

Good Work

BY RABBI DAVID WOLPE

The Rabbis of the Talmud valued work. Hillel was a woodchopper, Shammai the Elder was a builder, Abba Shaul was a gravedigger. Rabbi Yehuda and Rabbi Shimon said: "Great is labor for it honors the workman." Both sages would purposely carry burdens on their shoulders because they wanted their students to see that manual labor should be respected. Later Rabbis carried on the traditions in professions as well: Maimonides was a renowned doctor, Abravanel a statesman and financier.

The Torah says "on the seventh day you shall rest" but that is preceded by the admonition that for six days you shall work. The world is in need of human creativity and contribution. There were some Rabbis who so loved study that they felt, it alone, should be enough. In a passage of wry humor, the Talmud explains how that really fares in the world: R. Ishmael said: "One should combine study with a worldly occupation"... R. Simeon bar Yochai said: "When Israel performs the will of God, their work is done for them by others"... Abaye commented: "Many have followed the advice of R. Ishmael and succeeded; others have followed the advice of R. Simeon bar Yochai and it has not been successful." (Ber. 35b). So study, but work, too.