

Work for Sustenance and Dignity

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There is a type of story told in Jewish tradition called a Midrash. A Midrash will often fill in a missing detail of the narrative of the Hebrew Bible or deepen the meaning of the original text by adding to the story in some way. One particular Midrash explores an aspect of the story of Adam and Eve. It asks, "What kind of a tree did Adam and Eve eat of? Though it is in the popular conception that it was an apple tree, in fact, the Hebrew Bible does not tell us what type of fruit the tree bore, only that it was of the tree of knowledge. Seizing upon this opportunity to provide more detail, one answer is given by an early rabbi: "Wheat, according to Rabbi Meir. When a person has no understanding, people say of them: they have never put bread made of wheat in their mouth. Rabbi Samuel argued, 'But Torah speaks of a tree!' Rabbi Ze'eira replied, 'In the Garden of Eden, stalks of wheat were like trees, for they grew to the height of cedars of Lebanon'" (Genesis Rabbah 15:7).

Before they left the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve did not have to work for their own sustenance, since God provided for all of their needs there. However, once they were expelled from the Garden for eating from the tree of knowledge they had to work in order to provide their own clothing, food, shelter, etc. Eating from the tree of knowledge has two impacts. It is the mechanism that ends their stay in paradise and then also is the mechanism by which they gain the tool (knowledge) that helps them to survive in the world.

Rabbi Meir seizes on this fact and suggests that the "tree" that Adam and Eve ate from was a giant wheat stalk. This suggestion seems peculiar. Wheat is not a fruit that grows on a tree. What could Rabbi Meir have been thinking?

Instead of focusing on the some sort of fruit that grows on trees, Rabbi Meir focuses on what happens once Adam and Eve eat it. Wheat was very important in the ancient world. In ancient Israel, wheat, when leavened, kneaded and baked into bread, served as the foundation of most every meal. Wheat fermented into beer or some variant also occupied a central place in life. To create either of these required knowledge and expertise. Our ability to work with it and to manipulate it is a foundation of society and a sign of knowledge. Once Adam and Eve ate the wheat, they gained the ability to take what God has given them and to transform it through their work into something that could sustain them in numerous ways.

From this rabbinic expansion of this famous foundational story from the Hebrew Bible, we can detect some basic attitudes about work held by the rabbis. Yes, we are "cursed" to have to work the land for our sustenance. And at the same time, the "fruit" that Rabbi Meir picks (wheat) represents our ability to take what God has given us and use it to make our lives better. We don't eat wheat like animals do in its raw form; instead, we work it into marvelous creations. We can then see that Rabbi Meir believed that work should sustain us and lead to a better life—our work should be able to sustain us in dignity.

May all who work in our nation blessed with plenty be able to sustain themselves and their families in dignity.

Questions for Discussion:

- 1) Describe a positive work experience. What made that work and/or workplace good?
- 2) What does it mean to you to be able to sustain yourself in dignity via the work of your hands?
- 3) What can we do to help ensure that all are able to do so?
- 4) Do you feel that the ability to sustain yourself and your family in dignity should be a protected right in our country?