to size. In a sense, you kill them too."²⁰ Forgetting for a moment the notion that a person is dependent on when he or she is born-the commentaries on the Gemara deal with that-the Gemara makes it very clear that people are born with certain innate tendencies which they will follow as they go through life. The behirah or free will a person has only extends to how he or she will use these tendencies. You can make a positive choice in the shedding of blood by becoming a shohet or make a negative choice and become a murderer. The implication, then, is that people don't just choose their professions at random. Everyone has certain innate skills and talents which can be expressed in very different ways; the goal is to express them in the most concrete and positive of fashions. One thing that is pretty clear is the obligation to choose a profession not because you think you can make more money. As we saw earlier, the Gemara in Kiddushin states quite clearly that neither poverty nor wealth depend on any given profession.

In his Sefer Aggadah, under the rubric of 'yegi'a kapayim," H. N. Bialik cites a number of ma'amarei Hazal offering different kinds of advice regarding choices for a profession.²¹ For example, we find the statement that one

should go into business instead of farming because one's livelihood is more assured. A farmer depends on the weather and there are no guarantees. Hazal also said that if you have a sum of money to invest, don't invest it all in one area, but divide it over three different ones. There are some statements offering practical advice on how to succeed in business, when to invest, when to buy, when to sell. All this implies that Hazal encouraged people to be smart businessmen and not to rely on the statement of אין עשירות ועניות מן האומנות. Rather, one should work at one's business and try to accomplish as much as one can and G-d will take care of His end of things. One cannot sit home simply twiddling one's thumbs, and think that money will fly in through the window.

Although we have already seen a variety of references in the Bavli and Yerushalmi, there is a great deal that is not discussed. One thing that is clear is that we are given a great deal of freedom to choose what we want to do. The notion of communal responsibility definitely exists, but one can fulfill that obligation in a variety of ways. All types of work serve a purpose-אין לך אומנות שעוברת מן העולם-and all, therefore, are necessary. The question is only which one suits the particular individual and how he can best carry it out. A person can become a businessman with the goal of not only becoming very wealthy but of then becoming a big **ba'al** zedakah, supporting talmidei hakhamim and perhaps even establishing a formal Yisakhar-Zevulun relationship. The same is true for doctors and lawyers. Do you enter the profession to save lives and to defend Jews and those in need or do you do it because it is prestigious--or because your mother thinks it is prestigious? We live in a very

litigious society. The lawyers and accountants will always do well, whether the market goes up or down, whether business is good or bad. But that is not necessarily a good reason to choose a profession.

I think that at particular times, the needs of the Jewish community must get priority. The Gemara says ענייך קודמין - עניי עירך קודמין. [22](#) You can give zedakah to the entire world, but your primary obligation is to your own community. Therefore, I and others will tell you that if you have the skills and capabilities for the kind of profession that directly serves the Jewish community-whether it is as a rav, or a rebbe, or in a related position -then that should be your priority.

The same is true now that we have a Jewish state. We need to show that halakhah can apply to a modern society, and for that we need religious individuals who can make the application in their professional lives.[23](#) There is also a need for Torah-educated professionals who can help **rabbanim** determine halakhic issues, such as doctors who can explain to rabbis the medical aspects of certain questions so the rabbis can pasken correctly. We also need physicists and engineers who can deal with questions regarding the properties of electricity, for example, statesmen with political training, and more. The needs of the community definitely play a role. But, again, even this criterion need not be restrictive. There are many ways a person can fulfill the needs of the community.

The issue that I can't fully address because I do not have sources, is that of a hierarchy of choices. I only have my personal feelings or that which I have heard. When I was a

student at Yeshiva University, the Albert Einstein College of Medicine was just opening. As you can imagine, there were a lot of pre-meds in Yeshiva during that time. Prior to the founding of Einstein, it was very difficult, almost impossible, for a religious person to be accepted to medical school. Many of the brightest fellows in my class chose medicine as a profession, even though it was clear that even then, in the 1950's, Klal Yisrael needed people to teach Torah and serve the Jewish community. But the pre-meds argued that they could have even a greater impact on the community; that seeing a doctor wearing a yarmulkeh would be a Kiddush Hashem which would impact on the community more than a rabbi who is anyway expected to be religious. I venture to say that most of them became caught up in their professions, and while many have indeed been mekadesh shem shamayim by their religious commitment and ethical standards, I don't think they have had as great an impact on the Jewish community as those of us who chose the more traditional path of teaching Torah. Of course, there are great exceptions. I can think of quite a few in one class who made a tremendous impact on society and have turned their professions into vehicles to help the religious community. One is a well-known physician who serves all the rashei yeshiva and rabbis and is known for his particular concern for the health of gedolei Yisrael. Of course, there are also other ways; some have gotten involved in determining halakhic questions relating to medicine. Still, I believe that the direct impact one can have through the rabbinate or teaching does more to meet the needs of the contemporary Jewish community. [24](#)

Another related issue is that of individual likes and dislikes, unrelated to the matter of innate tendencies. They are not the same. I may like to play tennis very much, but I am a terrible tennis player. I may have a tremendous gift for symbols and be terrific with computers, but the thought of it leaves me cold. The fact that I have tendencies in terms of inherent skills does not mean that I have the desire. And we have learned from psychologists who specialize in this area that people do not perform well when they are doing work they do not like, even if they're skilled at it. So, to some degree, one has to take into consideration what one enjoys doing, because of the responsibility of performing work honestly.

Someone is paying my salary; I have an obligation to do my work. And if I do not like what I am doing, and I spend my entire day on a coffee break, then, obviously, I shouldn't be doing that work in the first place.

What I cannot tell you is how to mix all this together. I think Hazal were very wise in pointing out various pitfalls but not dictating specific choices. And as important as it is for people to become rabbis and teachers, I think everyone who attended a Jewish school has had a teacher who should not have been in that profession. The individual probably did more harm than good, turning off students right and left, thinking all the while that he or she was performing a great **mizvah** by teaching Torah. Unfortunately, this applies to the rabbinate as well. Someone who doesn't have the right skills and ability to handle himself can be a disaster in the rabbinate. That is why it is impossible to say that "x" is the right profession. Hazal never say it that way and every individual has to make his or her own choice.

Rav Soloveitchik would never tell his students what they should be when they asked him this question. A very prominent Orthodox rabbi-another one of my classmates-got semikhah while attending law school at night. He asked the Rav which profession to choose as his career and was very discouraged when the Rav refused to give him an answer. My interpretation is that the Rav was communicating to that person that other people cannot make that decision for you. When your reason for deciding on a career is to satisfy someone else, it is not the right decision.

The end of the story is that my classmate chose to become a practicing rabbi, and I think he is a much more successful rav because he's fulfilling his dream in life and not simply carrying out orders from his rebbe. Obviously there are other schools of thought within the Orthodox community on this issue.

Hazal encouraged Jews to be productive members of society. They recognized differing innate tendencies among people and cautioned against degradation or facing serious halakhic risks in one's choice of profession. Perhaps, even more significantly, they respected the right of the individual to make his or her own decision.

NOTES

1. [For a very preliminary discussion of this subject, see Y. Levi, "Hokhmat ha-Torah ve-Sha'ar Hokhmat; 'Yad Re'em (Jerusalem, 1915), 199-200; reprinted with some additions in idem.,

Sha'arei Talmud Torah (Jerusalem, 1981), 261-68. For an English version, see idem., Torah and Science (New York, 1983), 38-39.-ED.]

- 2 . Berakhot 8a.
- 3 . See Maharsha, ad.loc., s.v. gadol, citing Hullin 44b.
- 4 . Yerushalmi, pe'ah I:1.
- 5 . Kiddushin 82a.
- 6 . Ibid., 82a-b.
- 7 . In addition to fif'eret Yisra'el, see the commentaries of Rashi, Tosafot, Ri ha-zaken and Meiri.
[For a discussion of an interesting aside in fif'eret Yitra'efs commentary, see S. Z Leiman, "R. Israel lipschutz and the portrait of Moses Controversy," Daniz, Between East and West: Aspects of Modem Jewish History, ed. by I. Twersky (Cambridge, 1985), 51-63.-ED.]
- 8 . Tosafot, Kiddushin 82a, s.v. 'ela.
- 9 . See, for example, the commentary of Rabbenu Yizhak b. Shlomoh on 'Avot 1:10 and 11:2.
- 10 . This is implied in R. Yehudah's opinion (Kiddushin 30b) regarding the obligation to teach one's son a trade, according to some of the commentaries. See also Tosefta, Kiddushin I and 'Avot de-Rabi Natan II.
- 11 . Ketubot 59b.

- [12](#) . Sanhedrin 24b.
[13](#) . Kiddushin 40b.
[14](#) . pesahim 49b.
[15](#) . See also Baba Batra 8b.
[16](#) . See, for example, 'Avot IV:7- ולא קרדום
לחפור בה; Rambam Hil. Talmud Torah III: IV-1
I and Kesef Mishneh, ad. loc.

[For recent discussion of this issue,
see Y. Levi, "Torah ve-Derekh 'Erez,"
ha-Ma'ayan XIGI:2 (1976-77), 13-
32; ideas., Sha'arei Talmud Torah, op.
cit., 218-48.-E0.]

- [17](#) . See Berakhot 27b-28a.
[18](#) . See fif'eret Yitra'el on 'Avot III:14.
[19](#) . See Shabbat 156a and Meiri, ad. loc.
[20](#) . Ibid. and Shabbat 153a.
[21](#) . H. N. Bialik, Sefer ha-Aggadah (Tel
Aviv, 1952), 473 f.

[22](#) . Bava Mezi'a 71a.

- [23](#) . [See E. Berkovits, "An Integrated
Jewish World View," Tradition V:1 (1962), 6-7.-
ED.]

[24](#) . [In a responsum on the validity of
secular studies written in 1490, R. Jacob b.David
Provenzali offered another reason for the priority
of medicine as a profession. He

wrote:

A person studying medicine should
do so to enjoy the material benefits
and honor accorded by this
profession. He will thereby be able to

perfect his soul and study more Torah. Such actions will engender blessings from G-od and man as he will be utilizing his medical profession as a spade for the study of Torah. This is the meaning of the statement of the rabbis that, "A physician who heals for nothing is worth nothing" (Baba Kamma 85a). Such a policy indicates that he did not study medicine in order to facilitate his Torah scholarship, but rather to minimize it. . . I therefore extol the medical profession because it sustains its practitioner in dignity. It is better for a rabbinic scholar to be a physician rather than a shoemaker, tanner or tailor.

See E. Ashkenazi, Sefer Divrei Hakhamim (Metz, 1849). The English translation is from A. Rakeffet-Rothkoff, "Torah Study and Secular Endeavor," Niv ha-Midrashia XX-XXI (1987-88), 41.-ED.]