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What does Judaism say about being a workaholic?

Response by Rabbi Peter Schweitzer

Here I am, long after I should have called it a day, working on this article in the evening hours. The trouble with working from home is that it is too easy to return to the office, answer another email, or work on a piece like this.

Long before the term "workaholic" was coined in 1971, many of our immigrant forebears proved how hard someone could work. One might even say they were driven, but not in the sense the word is used today, as a kind of addiction or avoidance of other obligations, especially to one's family. To the contrary, our forbears endured long hours and horrible conditions to make ends meet and to give their children educational opportunities that would enable them to achieve a better life. Thanks to all that effort, their offspring, and the children of their offspring, have indeed had a much easier life.

Judaism has always valued hard work, but not as a goal in and of itself. We also want to set aside time for learning, doing good deeds, and having the kind of quality family experiences that earlier generations could not enjoy. The challenge is finding the right balance and learning to set boundaries. For many of us, that also means learning to play and learning to relax. It means cultivating other interests and hobbies. And it means setting aside time for study and for exercise (but not compulsively).

That's especially a challenge for a rabbi who can easily be absorbed by the work and find no end of things to keep him or her busy, often at the expense of time with the family. And that's why it's time to shut down the computer for the night.

Rabbi Peter Schweitzer presents a view of Humanistic Judaism as a regular contributor to Moment Magazine's "Ask the Rabbis" column. The response printed here may be slightly altered from the version that first appeared in the magazine. You can find Moment Magazine on-line at www.momentmag.com.