What Work Matters? Hierarchies of Labor

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1. Seneca, Letters 88.21–23

Posidonius asserts that the arts fall into four classes: first the vulgar and degrading, then those concerned with entertainment, those concerned with education of the youth, and finally the liberal arts. The vulgar, which depend on manual labour, are staffed by workmen and are concerned with satisfying everyday needs. They have not even a pretense of beauty or honour. The entertainment arts are those which are focused on pleasing the eye and ear. You might assign to this category the stage technicians who construct scaffolding that rises by itself or floors that rise silently upwards, and other surprising novelties, such as objects that seem whole but fall apart, that seem fragmentary but join together of their own accord, or that stand erect then gradually collapse… The arts concerned with the education of the youth, which have some similarity to the liberal arts, are those that the Greeks called the cycle of studies. We, however, call them the liberal arts. Those alone are the liberal arts, however—and, in fact, to speak more accurately, the “free” arts—whose concern is excellence of mind and character.

2. Talmud Bavli Yevamot 63a

Rabbi Eleazar said, “No occupation is lower than [working] the land, as it says, ‘And they (=people in other professions) shall come down [and stand upon the land]’ (Ezekiel 27:29).” Rabbi Eleazar saw land that had been plowed across its width. He said, “Even if they plow your length, doing business is more valuable than [working] you.” Rav entered a field and saw sheaves waving. He said, “You can wave if you want, but doing business is more valuable than [working] you.” Rava said, “Someone with a hundred zuzim in a business can eat meat and wine all day, but a hundred zuzim in a field yields only salt and vegetables—moreover, it causes him to lie on the ground and instigate arguments.”

3. Talmud Bavli Kiddushin 82a–b

The rabbis taught: Anyone whose business dealings are with women has bad character. For example: smiths, those who comb flax, those who chisel millstones, perfume peddlers, weavers, barbers, launderers, bloodletters, bathhouse attendants, and tanners. One may appoint them neither king nor Kohen Gadol. Why? Not because they are disqualified, but because their occupations are demeaning.
Our rabbis taught: ten things were said about the bloodletter. He walks on his side, he is arrogant, he leans on things when sitting, he is miserly, he is envious, he eats a lot and pays little, and he is suspected of forbidden relations, theft, and bloodshed.

Bar Kappara taught: a person should always teach their child a clean and simple craft. What is that? Rav Ḥisda said: fine stitching.

Мы говорил наш Равнение о десяти вещах, которые говорят о предпосылке. Он ходит на боку, он гордится, он опирается на вещи, когда сидит, он копилщик, он завистлив, он ест много и платит мало, и он подозревается в запретных делах, в воровстве и в убийстве.


4. MS JTS 1887, fol. 7b (Early 13th century, Provence)

[The golem said:] A builder built many houses, courts, and cities, but nobody could compete with his craft in either knowledge or skill until two men convinced him. He taught them the secret of his craft until they knew how to do everything correctly. Once they had mastered the craft and understood its secret and its character, they began to critique him and then broke from his company and became builders like him, except what he did for a dinar they would do for half that amount. When people noticed this, everyone stopped honoring the artisan and came to them instead, honoring them and contracting with them for any construction they required. Similarly, God made you in God’s image and appearance and form—but now that you are creating a man as God did, people will say: There is no God in the world but these two!

5. Mishnah Ketubot 5:5

These are the activities that a woman must perform for her husband: grinding, baking, doing laundry, cooking, nursing her child, making the bed for him, and spin wool thread. If she brought him a maidservant she does not need to grind, bake, or do laundry. Two [maidservants] and she does not need to cook or nurse her child. Three and she does not need to make his bed or spin wool thread. Four and she may [simply] sit in a chair.

Rabbi Eliezer says: even if she brings a hundred maidservants we compel her to spin wool thread because idleness leads to licentiousness. Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel says: [a husband] who swears that his wife will not do any work must divorce her, because idleness leads to idiocy.

The eggbeater, which was invented and marketed during the middle decades of the century, may have eased the burden of this work somewhat; but unfortunately the popularity of the beater was accompanied by the popularity of angel food cakes, in which eggs are the only leavening, and yolks and whites are beaten separately — thus doubling the work.

In short, whether it was bread or cakes that she was routinely preparing, the nineteenth-century housewife whose household…had converted from the product of the local grist mill to the product of the far-off flour factory, would have found, for a variety of reasons, that she was spending considerably more time working with that flour than her grandmother had—and her husband considerably less than his grandfather. The advent of industrialized flour brought with it a profound shift in the responsibilities and time allocations of the two sexes vis-à-vis their work in their own homes; men’s share in domestic activity began to disappear, while women’s share increased. Thus, housework was becoming truly ‘women’s work’ — and not an obligation shared by both sexes.
7. 13th century Bible (Rylands MS French 5)
8. Saint Omer Psalter, 14th century (BL Add. Ms. 39810, fol. 7r, detail)

9. Sarajevo Haggadah (14th century, Barcelona)


I esteem those who invent something beneficial for society at large: the alchemists who transmit metals and demonstrate publicly the truth of their art; the mineralogists, agronomists and engineers of water supply. Their work is useful to many in times of peace and war, and it is they who are the perfect scholars...not the philosophers who only write words...This also applies to mathematics, the functional aspects of which deserve much greater praise than the purely theoretical."


The destined purpose of the Jewish people as an agricultural nation is puzzling, since ordinarily, agricultural peoples are primitive and undeveloped, while nations which engage in industry and trade are the ones who have a developed and progressive culture...but in the life of the
Israelite nation the opposite process is taking place: is talents and the qualities of its soul find their realization and come to completion specifically in the way of life which has tilling the soil as its central founding element.

15. Mishnah Avot, Chapter 1: 2 and 18

2. Shimon the Righteous was one of the last of the men of the great assembly. He used to say: the world stands upon three things: the Torah, the Temple service, and the practice of acts of piety.

18. Rabban Shimon ben Gamaliel used to say: on three things does the world stand: On justice, on truth and on peace, as it is said: “execute the judgment of truth and peace in your gates” (Zechariah 8:16).