



From Creation to the Temple: Where Do Our Shabbat Prohibitions Come From?

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The Halakhah in the Parashah

I've always enjoyed being a bit of a mythbuster when it comes to teaching Jewish texts and law. For those of you who have learned with me virtually or in person, you might recognize this from topics such as "afikoman" (nope, was not originally designed so that matzah would be dessert); "the story of the miracle of Hannukah" (nope, was not designed to downplay the military victory); "mah nishtanah" (nope, it's not even questions, and the "avadim hayyinu" is certainly not an answer). I'll admit, I enjoy this role, even though at times it can feel a bit "grinch-like."

This week's parashah brings an opportunity for a little bit of myth busting, particularly the notion that the thirty-nine forbidden Shabbat labors were derived from the labors performed in the Temple. This week's parashah again notes that building the Temple does not supersede Shabbat. In the midst of several parshiyot concerned with the building of the Mishkan, the Tabernacle, Moses again reminds the people that "On six days work may be done, but on the seventh day you shall have a Sabbath of complete rest, holy to יהוה; whoever does any work on it shall be put to death. You shall kindle no fire throughout your settlements on the Sabbath day" (Exodus 35:3). An even longer interruption was found in parshat Ki Tisa (31:13-17). It seems quite clear that the interpolation of Shabbat laws into these passages was intentionally designed to send the message that the building of the Tabernacle is critical, but Shabbat takes precedence.

The laws of building the Tabernacle are occasionally referenced in Mishnah and Tosefta Shabbat. For instance, in Mishnah Shabbat 12:3 R. Yosi derives that the prohibition of writing is violated not only by writing letters but also by writing marks, for in the Tabernacle they would put marks on planks of wood to know which goes with which (the Tabernacle, brought to you by Ikea). In Mishnah Shabbat 11:2, a detail concerning the prohibition of passing objects from one domain to another is derived from the way the Levites would pass planks in the public domain.

However, the notion that the famous list of 39 forbidden labors is derived from the building of the Tabernacle is problematic. This myth is already found in the Babylonian Talmud (Shabbat 49a; 73b and elsewhere) but the fact that it is early does not mean that it is an accurate assessment of the origins and nature of this list.

Mishnah Shabbat 7:2 lists 39 labors that are prohibited on Shabbat. The first section of this list consists of all actions needed to create bread: "sowing, plowing, reaping, binding sheaves, threshing, winnowing, selecting, grinding, sifting, kneading, baking." The next section lists what is needed to make clothing: "shearing wool, bleaching, hackling, dyeing, spinning, weaving, the making of two loops, weaving two threads, dividing two threads, tying and untying, sewing two stitches, tearing in order to sew two stitches." The third section lists the work needed to create clothing: "capturing a deer,

slaughtering, or flaying, or salting it, curing its hide, scraping it [of its hair], cutting it up, writing two letters, erasing in order to write two letters [over the erasure].” The fourth section consists of the labors required for building houses: “building, tearing down, extinguishing, kindling, striking with a hammer.” The mishnah concludes with carrying from one domain to another, a prohibition that probably originates in the story of the gathering of the Manna in Exodus 16.

Bread, clothing, books and buildings—these come to define the creativity that is not supposed to occur on Shabbat. The list is inspired by the first place where Shabbat appears in the Torah—the beginning of Genesis 2. God has finished creating the world, but human creation is still left to be done. Humans and not animals (for the most part, there are a few minor exceptions) manipulate their environment in order to make food, and the most amazing culinary invention is clearly bread. Humans, and not animals, make clothing. Humans, and not animals, make books and humans, and not animals, make homes in which to spend their lives. God did not create a world in which there was bread, clothing, books or homes. But God did create a world with human beings. And our human creativity must end on Shabbat. This, and not the building of the Tabernacle, is the source of the 39 prohibited labors.

There are other types of prohibitions on Shabbat, namely the mandate to rest; these come from elsewhere in the Torah. Likewise in this week and last week’s portion, Moses’ interpolation of Shabbat warnings teaches less about the details of the laws as about their spirit. Our creativity does not supersede the mandate to rest, even if the goal of such creation is an elevated, holy one. Our mandate to rest is nearly absolute and is only suspended in the face of worship of God; it is not suspended in the face of human achievement. Sacrifices were offered on Shabbat in the Temple—worship of God occurs every day. But sacrifices are not a symbol of human achievement. Building a place for God on earth is, despite its lofty nature, still a symbol of human achievement.

With this in mind, one of the primary questions one needs to ask in shaping one’s Shabbat practice is whether or not a particular action is a creative act, one that shapes the environment and is, even in some attenuated form, a means by which humans transform the world. If it is, then no matter how lofty the goal, it’s an act that should not be performed on Shabbat.
