

The Essence of Shabbat

The number of new Jewish laws, or *halachot*, introduced in the weekly portion of Mishpatim is quite extensive, which makes a potential repetition of a previous commandment stand out. The day of Shabbat resurfaces after introducing the commandment of Shmita, with a further exhortation (Shemot 23:10-12):

“Six years you may sow your land and gather in its produce. But in the seventh [year] you shall release it and abandon it; the poor of your people shall eat [it], and what they leave over, the beasts of the field shall eat. So shall you do to your vineyard [and] to your olive tree[s]. Six days you may do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest [tishbot], in order that your ox and your donkey shall rest, and your maidservant's son and the stranger shall be refreshed.”

What additional information is being presented here regarding Shabbat?

There are many different answers offered; the focus here will be on two that are developed within various Midrashim. The first explanation involves an odd line of thinking. A person might consider the prohibition of *melacha*, or creative act of labor on Shabbat, to only be applicable at the time one would actually be involved in such an action. During the time when one would **not** be engaged in *melacha*, the prohibition would no longer be an issue.

Why would someone think this? The prohibitions would seem to be tied to the fabric of the day, rather than only appearing when faced with the action at hand.

The second explanation is similarly problematic. The prior verses announce the occurrence of the Shmita year. For six years, the Jewish people were able to farm the Land of Israel. However, once the seventh year occurred, they were to be prohibited in planting anything new, allowing the land to lie fallow. The terminology used (later in the Torah) for the cessation of working the land is the same as for the seventh day of every week: “Shabbat”. The verse then that follows the warning of Shmita redirects to the weekly Shabbat. In looking at the series of verses as being linked, Rashi notes that one should not conflate the two “Shabbatot”. During the experiential seventh year of Shmita, one might consider the obligation to adhere to the weekly Shabbat as being unnecessary. As Rashi puts it, since the entire year is one of “Shabbat”, one might not keep the Shabbat of Creation.

While the assumption in this instance is slightly more reasonable, it is still remarkable to consider someone might come to this conclusion. It is true the two legal institutions share the same terminology; does this therefore imply a superfluity of one with the other?

The atmosphere of prohibition pervades Shabbat, a day where the performance of any physically creative action is problematic. On one level Shabbat would appear to be a day of privation. Removing oneself from the world of *melacha* is the objective of the sanctified day. If

Shabbat were “merely” this idea, then one could understand how *melacha* only presents itself during the time when the potential for creative labor exists. The privation is empirical, expressing itself when faced with the opposing action. Shabbat becomes a vacuum of sorts, similar to Yom Kippur. On that day, the individual is deprived of the world of the instinctual, and the subsequent state allows for the immersion in repentance.

Shabbat, though, is not quite like this. Rather than view Shabbat as a state of withdrawal, it could be that Shabbat is a positive state of existence. It is the ideal realm a person should be in, where one’s mind is able to focus solely on God. Much of weekly life draws a person away from this utopian condition. Of course, this does not mean that one should shun working. Rather, one should consider the value of the unique Shabbat experience and look forward to “creating” this paradigmatic state.

Sforno echoes this point in his commentary on the verse. He notes that the addition of “*tishbot*” in the verse widens the scope of that which one must avoid. This means the area of prohibition is no longer just specific creative actions. An example is the limitation in what one may speak about on Shabbat, where weekly matters (such as business) are off the table. Introducing any significant aspect of the week into Shabbat is, in a sense, a corrupter of the environment sought out.

The other interpretation guides the reader into a different realm concerning Shabbat. When looking at the list of *melachot* forbidden on Shabbat, one notices how many of them are focused on the agricultural. Activities related to and including planting and harvesting are prohibited on Shabbat. Similarly, many such actions are forbidden to be done during the Shmita year. With the significant overlap in the various prohibited actions, why the need to celebrate the weekly Shabbat?

Rashi emphasizes how this is the Shabbat of Creation. While the legal and technical structures of the two acts of “*melacha*” might share much in common, their objectives are quite different. One of the primary objectives of allowing the land to “rest” involves internalizing the reality of humanity being dependent existences. The farmer labors daily, engaged intimately in the cycle of planting and harvesting. With all the work put in, it becomes natural to see one as being in control of the process. Of course, not everything (such as the weather) is within the farmer’s purview. However, to easily put one’s security in God and achieve a state of mind of complete dependence on Him, is a challenge. The year of Shmita affords the Jewish people just such an opportunity.

The weekly Shabbat, as noted above, is the entrance of the individual into an ideal state of existence. In such a state, the person now reflects on God as Creator, achieving a greater

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understanding of Him. The abstention from *melacha* allows for an individual to truly elevate on this unique day.

Thus, while the planting on Shabbat may appear no different than the planting done during Shmita, the objective of each is completely different. In a sense, the act of *melacha* can take on two completely separate identities, yet be the same physical action.

On one level, it is obvious how Shabbat is a particular day, evidenced by the multitude of restrictions levied upon each and every Jew at its onset. Yet this additional verse in the Torah helps to lay out the transcendental experience Shabbat must be to each and everyone. When we leave the sole mindset of prohibition and turn our focus to God, the true potential of Shabbat is actualized.