

Primary (*avot*) and subcategories (*toladot*) of labors

As stated above, the mishna lists thirty-nine “**primary labors.**” The term “primary” implies that the labors which appear in the list are fundamental activities, from which are deduced other, similar labors, which are also prohibited. Those labors are called “**subcategories.**” For example, Sowing is a primary category of labor (*av melakha*). Watering a plant is somewhat similar to sowing, as it too enhances growth. Although this action is not part of the primary category of Sowing, nevertheless it is a subcategory (*tolada*) of Sowing, and it is also prohibited by Torah law.

The subcategories branch out from the primary categories

The **Gemara** in *Bava Kamma* (2a) explains that in practice there is virtually no difference between primary categories and subcategories of labor:

The *halakha* of a subcategory is the same as that of the primary category

It is no different [if one unwittingly performed labor that is] a primary category, [for which he is liable to bring] a sin-offering (*ḥatat*), and it is no different [if one unwittingly performed labor that is] a subcategory, [for which he is also liable to bring] a sin-offering. Likewise, it is no different [if one intentionally performed labor that is] a primary category, [for which he is liable to be executed by] stoning, and it is no different [if one intentionally performed labor that is] a subcategory, [for which he is also liable to be executed by] stoning. And [if so,] what difference is there between a primary category and a subcategory? The difference is that if one unwittingly performs together two labors [classified as different] primary categories, or, alternatively, [if he unwittingly performs] together two [labors classified as] subcategories [of two different primary categories], he is liable [to bring a sin-offering] for each and every [labor]; whereas [if one unwittingly] performs a primary category and its [own] subcategory, he is liable to bring only one [sin-offering].

In other words, there is no difference between one who performed labor from a primary category on Shabbat and one who

performed labor from a subcategory; each is liable to execution by stoning if they acted intentionally, or to bring a sin-offering if they did so unwittingly. The classifications of primary categories and subcategories are relevant only if one unwittingly performs several labors together: One who violates two separate primary categories, or two subcategories of different primary categories, is liable to bring two sin-offerings. One who performed a primary category and a subcategory of that labor (or two subcategories of the same primary category) is liable to bring only one sin-offering.

A primary category is a significant labor in the construction of the Tabernacle

The **Gemara** (ad loc.) proceeds to explain the criteria according to which some labors are classified as primary categories while others are subcategories:

That which was significant in the Tabernacle, [the Sages] characterized as a primary category; that which was not significant in the Tabernacle, they characterized as a subcategory.

In other words, an action that was an important labor in the construction of the Tabernacle is classified as a primary category (*av*), whereas an action like the primary categories that was not a significant labor in the construction of the Tabernacle (or which was not performed in the Tabernacle at all) is classified as a subcategory (*tolada*).³⁶

A subcategory: An action somewhat similar to a primary category

Of course, an action is considered a subcategory only if it resem-

36. According to this formulation, there are activities that were performed in the Tabernacle and yet are not considered primary categories of labor, but only subcategories, because they were not important stages in the process of the construction of the Tabernacle. However, there are other versions of the text of the Gemara, according to which all activities carried out in the Tabernacle were of importance, and all are classified as primary categories (see *Tosafot*, 96b, s.v. *ulerabbi*, and **Ramban** and **Rashba** ad loc.). The *Rishonim* suggest a third possibility, that the guiding principle is importance: An important labor is a primary category, even if it was not performed in the Tabernacle, whereas an unimportant labor is a subcategory, even if it was performed in the Tabernacle (see *Tosafot*, *Bava Kamma* 2a, s.v. *hakhi garsinan*, and *Piskei Tosafot* ad loc., 3). According to this opinion, the primary

bles one of the activities classified as a primary category. That said, when two actions are extremely similar to each other, they are both defined as examples of the same primary category. It is only when the comparison between the two acts is incomplete that the one that was performed in the Tabernacle is classified as a primary category, and the other as a subcategory. As the **Rambam** writes (7:2–6):

All these labors, **and all of the same type**, are called **primary categories of labor**. What is the same type? Plowing and digging, or making a ditch, these are [one] primary category, as each of them involves digging the ground, and they are a single type [of action]. Likewise, one who sows seeds, or plants trees, or bends [the branch of a vine or a tree into the ground so that it takes root while still attached to the trunk], or grafts, or prunes, all these are [one] primary category, and they are a single type [of action], as each is intended to cause growth. Similarly, if one reaps produce or legumes, or harvests grapes, dates, olives, or figs, all these are one primary category, as each is intended to uproot something from its place of growth. The same applies to the other primary categories.

A **subcategory** is a labor that is **similar to one of these primary categories**. How so? If one chops vegetables little by little in order to cook them, he is liable, since this labor is a subcategory of Grinding, as one who grinds takes a single body and divides it into many bodies. [With regard to] anyone who does something similar, this is a subcategory of Grinding... And likewise, one who takes milk and puts rennet in it in order for it to harden and become cheese is liable for a subcategory of Selecting, as he separated whey from the milk. And one who made it into cheese is liable for Building, since [with regard to] anyone who gathers parts together and pastes them together until they form one body,

categories of labor are derived by logic, not from the Tabernacle, similar to the opinion cited above, note 23.

this is similar to building. And similarly, each and every one of these primary categories has subcategories, as explained above.

The Rambam distinguishes between two actions that are considered “the same type,” both of which are classified as one primary category, and two actions that are comparable but are not “the same type,” in which case one is a primary category while the other is a subcategory. The *Maggid Mishne* explains the Rambam accordingly (ad loc., 4):

Know that our master’s intent is that any labor which is **fully similar** to a primary category, differing from it only **in the quality of the act or the type of the item acted upon**, is likewise a primary category. But an act of labor that is somewhat similar to it is called a subcategory. An example of this [principle] is reaping produce and harvesting grapes, which are fully similar aside from the items acted upon, and the same applies to sowing and planting, as well as plowing and digging, which are qualitatively different but are [otherwise] fully comparable. With regard to them, the Sages said [that] they are all one labor... but when they are only **slightly similar**, such as chopping fruit, which is similar to grinding only in that many bodies are formed from one body, as grinding transforms the initial item entirely but chopping does not do so, [in such a case, chopping] is a subcategory.

Reaping produce and harvesting grapes are both the same primary category of labor (despite the fact that reaping, not harvesting, was performed in the Tabernacle), as these are in effect identical actions, which differ only in the identity of the plant that is collected. Likewise, sowing and planting are both considered the same primary category (even though sowing, not planting, was performed in the Tabernacle), as in both instances one places an item into the ground so that it will grow. It makes no difference that in the first case one inserts seed into the soil and in the other case a seedling. By contrast, finely chopping vegetables is not included in the primary category of Grinding, as there is a significant difference between them: Grinding

changes the item entirely, turning it into powder, whereas fine chopping does not change the nature of the item but merely divides it into pieces. Nevertheless, since the two actions are after all similar, as both serve to divide a single body into smaller parts, finely chopping is a subcategory of Grinding.³⁷

Of course, it is not always easy to determine when two activities are considered “fully similar” and when they are only “slightly similar.” Consequently, there are sometimes disputes between the *Rishonim* with regard to certain actions, whether they are classified as primary categories of labor or subcategories.³⁸

One can thereby understand that the *halakhot* of Shabbat follow a pattern of general principles and details: The Torah prohibits thirty-nine fundamental acts of labor. After clarifying the basic characteristics of each and every primary labor (the manner of its performance,

The importance of learning with the aid of general principles

37. Yet, the **Rambam** (ad loc.) adds that if one files metal in order to use the powder that is produced, this is a subcategory of Grinding. Why is it not actual Grinding? After all, the metal has changed completely and has become powder. Perhaps the answer is that although this action is similar to Grinding with regard to the manner of the **action and its result**, it differs from it with regard to **its purpose and goal**: Grinding spices (or wheat) is performed for cooking (or baking), whereas filing metal is not done for the purpose of cooking. This issue will be discussed at greater length in the chapter that addresses the labor of Grinding (pp. 959–962); see also the next note.

38. The *Tiferet Yisrael* (at the beginning of his introduction to tractate *Shabbat*, *Kalkalat Shabbat*) attempts to provide a more precise definition of when an action is considered a primary category and when it is a subcategory. In his opinion, any action that is similar to a primary category both with regard to the **manner** and the **purpose** of the activity, or an action which is similar to the primary category with regard to the purpose although not the manner but which was performed upon the same body to which that purpose applies, is classified as a primary category. By contrast, when the act is not similar to the primary category with regard to its purpose, or if it is performed on a different body, it is considered a subcategory. For example, Watering is a subcategory of Sowing, not a primary category, despite the fact that both activities are directed at growth. This is because the act of watering is performed with water, not on the plant itself. See ad loc. for additional examples; see also previous note.

its aim, etc.), one can deduce which other activities are considered subcategories of that labor and are also prohibited by Torah law.

Actually, this is a good approach to the study of *halakha* in general. The Torah and the *halakha* cannot refer in detail to every potential case that may arise, and likewise it cannot be expected of people that they will remember by heart the *halakha* in every possible case. Rather, one should study thoroughly the halakhic principles in various areas, and when encountering a practical case one will be able to implement the general principles and thereby determine the *halakha* in that instance. The Midrash states (*Shemot Rabba*, 41) with regard to Moshe:

And did Moshe learn the Torah in its entirety? [But] it states in the Torah: “Its measure is longer than the earth, and broader than the sea” (*Iyov* 11:9). Rather, God taught Moshe the principles [*kelalim*]. This is [alluded to in the verse]: “When He had made an end of speaking [*kekhaloto*] with him” (*Shemot* 31:18).

Another midrash (*Midrash Tanna'im*, *Devarim* 32:2; see also *Sifrei*, *Haazinu* 306) similarly advises each person who learns Torah:

You should gather in the Torah as general principles, because if you gather them as details they will weary you and you will be unable to cope with them. This is comparable to a person who goes to Caesarea, who requires one hundred or two hundred *zuz* for expenses. If he takes the [money in the form of] small change, [the coins] will weary him and he will be unable to cope with them. Rather, he combines them into *sela'im* [large coins], and he exchanges them and spends wherever he needs.

This midrash compares learning Torah to someone who needs to travel to a distant place with a large sum of money. It is hard to remember the details of *halakha* for each and every case. Therefore, it is more effective to become highly familiar with the general principles of *halakha* in the various fields, and when encountering a particular case one can apply the rules and determine the *halakha* in that specific instance.