



We read in Parashat Vayetze of Yaakov's experiences as he worked as a shepherd for his father-in-law, Lavan. Maimonides, amidst his presentation of the laws governing employer-employee relations, points to Yaakov as the paradigm of the commitment and loyalty required of an employee:

Just as an employer is admonished not to steal the payment of the poor [employee] and not to withhold it, so is the poor [employee] admonished not to steal from the work [owed] to the employer and waste some time here and some time there, thereby passing the entire day in deceit. Rather, he is obligated to be exacting with his time... Similarly, he is obligated to work with all his strength, for the righteous Yaakov said (Bereishit 31:6), "that I have worked with all my strength for your father."

(Hilkhot Sekhirut 13:7)

Yaakov's service to Lavan, which was performed "with all my strength," establishes the model of devotion for employees, who are obliged to perform their work to their maximum ability and effort, and to work for the entire period for which they are paid.

We learn more details of Yaakov's devotion to his work later in the *parasha*, when the patriarch describes to Lavan the extent of his tireless efforts on behalf of the sheep under his charge: "I was consumed by heat by day and frost by night, and sleep was withheld from my eyes" (31:40). Yaakov worked long hours and under the harshest conditions to ensure the safety and well-being of Lavan's sheep, often denying himself a good night's sleep and subjecting himself to scorching heat and bone-chilling cold.

One might ask whether Maimonides is justified in imposing this rigorous work ethic upon all employees. Is it not possible that Yaakov held himself to a higher standard than was required? On what basis did Maimonides apply Yaakov's standards of working "with all my strength" to every worker?

Rabbi Yehuda Leib Ginsburg, in his work *Yalkut Yehuda* (Denver, 1936), suggests that Yaakov would not have been entitled to subject himself to physical strain and discomfort had it not been required according to the laws of employer-employee relations. *Halakha* generally frowns upon unnecessary self-affliction and self-denial, to the point where the

Gemara considers a *nazir* a "sinner" for denying himself the pleasure of drinking wine (Bava Kama 91b). If Yaakov regularly denied himself sleep and spent long hours outdoors in the scorching heat and snowy winter nights, he must have felt obligated to do so by force of his responsibilities to Lavan. Maimonides thus justifiably inferred from Yaakov's devotion the extent of a worker's responsibility to his employer.

Maimonides concludes, "He [Yaakov] therefore received his reward for his even in this world, as it says (Bereishit 30:43), 'The man became exceedingly wealthy'." Honesty never goes unrewarded, and Yaakov was repaid for his efforts by earning great wealth as a result of his work.