LAW OF SHABBAT - CLASS #32

Actions that cause bleeding or kills a living thing.

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**Introduction**

The melacha of Shochait\(^1\) shares a name with a traditional Jewish profession – that of the ritual slaughterer. In the context of Shabbat, though, ‘Shochait’ has a broader meaning: it refers to any action that involves killing a living thing.\(^2\)

This labor category is the next logical one in the ‘Order of Hides’ we are now studying. Once you’ve captured an animal, you’ll need to kill it if you want to use it for food or some other purpose.

Although most of us don’t live in farming communities, Shochait is still relevant to our Shabbat. Among the common activities it includes are:

- killing household pests such as roaches, ants, mice, and the like – whether by physical means or by using insecticides or poisons\(^3\)
- killing mosquitoes or other insects that are disturbing you outdoors

What about not actually killing an animal, but placing it in a situation where it will die, such as fishing? This is also prohibited. A common scenario is that you find an ant in your sink. In such a case, you could not flush it down the drain.\(^4\)

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\(^1\) Pronounced show-CHAITE.
\(^2\) Rambam (Shabbat 11:1); *Principles of Hilchos Shabbos*, ‘Shochet’.
\(^3\) Rambam (Shabbat 11:1); 39 Melochos, p. 887. However, we are allowed to kill lice and nits (Orach Chaim 316:9).
\(^4\) Mishnah Berurah 316:42. Even if you don’t have intention to “kill” the ant, but merely remove it, the act of flushing it down the drain will definitely kill it, and thus this is a prohibited act of Psik Reisha.
Dealing with Dangerous Creatures

As we mentioned briefly in the previous lesson, there are exceptions to the basic rule of Shochait: when faced with a dangerous (or potentially dangerous) creature, you may be able to kill it.

We may divide this into four categories, organized by descending levels of danger:⁵

**(1) Life-threatening danger** - The most straightforward scenario is if you find yourself near something that could cause life-threatening danger. Examples would include a scorpion, a poisonous snake, a poisonous spider, and a rabid animal.

If possible, the halacha prefers that we ask a non-Jewish person to kill the animal. If this is not possible, then we may kill it ourselves.

The halacha notes that you don’t have to wait until the creature is actively trying to harm you. The fact that it has the potential to harm is enough to override the prohibition of Shochait.

**(2) Great pain** - What about where the creature isn’t normally life-threatening, but you are especially sensitive to it and it could cause you great pain? For example, say you are allergic to bee stings. Here, the preference is to trap the insect. If you can’t trap it without killing it, then you should seek a non-Jewish person to help you out; if this also isn’t possible, you can kill it while walking about in a normal manner (as will be explained later).⁶

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⁵ Orach Chaim 316:10; 39 Melochos, p. 890-891.
⁶ Orach Chaim 316:10, with Mishnah Berurah 27; Orach Chaim 328:12, with Mishnah Berurah 37; Shemirat Shabbat K’Hilchato 25:2.
In the case of someone who is allergic to bee stings to the point of a life-threatening danger, then the bee could be killed outright, as in category (1) above.

(3) Painful - What if the creature can cause harm which is not life-threatening, but is serious and/or painful? An example would be a bee or wasp sting (for someone who is not allergic), or a non-poisonous snake.\(^7\) Here, if the creature is not chasing after us, we are only allowed only to trap it. If it is coming after us, we may kill it.\(^8\)

(4) Annoying - Bites from a fly or mosquito are not considered sufficiently painful to warrant trapping these creatures.\(^9\)

In all of these cases, when we speak of killing an animal, the halacha prefers that we do it in a non-obvious way (unless, of course, the nature of the danger is such that the animal must be killed as quickly and directly as possible).\(^10\)

What does this mean, and why is it necessary?

The Sages were concerned about someone killing an insect (or other thing) in a visible way, such as by emphatically stamping on it or swatting it with a heavy object. They felt that if this behavior was seen by people who didn’t know the halachic specifics, they might conclude that it is okay in general to kill animals on Shabbat. Therefore, the Sages required us to be more discreet: For example, you might walk over to the area where the insect is and step on it, although to the

\(^7\) This means that a creature which causes mere discomfort, like a mosquito, cannot be killed, unless there is reason to suspect that it is carrying a more serious disease (e.g., malaria or West Nile).

\(^8\) Again, if we can’t find a non-Jewish person to get rid of the animal for us.

\(^9\) *Shemirat Shabbat K’Hilchato* 25:3. This means that such creatures cannot be killed, unless there is reason to suspect that it is carrying a more serious disease (e.g., malaria or West Nile).

\(^10\) Orach Chaim 316:10.
innocent observer, it seems that you are merely walking about. The Talmud calls this approach *dorso l’fi tumo* – literally, ‘you step on the creature innocently’.\textsuperscript{11}

To summarize – we aren’t allowed to kill anything on Shabbat unless there is a real possibility that it can cause harm to someone. Indeed, the halacha requires us to respect the lives of animals and other creatures all the time, not just on Shabbat.\textsuperscript{12}

### Causing Bleeding

The melacha of Shochait also encompasses other activities.

We are not allowed to cause someone to bleed, or to create a bruise. Both of these actions release blood,\textsuperscript{13} which is considered the ‘life’ of a living being. Thus this is treated as a form of Shochait, even though the person (or animal) remains alive after being wounded.\textsuperscript{14}

Some examples of this aspect of Shochait are:

- using a toothpick, if you know your gums are sensitive and are likely to bleed
- removing a loose tooth
- scratching a sore, if it is likely to bleed

\textsuperscript{11} Talmud – Shabbat 121b; 39 *Melochos*, p. 891-92. Whether this approach is possible will depend on the situation.

\textsuperscript{12} Talmud - Baba Metzia 32b; Even Ha'ezer 5:14.

\textsuperscript{13} With a bruise, the blood remains underneath the skin.

\textsuperscript{14} Orach Chaim 316:8, with Mishnah Berurah 30 and Biur Halacha s.v. ‘V’HaChovel’; Mishnah Berurah 328:147; 39 *Melochos*, p. 893-94.
Of course, as with any health issue, if someone has a serious problem, then Shabbat restrictions may be overridden. We discussed these issues in detail in lesson #17; it’s best to consult a rabbi for specific advice.

The Next Group of Melachot

The concepts we’ve been addressing – capturing an animal and killing it – are relatively straightforward (even though the details can get complex). However, the next five melachot are more technical, and reflect actions that most of us probably haven’t done. So a short overview is in order.15

How are skins or hides processed into a finished product like leather?

First, the hides must be physically removed from the animal. This is the labor category known as Mafshit. Then, the hides must be preserved so they don’t spoil. This process, called tanning, is another melacha, Me’abeid. The hide is then smoothed over to remove dirt, hair, and other unwanted stuff, an action known as Memachaik.

These activities result in a smooth product, ready to be made into whatever the craftsman wishes. Before cutting the hide into the proper pieces, the artisan will score some lines to show where the cutting will take place. He or she will then follow these lines and actually cut up the material. Each of these steps – the scoring (Mesarteit) and the cutting (Mechataich) – are separate melachot.

We will now learn more about this set of labor categories.

15 Rambam (Shabbat 11:5); Rambam (Peirush HaMishnah - Shabbat 73a); Jerusalem Talmud - Shabbat 7:2); 39 Melochos, pp. 899, 901, 913, and 931.