

CHAYE SARAH 2013

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick on October 26, 2013

On this Shabbat, day of rest, I want to share an interesting fact with you: On average, in your lifetime, you are going to spend about 150,000 hours at work. (PS- I later found out the number is more like 90,000.) That's about 40% of your life spent at work. And because it takes up so much of our time, work defines our lives; for many of us it describes who we are – it identifies us. And that's why we are going to be starting a new Sermon Study Series this week on Business Ethics and Work Related Issues. And it's an important and valuable topic because **THE WORKPLACE IS A LIFE COURSE IN CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT**. Our work is an extension of who we are, what we stand for, and how we want to be known.

A couple of weeks ago, for those of you who were here, or who read my sermon on line, you know we talked about you "calling." Noah and Abraham were called by Gd. That doesn't only mean they heard a supernatural voice from heaven, it meant that they were given the opportunity to do something great with their lives by getting to work. It was meaningful work, and it shaped their lives. They became known for the work they did. And the same is true today: People are happiest; YOU are happiest when you feel you are using the talents that Gd gave you for something greater than yourself that gives your life meaning. When you are doing what you are supposed to do it gives you self-respect and personal dignity – it makes you feel good. You take pride in a job well done. Some people think that the goal of life is to make enough money that you can do nothing, but psychologists will tell you that people who have a healthy, self-fulfilling sense of the work they do, have greater satisfaction than people who are idle. So what we strive for is the kind of meaningful work that taps into our talents, that is appreciated by the people we work with and for, and makes us feel good about ourselves – like we are doing what Gd intended. That's what we mean by a calling.

And I know that we have a lot of people in the helping professions here this morning- and many of you know what I am talking about. But I suspect that many of us here also know that no matter how fulfilling your work may be, there are days that your job stinks. You have to deal with tough situations, with people who are difficult, and with problems you simply wish would go away. And that's when you have to remember: **THE WORKPLACE IS A LIFE COURSE IN CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT**. It's in the challenges that your true character shows.

That's why this morning's Torah reading goes into so much detail about business. The Talmud tells us that Abraham faced 10 tests throughout his life. Almost sacrificing Isaac was a biggie. But the Talmud says that the business deal we read about in this morning's portion was the 10th and final, and some say the toughest one of all. He's just lost his wife and now he has to go and buy a burial plot for her, and he has to enter into horse trading-like negotiations with the Hittites, for land that only last week Gd had already promised to him. You'd have thought Gd would have taken care of this little detail. "...OK, don't give me the whole country for free... I'll just take a few plots at Crescent or Locustwood." But the Torah goes into such detail about the business deal and the

work involved so that we can learn more about Abraham's character (kind of like following him to work), and in the process about our own. So we watch carefully as Abraham has to learn the local customs, learn how to negotiate with the Hittites (who seem to be wheeler-dealers) and find a just solution, even with the Hittites. He's got to meet them where they are at.

Rabbi Nachman of Breslov often related the following parable: There was once a prince who lived with his father and mother, the king and queen, in a splendid fashion. He received the finest education and upbringing. To his parents' chagrin, one day the prince went through an identity crisis and came to the conclusion that he was really a turkey and not a human being. Initially, the king and queen thought he was kidding. However, after he stopped joining them at the royal table and instead, moved under the table and sat there naked and pecking at crumbs, they knew that serious trouble was afoot. The king was ready to spare no expense for the person who could cure his son. The finest doctors and psychiatrists of the land came and tried to cure the prince, all to no avail. The king was at a loss until a gentle-looking wise man came to the palace. "I hereby offer to cure the prince free of charge," declared the man. "My only condition is that no one interferes with anything I do. Intrigued and desperate, the king and queen readily agreed. The following day, the prince had company under the table. It was the wise man. "What are you doing here?" asked the turkey prince. "Why are you here?" countered the man. "I am a turkey," responded the prince emphatically. "Well, I am also a turkey," the man replied. With that, he began to gobble like a turkey and peck at the crumbs on the floor. The prince was convinced. A few days passed in this fashion.

One morning, the wise man signaled to the king to bring him a shirt. He said to the prince, "I don't see any reason a turkey can't wear a shirt." The prince thought about it and agreed, and soon the two of them were wearing shirts. Soon the wise man asked to be brought a pair of pants. He said to the prince, "Is it forbidden for turkeys to wear pants? Certainly not!" The prince thought it over and agreed, and soon the two of them were wearing pants. So the process continued. Shortly thereafter, the wise man convinced the turkey prince that it was not forbidden for turkeys to eat human food, which was surely tastier. Then came sitting at the table and enjoying human conversation. Within a short time, the turkey prince, although still maintaining that he was a turkey, began conducting himself exactly like a regular person.

Try as you might, in the work that you do – whether it is in your professional life, in the volunteer work that you do, or the work that you do in the home-- inevitably there will be confrontations with clients, disputes with customers, disagreements with patients, heated discussions with parents, children or grandchildren. There will be disillusionment, offended sensibilities and even hurt feelings. But if we want to find or restore that sense of calling we need to be able to be with people in the way that they need. And sometimes that will be tough – but the workplace is really a life course in character development. And that requires patience and integrity – traits that we can work on and build and develop at every single stage of our lives. We can help others to reach their greater potential as well when we learn to meet them at where they are at and help them to see a

better place to be. In lifting them up we are lifting ourselves and becoming, always becoming, the people Gd knows we can be...