Laws of Shabbat - Class #1

An introduction to the idea of “creative labor activities.”

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"Remember the Sabbath day" – Exodus 20:8.
"Observe the Sabbath day" – Deut. 5:12.
‘Observe’ and ‘Remember’ were said in the same breath.
– Midrash¹

**Resting and Working**

Many people know that Shabbat (Saturday) is the Jewish day of rest. But what does being a ‘day of rest’ actually mean?

Most basically, it means that we take a break from our regular routine. We have more time to spend on the important things: to see family and friends, to eat well, to study Torah, to rejuvenate. Shabbat gives balance and perspective to our lives and to our week. The word ‘Remember’ in the first recital of the Ten Commandments refers to these enjoyments.

Beyond relaxing, being restful also means avoiding work. The Torah defines “work” as any creative labor. If my action results in something new, it is considered ‘creative.’ This is different than the common definition we learn in physics class, which is that work results when a force is applied to an object. The distinction is important: it explains why we are permitted to move a heavy chair from one room to another, but we are not allowed to flick on a light switch.

The Torah, in its second recital of the Ten Commandments, refers to this aspect of Shabbat through the word ‘Observe.’ But it does not tell us what kind of labor to avoid. The specifics – and there are plenty of them – are spelled out in the Mishnah, the Talmud, and later texts.

Shabbat empowers us – not to discard our workaday world – but to retain our ability to be independent from it.

Our first take-home point, then, is that

> **Refraining from creative labor is an essential element of observing Shabbat.**

¹ Mechilta B’Chadash 7
Shabbat and the Tabernacle

God created the world in six days and rested on Shabbat, the seventh day.² Jews are similarly commanded to cease acts of creation (Melachot) on Shabbat, just as God stopped His work.³ This ceasing of "work" acknowledges that God's creation can exist without active human input.

How did our sages derive the many laws of Shabbat? The Oral Law, explained by God to Moses, shows how the verses of Shabbat are juxtaposed to the commandment to build the Mishkan (the Tabernacle).⁴ From this it is understood that the building of the Mishkan could not take place on Shabbat. In other words, the activities that were required for the construction and operation of the Mishkan are considered 'work' for Shabbat purposes.

The Tabernacle represents a microcosm of the universe – a distillation of all the energies, patterns and resources found in the material world. Therefore as the microcosm of creation, the activities performed in constructing the Tabernacle precisely parallel those acts performed by God (so to speak) in creating the world. Thus these are the same activities that we refrain from on Shabbat.⁵

The 39 Melachot

The Mishnah⁶ lists 39 ‘labor categories’ that were performed in connection with the Mishkan. These categories are thus the basis for the laws of avoiding work on Shabbat.

Let’s examine the first labor category, Zoreya⁷ (Planting), in order to see how this works. The classic case of Zoreya is planting seeds in the

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² Genesis 2:2
³ Exodus 20:8-11
⁴ See the first five verses of Exodus, chapter 35.
⁵ Malbim
⁶ Shabbat 7:2.
ground. This activity is included as one of the paradigms of ‘work’ because bread was used in the Mishkan, and of course it is necessary to grow grain in order to have bread. So, if you plant a seed on Shabbat you have engaged in Zoreya (which is not permitted).

How about if you don’t actually plant the seed, but you do something else that will help the seed (or a plant) grow? Say you water the seed, or prune the plant, or similar activities. This isn’t exactly Zoreya, but it is similar. These activities are also forbidden, because they resemble the classic case.

In halachic terminology, the classic case in each category is known as the Av Melacha (literally, the “parent” – i.e. primary – labor). The similar activities are known as toladot (literally, the “offspring” – i.e. secondary; singular is “toladah”). While there are only 39 Av Melachot, there can be many more toladot.

**Torah Law and Rabbinic Law**

Within halacha there are two broad sources of law: the laws of the Torah, and the laws enacted by the sages throughout the generations. Anything based on the text of the Torah, or passed orally from the time of Moses, is considered to be ‘Torah law’ (in Hebrew, *mi’de’oraita*). Anything else is considered ‘rabbinic law’ (in Hebrew, *mi’derabbanan*).

Regarding Shabbat, all of the Avot Melachot (plural for the ‘parent labors’) as well as their Toladot are considered ‘Torah law.’ This is because all of these prohibitions derive from the mitzvah to ‘observe/remember the Shabbat’.

Both sets of laws are binding on us as Jews. However, Torah law does have an extra level of stringency, and we will often distinguish

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7 Pronounced zoh-RAH-ah.
8 Pronounced mee-deh-oh-RIGHT-ah.
9 Pronounced mee-deh-rah-bah-NAHN.
between Torah law and rabbinic law when it comes to permitting certain activities on Shabbat.

We will also see throughout this course that there are further Shabbat restrictions that the Sages put in place. These are known as gezerot and takanot (loosely, ‘decrees’ and ‘enactments’). In their great wisdom, the Sages enacted these when they felt it necessary to distance us from potential violations of Shabbat,\(^{10}\) or to strengthen the spirit of Shabbat.

Shabbat is an encompassing experience, one in which we are completely immersed for 24 hours. When approaching the laws of Shabbat, many people are surprised by how they regulate every aspect of our behavior – even our speech. In practice, this takes some getting used to. But with a proper appreciation of where each of these laws derive from – and why – the observance of Shabbat can become the undisputed high point of one’s week.

**The Big Picture**

In this lesson, we have

- defined what ‘work’ means with regard to Shabbat
- understood that we derive the specific types of work from the Mishkan
- explained the system of the 39 labor categories
- distinguished between a ‘parent labor’ and an ‘offspring’
- understood that the halachot of Shabbat involve both Torah law and rabbinic law

Quite a lot of ideas! But these concepts are the building blocks for everything else we will do in this course.

\(^{10}\) See Leviticus 18:30
With this background, we are ready to move ahead to the concept of ‘thoughtful labor’. In order to be considered ‘work’ for Shabbat purposes, an action needs to be done with intention. We will learn the several aspects of this idea in our next lesson.

**For Further Reading**

There are a number of excellent articles on Aish.com that discuss some of the basic ideas and ‘philosophy’ behind Shabbat. Search the website for these titles:

- Tabernacle of Time
- Rest and Relaxation
- Heaven on Earth

**About the Sources**

This lesson provides a general overview of the topic covered. It is intended to provide halachic principles and some examples. There are many nuances to halacha, and in actual practice one should consult with a local rabbi.

This course follows these main source materials:

- **The 39 Melochos** by Rabbi Dovid Ribiat (Feldheim)

- **Principles of Hilchos Shabbos** by Rabbi Daniel Schloss, based on the lectures of Rabbi Yitzchak Berkovits, given at the Aish HaTorah yeshiva in Jerusalem.

There are a number of other helpful studies of the labor categories, including:
• *Shemirath Shabbath* by Rabbi Yehoshua Neuwirth (English edition: Feldheim) (referred to in this course by the name of the Hebrew edition, *Shemirat Shabbat K’Hilchato*)

• *Halachos of Shabbos* by Rabbi Shimon Eider (Feldheim)

• *The Shabbos Kitchen* by Rabbi Simcha Bunim Cohen (ArtScroll)

For those readers who wish to reference more primary sources, we provide footnotes to this important work throughout our lessons. The citations refer to a specific volume and a specific section within the volume.

• *Shulchan Aruch* (literally: "Set Table") is the main authoritative source of Jewish law and custom, and hence often simply referred to as the Code of Jewish Law. Written by Rabbi Yosef Karo in the 16th century, it is divided into four main sections; the laws of Shabbat are covered in the section 'Orach Chaim' (abbreviated OC).

• Many subsequent commentaries have been written on the *Shulchan Aruch*. Two of the most authoritative are the 17th century Taz ("Turei Zahav") by Rabbi Dovid HaLevi, and Shach ("Sifsei Cohen") by Rabbi Shabsai HaKohen.

• *Mishnah Berurah* is a 20th century Ashkenazi 'update' of the *Shulchan Aruch* 'Orach Chaim' section, including the laws of Shabbat. It was authored by Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, better known as the Chafetz Chaim, and includes his additional notes entitled Biur Halachah and Sha’ar Hatziyun. *Mishnah Berurah* is also available in English translation (Feldheim).

• *Shu”t Igros Moshe* is an 8-volume work written by Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, America’s pre-eminent authority on Jewish law in the 20th century.