

“Vocation of a Business Leader”- Jewish Reflections

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The Vatican’s Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace issued a pamphlet this month on business ethics that most readers have found exceptionally good, addressing the needed morals for our age without becoming mired in explicit partisan politics. Let’s jump right into the content before I give more background. People today speak of the need to give our families good values at home and to teach them well in school, but then spend the majority of our time and energy in social and moral contact with our co-workers during our work days. The document wants us to do the obvious: we should consider our workplace and our careers as just as important as our families and education for our forming our moral lives. Consider these thoughtful passages:

When managed well, businesses actively enhance the dignity of employees and the development of virtues, such as solidarity, practical wisdom, justice, discipline, and many others. While the family is the first school of society, businesses, like many other social institutions, continue to educate people in virtue, especially those young men and women who are emerging from their families and their educational institutions and seeking their own places in society.

Chief among these obstacles at a personal level is a divided life, or what Vatican II described as ‘the split between the faith which many profess and their daily lives.’ The Second Vatican Council saw this split as ‘one of the more serious errors of our age.’

This message was the original message of R.S.R. Hirsch in his Bible commentary in dozens of places. We have to let the eternal values guide our everyday actions, when guiding means does it increase dignity, virtue, and help our education of how to act in that situation. It is not a bifurcated view where once something is permitted then I can become Mr. Hyde for the rest of the time. The extension here is that a well-run business is spoken of like a family. Business educates “people in virtue” therefore it should not stop when people are out of day school. The business does not only exist for profit but is at the heart of a just society. Right now, we imagine that we have justice in our home community and project our own vices onto the outside world.

This document was drafted as a group by a group think. It was issued by Cardinal Turkson, the president of Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, as [“Vocation of a Business Leader.”](#) The document, however, grew out of a seminar sponsored by the John A. Ryan Institute at the University of St. Thomas and the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, held in February 2011, called “The Logic of Gift and the Meaning of Business.” Cardinal Turkson’s training was in Bible and one should see this document as the best practices called by the team of drafters. It was not even published as an essay or article, rather as 30 pages corporate report with an executive summary, bullet points, side bars, and power point type graphics.

Here is another representative paragraph. Here we have some good mussar rather than Pope Benedict’s or Chief Rabbi Sacks fear of relativism and the need for covenant. As you read it, how many of the faults of the first line ring true? How would you give mussar to solve it? What would a service leadership look like? And if we look for moral exemplary, lets not pretend by using Moses as corporate leader or Rabbi Akiva as CEO, who would we use? And finally someone has put entitlement on the table. How many in the community or graduates of our schools have huge amounts of entitlement?

Obstacles to serving the common good come in many forms—lack of rule of law, corruption, tendencies towards greed, poor stewardship of resources—but the most significant for a business leader on a personal level is leading a “divided” life. This split between faith and daily business practice can lead to imbalances and misplaced devotion to worldly success. The alternative path of faith-based “servant leadership” provides business leaders with a larger perspective and helps to balance the demands of the business world with those of ethical social principles...

As a result we might have more private goods but are lacking significantly in common goods. Business leaders increasingly focus on maximising wealth, employees develop attitudes of entitlement, and consumers demand instant gratification at the lowest possible price. As values have become relative and rights more important than duties, the goal of serving the common good is often lost...

The Church calls upon the business leader to receive—humbly acknowledging what God has done for him or her—and to give—entering into communion with others to make the world a better place. Practical wisdom informs his or her approach to business and strengthens the business leader to respond to the world’s challenges not with fear or cynicism,

The interesting moral call is not to give back to your religious community but to give back to your work environment. Here are some of the bullet point goals. It is not free enterprise supply side nor socialist, rather social responsibility- leaving enough room for interpretation.

** producing goods and services that meet genuine human needs while taking responsibility for the social and environmental costs of production, of the supply chain and distribution chain (serving the common good, and watching for opportunities to serve the poor);*

** organising productive and meaningful work recognising the human dignity of employees and their right and duty to flourish in their work, (“work is for man” rather than “man for work”) and*

** structuring workplaces with subsidiarity that designs, equips and trusts employees to do their best work; and using resources wisely to create both profit and well-being, to produce sustainable wealth and to distribute it justly (a just wage for employees, just prices for customers and suppliers, just taxes for the community, and just returns for owners).*

John Allen of NCR notes:

the idea is to be didactic on principle but interrogatory on policy. The church may not have to offer specific answers; perhaps it’s enough to frame the right questions. Perhaps the most striking element of the text, however, comes in its appendix. There one finds a “Discernment Checklist for the Business Leader,” composed of thirty questions which amount to an examination of conscience informed by Catholic social teaching.

Do I provide working conditions which allow my employees appropriate autonomy at each level?

Am I making sure that the company provides safe working conditions, living wages, training, and the opportunity for employees to organize themselves?

I can already see the potential AI-Het sheets for Yom Kippur that can-be based on this. You can read the rest of the [document here](#). After you read it, do you have any thoughts for its application to the Jewish community?