

## **Dignity, Devotion and Dilemmas: Judaism and work (KS2, KS3, KS4)**

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**“Should I work occasionally on Shabbat if I am struggling to find a job?”** was a question sent to the Jewish Chronicle’s ‘Rabbi, I Have a Problem’ feature. The Orthodox rabbi’s response concentrated on the importance of staying true to the faith. “If you betray your principles by working on Shabbat, you will lose a part of yourself that will be very hard to reclaim. Be true to yourself and you can never go wrong.”

The Reform rabbi looked more practically at the matter, suggesting that the writer go to employment organisations that support people who keep Shabbat, or which are known for their flexible working conditions. He also alluded to the German Reform Rabbi Leo Baeck’s concept of ‘Sabbath moments,’ not keeping the full Shabbat but elevating certain times, such as making Kiddush on Friday nights.

The area of work and Judaism is positive to explore in the classroom, as it puts the faith into a modern, living context. It also encourages practical peace-making – how can we find a solution to difficult dilemmas? How can people from different beliefs and traditions work happily side by side? How can we offer support to people who hold different beliefs when they face harassment and racism?

Some questions for pupils to discuss in groups could be:

### **I keep the kosher food rules but want to be a chef. What should I do?**

This dilemma was first mentioned to me by an ex-pupil, who had special needs and worried that his job choices would be even more limited if he could not taste certain foods. There are now far more vegan and vegetarian restaurants which would suit an employee who would want to keep away from ‘treif (non-kosher food)’ if they cannot get a job in the kosher sector. Also, I note that a famous TV chef – Tom Kerridge – has a shellfish allergy and lets others from his team taste these dishes. However, the answer is not, as one pupil suggested, just taste a little non-kosher food, as it won’t matter.

### **I am a doctor in A and E and usually don’t work on Saturday as I am Orthodox. However, this week no-one else can work on that day. What should I do?**

A key Jewish concept is ‘pikuach nefesh’ – preservation of life. This should always come first. A Biblical quotation for this would be, ‘Do not stand by idly when a human life is in danger.’ (Leviticus 19:16). There is also the quotation used in Schindler’s List, “Whoever destroys a soul, it is considered as if he destroyed an entire world. And whoever saves a life, it is considered as if he saved an entire world.” Jerusalem Talmud, Sanhedrin 4:1 (22a). Pupils can discuss how the doctor could have ‘Sabbath moments’, for example, saying Shabbat prayers in his break.

### **I wear a kippah and work in a recycling centre. Some of my work mates make fun of me every day. What should I do?**

This is an opportunity to discuss workplace bullying and discrimination. Pupils should not feel it is acceptable for people to experience hatred at work simply because of their beliefs and there are laws (2010 Equalities Act) and procedures to deal with this. Role play could encourage pupils to show how to support someone who is facing anti-Semitic harassment at work.

### **I know someone who is poor. I don’t know whether to give them money or to help them get a job. What**

### **do you think?**

Here, Maimonides' Ladder of Charity could be mentioned (Mishnah Torah 10:7-15). The highest level of charity is giving someone a gift or loan, or helping them into work, so that they don't need to be dependent on charity anymore. The dignity of having a job is very important in Judaism.

### **I am an Orthodox woman who dresses modestly. My new manager at my hairdressers' says I must wear a short skirt at work. What should I do?**

This is indirect discrimination and will be in breach of the 2010 Equalities Act. An employee would have to justify their decision on health and safety grounds, which is obviously not the case in the example. Pupils could discuss 'tzniut' – Jewish customs on modest dress – and how it connects with Muslim women's dress code.

Finally, it is interesting to consider the whole area of Jewish workplace ethics. How should we behave at work? Is it acceptable to gossip about workmates, take home stationery, use work time to sort out our social life, to tell lies in order to sell things? Some key teachings are

- You should keep your distance from a falsehood - Exodus 23:7
- For one positive act leads to another positive act and one transgression leads to another transgression - Ethics of the Fathers 4:2
- What would be hateful to you do not do to others – Hillel, the Babylonian Talmud
- Even a good deed, if done (without permission) in the employer's time is a sin - Path of the Just
- A good name is better than precious oil – Ecclesiastes 7:1

Jewish Principles in the Work-Place, a resource from JABE (Jewish Association for Business Ethics)

[https://www.scojec.org/resources/files/workplace\\_ethics.pdf](https://www.scojec.org/resources/files/workplace_ethics.pdf)

The Employer's Guide to Judaism, a resource from the Board of Deputies of British Jews

<https://www.bod.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Employers-Guide-to-Judaism2.pdf>

<https://www.thejc.com/judaism/rabbi-i-have-a-problem/should-i-work-occasionally-on-shabbat-if-i-am-struggling-to-find-a-job-1.148045>

This resource was written by Hannah Mandelbaum, one of RE:ONLINE's Email a Believer team. If your class would like to ask a Jewish representative any questions about their faith, or to see answers to previously asked questions please visit <http://pof.reonline.org.uk/people-of-faith/judaism/>