

The mitzvot of Shabbat

Several of the Torah sources which deal with Shabbat mention various mitzvot that must be fulfilled on this day.

The prohibition of performing labor

The central mitzva of Shabbat is the prohibition of performing labor. This prohibition is mentioned, for example, in the Ten Commandments of *Parashat Yitro* (*Shemot* 20:9–10):

Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God, on it **you shall not do any manner of work**, you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your manservant, nor your maidservant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates.

A similar command appears in the corresponding Ten Commandments in *Parashat Vaethanan* (*Devarim* 5:13–14). The prohibition of performing labor is also mentioned in *Parashat Emor* (“You shall do no manner of work” [*Vayikra* 23:3]), and elsewhere.

The verse quoted above implies that the prohibition against performing labor applies not only to the individual, but also to other people and animals in the household: “You, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your manservant, nor your maidservant, nor your cattle.” There are other *halakhot* of Shabbat that are likewise derived from here:

The Shabbat rest of one’s children

1. **The Shabbat rest of one’s children:** Just as people are commanded to refrain from performing labor on Shabbat, so too

they are obligated to ensure that their minor children do not perform labor **for them**, which the Sages derive from the phrase “you, nor your son, nor your daughter” (*Mekhilta, Yitro, Mesekhta DeBeHodesh* 7, cited by Rashi on this verse):

“You, nor your son, nor your daughter”; these are minors. Or perhaps these are adults. You say [in response]: But [adult Jews] are already warned [about labor on Shabbat]. Thus, what is [the meaning when] the verse states: “You, nor your son, nor your daughter”? These are minors.

This prohibition applies even to a minor who has not yet reached the age from which one must educate a child about mitzva observance (*Mishna Berura* 334:64), including one who performs the labor without being prompted; they know that the parent would desire with the result and is performing the labor for the parent (*Mishna Berura* 334:65, based on the *Gemara* [121a], and *Rashi ad loc.*).² When a minor performs labor unprompted,

2. It can be inferred from statements of *Rashi* (*Shemot* 20:10), the *Rashba* (153b, s.v. *keshehi*), and *Rabbi Yehonatan of Lunel* (on the *mishna*, 121a) among others, that in such a case the parent violates the commandment by Torah law that one’s child must rest, and the *Mishna Berura* concurs with this ruling (334:65, and in *Shaar HaTziyun* 54). By contrast, the *Rid* (in his halakhic rulings, 153a, s.v. *ibaya lehu*) maintains that the parent transgresses a prohibition by Torah law only by explicitly instructing the child to perform the labor. But if the child acts unprompted for the parent’s sake, this is a prohibition by rabbinic law. The *Beur Halakha* writes similarly (266:6, s.v. *haga vedavka*), in connection to the opinion of the *Rema* (*ad loc.*).

According to both opinions, it is clear that **one may not ask children to perform labor on Shabbat**. This is a widespread misconception, as people are unaware that a child may not perform labor for them on Shabbat. The Torah expressly states: “You shall not do any manner of work, you, nor your son, nor your daughter,” from which it is derived that there is a **prohibition by Torah law** against commanding a minor to perform labor on one’s behalf. As stated, according to many *Rishonim*, the prohibition applies even if the minor acts unprompted, if they know that the parent would be pleased with the outcome. In addition, there is a general prohibition by Torah law not to feed a minor prohibited foods or to command a minor to violate prohibitions (*Yevamot*

Using children in order to perform labor on Shabbat

this does not violate the parent's obligation to ensure that the child rest on Shabbat. But if the child has reached an age of understanding, the parent must prevent them from performing labor on Shabbat as part of the obligation to educate one's children (*Shulhan Arukh* 343:1).

The Shabbat rest of
one's slaves

2. **The Shabbat rest of one's slaves:** The Torah applies the prohibition of labor to "your manservant, nor your maidservant," from which it is derived that even slaves who have undergone a partial conversion and are obligated in mitzvot to the same extent as Jewish women are prohibited from performing labor on Shabbat.

114a; *Shulhan Arukh* 343:1; *Mishna Berura* 4). Therefore, it is certainly not permitted to instruct a minor to perform a labor that is prohibited by Torah law on Shabbat.

As for an act of labor that is prohibited by rabbinic law, this issue is subject to a dispute among the *Rishonim*. The **Rashba** (*Yevamot* 114a; s.v. *umihu mashma*) permits one to tell a minor to perform a labor prohibited by rabbinic law **if it is for the minor's benefit**, but the **Rambam** (*Sefer Kedusha, Hilkhhot Maakhalot Assurot* 17:27) writes that this is prohibited. The *Shulhan Arukh* (343:1) rules in accordance with the opinion of the Rambam, without reservation, but the *Aharonim* accept the ruling of the Rashba in certain cases (see *Beur Halakha* ad loc., s.v. *midivrei Soferim*, based on the **Responsa of Rabbi Akiva Eiger**, 15). In any case, this leniency applies only if the minor performs the act **for their own benefit**, in which case others may derive benefit from it (see *Beur Halakha* ad loc.). One may not instruct a minor to perform a labor for the benefit of adults, even if the labor is prohibited only by rabbinic law.

In contrast to the above, it is permitted to bring a very young child, who is not yet of understanding, to a refrigerator, knowing that they will open it unprompted, even if this will cause a light to turn on. Likewise, one may bring such a child close to a switch, knowing that they will play with it and turn on a light. In such cases, the child is not performing the labor for the adult but for their own enjoyment. Consequently, there is no prohibition here with regard to the child's Shabbat rest. Likewise, a parent is not obligated to separate their child from the act for educational reasons, as the child does not yet understand and therefore the mitzva of education does not yet apply. Nevertheless, this is relevant only for a very young child, who does not comprehend the meaning of Shabbat, and only one who acts unprompted. In all cases, it is prohibited to instruct the child to perform the action.

Elsewhere the Torah adds: “That your manservant and your maid-servant may rest as well as you” (*Devarim* 5:143), and “the son of your handmaid, and the stranger, may be refreshed” (*Shemot* 23:12). The Sages derive from these verses (e.g., *Yevamot* 48b) that not only are the slaves themselves prohibited from performing labor, but their master is also obligated to prevent them from performing labor, even for themselves. Furthermore, a master must prevent even slaves who have not converted and who are full-fledged gentiles from performing labor on the master’s behalf (see *Shulḥan Arukh* 304:1 and *Mishna Berura* 1).

3. **The Shabbat rest of one’s animals, and directing an animal:** The prohibition of labor is also directed to “your cattle.” This is the source of the Sages’ statement that one may not perform work **together with an animal**, e.g., if one leads it in the public domain bearing a load (*Shabbat* 153b). This prohibition, which is called directing, applies even to an animal **which does not belong to the person** according to the majority of *Rishonim* (see Ramban, Rashba, Ritva, and Ran ad loc.; the *Mishna Berura* rules accordingly 266:7–8). It is further stated in the Torah: “That your ox and your donkey may have rest” (*Shemot* 23:12), from which the Sages derive that one is obligated to make sure that an animal **in one’s possession** does not perform labor on Shabbat even of **its own accord** (see the Gemara [51b]; Rashi and *Tosafot* ad loc., s.v. *bameh behema*; *Mishna Berura* 305:1).³

The Shabbat rest of one’s animals, and directing an animal

As stated, the Torah commands in general terms: “You shall not do any manner of work,” without detailing the prohibited labors on Shabbat. It will be shown below that the Sages derive the activities

Labors that are explicitly mentioned in the Torah

3. It is permitted to let the animal perform actions for its own pleasure, as the Sages expound in the *Mekhilta* (*Mishpatim, Mesekhta DeKaspa*, 20): “That your ox and your donkey may have rest”: The verse added for [the animal] one [more] rest, teaching that it may uproot [produce] from the ground and eat. You say that [the verse] serves to teach this, or perhaps it serves only [to teach that] one must tie [the animal] up in the house? You say [in response, that] this is not rest [for the animal] but suffering.

that are defined as “labors” from the construction of the Tabernacle. Having said that, the Torah does mention on various occasions specific actions that are prohibited on Shabbat. The Sages seek to explain why those particular labors are explicitly spelled out in the Torah:

1. “You shall kindle no fire throughout your habitations upon the Sabbath day” (*Shemot* 35:3). The *tanna'im* (*Shabbat* 70a) disagree as to why the Torah mentions the labor of Igniting. According to Rabbi Yossi, it is derived from here that Igniting is less severe than other prohibited labors, in that it is not punishable by excision or by stoning, but only like a standard prohibition. By contrast, Rabbi Natan maintains that Igniting does not differ from any of the other labors, and the Torah mentions it only as a paradigm to teach that one who performs several acts of labor concurrently is liable for each and every one of them.⁴
2. “Six days you shall work, but on the seventh day you shall rest; **in plowing time and in harvest you shall rest**” (*Shemot* 34:21). With regard to this verse as well, the *tanna'im* disagree (*Shevi'it* 1:4; *Makkot* 8b) why plowing and harvesting are explicitly mentioned. According to Rabbi Yishmael, it is derived from here that the reaping of the barley crop for the *omer* overrides Shabbat (see ad loc.). Rabbi Akiva maintains that as far as Shabbat itself is concerned there is no reason to mention plowing time and harvest, and therefore he interprets this clause as referring to the Sabbatical Year rather than Shabbat (see ad loc.).⁵

4. The commentaries on the Torah (e.g., **Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, Ramban**) suggest another explanation: Since the Torah permits labors of food preparation on a Festival, and Igniting is one of the central labors in the preparation of food, it is necessary for the Torah to stress that such acts of food preparation are not permitted on Shabbat.

5. Here too, the commentaries on the Torah (e.g., **Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, Ramban**) suggest another interpretation: The Torah specifically mentions plowing and harvesting because these are especially important labors, as people's lives depend on them. With this, the Torah teaches that even such critical labors are prohibited, and all the more so other labors.