

# Contents

<b>PREFACE</b>	<b>IX</b>
<b>CHAPTER I: Labor, Crafts and Trade in the Bible</b>	<b>1</b>
1. Sheep and Cattle Raising 1; 2. Agriculture 4; 3. Arts and Crafts 7; 4. The Medical Profession 9; 5. The Wailing Women 21; 6. Levites and Priests 22; 7. Traders and Peddlers 23; 8. Scribes 24; 9. Indolence Condemned 25.	
<b>CHAPTER II: Industry and Trade in the Hellenistic Age</b>	<b>28</b>
1. Ecclesiastes on Labor 28; 2. Ben Sira's Views on Labor, Commerce and Crafts 29; 3. Economic Progress during the Hasmonean Age 37.	
<b>CHAPTER III: Occupational Structure of the Rabbis</b>	<b>38</b>
1. General Characteristics of the Rabbinate 38; 2. Rabbis in Agriculture and Industry 39; 3. Viniculture 54; 4. Rabbinic Land Surveyor — Rab Adda 55; 5. Woodchopper and Shepherd — R. Aki-ba 55; 6. Animal Hire Service — R. Jose of Yodkart 56; 7. Rabbis and Agricultural Laborers 57; 8. Rabbis in Business — Silk Trade and Other Commercial Activities 58; 9. Rabbis as Schoolteachers and Educators 68; 10. Rabbis as Professional Preachers 71; 11. Rabbinic Scribes 71; 12. Rabbis as Physicians 77; 13. Rabbinic Craftsmen 82; 14. Miscellaneous Rabbinic Occupations 85; 15. Occupations of Early Christians 89.	
<b>CHAPTER IV: Rabbinic Attitude to Physical Labor</b>	<b>91</b>
1. Moral Value of Work 91; 2. Divine Blessings depend on Human Efforts 91; 3. Work essential for Human Dignity 92; 4. Merit of Labor more potent than Fathers' Merit 92; 5. Miracles due to Work 93; 6. Labor as Part of Divine Plan since Adam 94; 7. Abraham and Isaac — Labor in the Promised Land 95; 8. Israel's Work on the Tabernacle — Condition of Divine Presence 95; 9. "Six Days you shall Labor" 96; 10. Tree-Planting in the Land of Israel 96; 11. The Divine Worker — The Craftsman's Pride in his Work 99; 12. Craftsmen, Scholars and Pilgrims 100; 13. Legal Privileges of Craftsmen and Laborers 100; 14. Work as a Social Necessity 101; 15. Torah and a Worldly Occupation 102; 16. Work Obligatory for Wives 102; 17. Work Essential for Prolonging Life 102; 18. "Love Work" 103; 19. He who will not work, neither shall he eat 104; 20. Monotonous and Uninteresting Work not to be shunned 104; 21. Indolence Condemned 105; 22. How to "find" Work 105; 23. Labor honors the worker 105;	

24. Hard Work as a Cure for Colds 106; 25. Dissenting Views due to Hellenistic Influence 106; 26. Importance of Craft Skills 107; 27. Craft Skill as Social Security 107; 28. Craft Education 108; 29. Son should follow Father's trade 108; 30. Study and Work — Antidote to Sin 109; 31. Work in the Scheme of Life 110; 32. Maimonides and the Three-Hour Workday 111; 33. Equality of Laborer and Scholar 111; 34. Minimum of Study — Maximum of Work 112; 35. Abandonment of Studies for Vocational Career 112; 36. Torah Study as Exclusive or Principal Vocation 113; 37. Study and Work in Equal Proportions 117; 38. Torah and Commerce 118; 39. Higher Education for "Eaters of Manna" 119; 40. Torah for Israel, Labor for Gentiles 119; 41. No Blessing in Manual Work 120; 42. Dislike of Economic Activity due to Self-Sacrifice for Torah 121; 43. Prosperous and Poverty-stricken Students 121; 44. Want and Destitution for the Sake of Learning 122; 45. Martyrdom on the Altar of Torah 124.

## CHAPTER V: The Occupational Structure of the Jews in the Talmudic Age

126

1. Agriculture 126; 2. Building 127; 3. Textile Industry 131; 4. Pottery 134; 5. Glass Industry 136; 6. Metal Industry and Arms Manufacture 140; 7. Marketing and Trading Activities 141; 8. Commercial Ethics — Price Control 144; 9. Private Enterprise — Legal Problems 148; 10. Jewish Occupations in the Roman-Hellenistic Dispota 151.

## CHAPTER VI: Recommended and Undesirable Trades

159

1. "Clean and Easy" Crafts 159; 2. Commerce and Business Education 160; 3. Trading in Sacred Commodities 163; 4. Bookkeeping and Accountancy 164; 5. Agriculture 164; 6. Sheep and Goat Breeding 179; 7. Medicine 181; 8. Morally Undesirable Trades 201; 9. Bloodletting 203; 10. Prison Administration 205; 11. Peddlers 205; 12. Tanners 207; 13. Weavers 209; 14. Artistic Weavers 212; 15. Launderers 214; 16. Transport Workers — Ass-Drivers and Camel-Drivers 220; 17. Herdsmen and Shepherds 224; 18. Storekeepers 231; 19. Sailors 232; 20. Ritual Slaughterers and Butchers 233; 21. Hunters 236; 22. Fishermen 239.

<b>CHAPTER VII: Vocational Training — Masters and Apprentices</b>	<b>241</b>
1. Biblical and Hellenistic Periods 241; 2. Shepherd Apprentices 241; 3. Roman Age 241; 4. Apprenticeship Agreements 242; 5. Unsuitable Applicants for Apprenticeship 243; 6. Duration of Apprenticeship 243; 7. Relationship between Master and Apprentice 244; 8. Refusal to teach a Craft 246.	
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>251</b>
<b>List of Abbreviations</b>	<b>256</b>
<b>General Index</b>	<b>258</b>
<b>Sources</b>	<b>280</b>
Hebrew Bible 280	
Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha 283	
New Testament 284	
Hellenistic-Jewish Literature 284	
Rabbinic Literature 285	

## Preface

Among the many spurious arguments used by modern anti-Semitism, that of Jewish parasitism and unwillingness to work has probably been the most widely disseminated and the most dangerous. The concentration of Jews in commerce, banking and the free professions, and their virtual absence (outside of Israel) from agriculture, mining and heavy industry, tended to lend credibility to the charge that the Jews avoided productive labor. Even Jews were sometimes inclined to believe this unfounded accusation.

The truth of the matter, as students of Jewish history and sociology have long known, is that Judaism, so far from frowning on manual work, encourages it, not only as a necessary means of earning one's livelihood but as a moral value in its own right. In pre-medieval Europe, Jews were well represented in agriculture as well as in many branches of industry. It was Christian intolerance that effectively excluded the Jews from feudal agriculture and the guild-dominated craft trades. Driven to commerce and banking, Jews excelled and prospered because they had to excel and prosper in order to survive. The "miracle" of Jewish survival — albeit in a sadly decimated state — after 1,500 years of almost incessant discrimination and persecution was due to the vital economic functions performed by the Jews. At the time when the Dark Ages were at their darkest, and Europe's economy had sunk to the level of village autarky, adventurous Jewish merchants — the so-called Radanites — pioneered international commerce, extending from France and Spain to India and China.

Driven from these profitable operations by the superior competition of the commercial republics of Italy and the Hanseatic League in Germany, the Jews employed their accumulated capital in banking — which is

what Jewish “usury” really was. The rise of royal power in Western Europe, a necessary beneficial development favoring the creation of the modern national state, can be directly traced to the heavy contributions levied on the Jews for the royal exchequer.

The wealth that Jewish merchants and bankers created for Europe — though kings and emperors squandered much of it on fratricidal and foreign wars, on Crusades and luxurious edifices — was nevertheless the economic basis of Europe’s recovery from the Dark Ages and of the magnificent Renaissance which began in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Much has been written about the Jewish contribution to modern capitalism,<sup>1</sup> and while it must be admitted that there has been some exaggeration of the Jewish role in the rise of capitalism — the impoverished Jews of sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe lacked the capital for the decisive role attributed to them — the Jews did play their part, and played it well. A few financial geniuses, in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, rose from obscurity to dominate the money markets of Europe. But even the Rothschilds, at the height of their power, were able to function in the way they did only because their activities were wholesome and essential. Their wise employment of capital was just as necessary for the unprecedented expansion of nineteenth century trade and industry as the labor of entrepreneurs, scientists, engineers and skilled workmen.

If this study emphasizes the role of manual work in Jewish history, it is thus by no means an essay in apologetics, as if to say, “The Jews are not quite so bad as they are made out to be. They have not always been shady traders, usurers and slum landlords. When they lived under normal political and economic conditions or were given a chance by friendly rulers, they also engaged in agriculture, crafts and all kinds of manual labor”. This was, indeed, the common approach fostered by the inferiority complex of the newly liberated ghetto Jew in the early years of Jewish emancipation. German and Austrian Jews were particularly adept at this kind of indirect self-flagellation, continuing in this vein down to the Hitler period. Granted that the Jewish economic structure was lopsided and unhealthy, there were no grounds for Jews chiding

1 Cf., in particular, Werner Sombart, *The Jews and Modern Capitalism* (Eng. translation, Glencoe, Ill., 1951).

themselves for historic developments for which they were manifestly not responsible. Whatever the faults of individual Jews, as a group the Jews have always played a beneficial role in society, irrespective of their economic activities and occupations.

What, then, is the purpose of this study, if we refuse to make excuses for Jewish preponderance in other spheres? It is, briefly stated, to correct widespread misconceptions concerning Jewish economic activities throughout history; to demonstrate Jewish participation in every facet of economic life open to them; and above all, to emphasize the moral significance attached to labor in biblical and rabbinic literature alike.

In this century, indeed, pioneers of the Israeli labor movement — such as A.D. Gordon, Berl Katzenelson, David Ben-Gurion and many others — created what has rightly been called a “Religion of Labor”, not simply because they hated and despised Jewish “huckstering” and petty trading in the Diaspora, but because they were inspired idealists who correctly realized that without a vast Jewish labor movement the Zionist dream would remain just that — a dream. They and thousands like them — students, engineers, and intellectuals of every hue — sacrificed promising careers in the Diaspora and went to a desert called Palestine to reclaim by their labor the eroded soil of the mountains and malaria-infested swamps for the Jewish people. It was their sweat and blood, freely given to their nation, that created the state of Israel. In the entire history of mankind, there is no parallel to such heroism shouldered not by individuals but by an entire movement. Without the inspiration derived from the ethical sources of the Jewish faith, it is very doubtful whether the *Halutzim*, the pioneers who braved all obstacles to rebuild their country and their people, would have found the moral stamina that sustained them against incredible odds.

This study is an attempt to lay bare and analyze these valuable sources, scattered as they are in the vast sea of biblical and rabbinic literature. While every attempt has been made to follow strict scholarly criteria in evaluating the source material, a work of this type should not be designed for the exclusive use of historians and theologians. It is to be hoped that the presentation of the material in a readable as well as scholarly manner, will make it suitable for interesting reading by intelligent laymen whose standards are sometimes no less exacting than those of professional students of religion or history.

XII *PREFACE*

It is in line with this aim that, with some exceptions, no attempt has been made to describe the technical details of the production of raw materials and manufactured articles in ancient Israel. Not only would such descriptions greatly have expanded the scope and size of this book, but they would have been of little interest to non-specialist general readers who rarely wish to immerse themselves in detailed portrayals of ancient tools and manufacturing processes.

Finally, it is my pleasure to acknowledge with gratitude the assistance generously provided by all those who have helped to make the writing and publication of this work possible. First and foremost, I am indebted to Mr. Leon Lerner, formerly director of the Baltimore branch of the B'nai B'rith Vocational Service, who originally commissioned me to write a pamphlet on the Jewish attitude to labor and craft education. It was this pamphlet, intended primarily for a lecture at an inter-denominational conference in New Orleans, that provided the impetus for additional research in this vast but relatively neglected area of Jewish social and economic history in ancient times. Mr. Lerner encouraged me to continue this research, and he generously provided all the necessary technical assistance.

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Moshe Aberbach

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