

How did the Sages arrive at thirty-nine primary categories of labor?

The **Gemara** (49b) cites an amoraic dispute with regard to the source of the thirty-nine primary categories of labor:

Various allusions
to the number
thirty-nine

That which we learned in the mishna: The primary categories of labor are forty-less-one; to what does this number correspond? Rabbi Ḥanina bar Ḥama said to them: They correspond to the labors in the Tabernacle. Rabbi Yonatan, son of Rabbi Elazar, said to them that so said Rabbi Shimon, son of Rabbi Yossi ben Lakonya: They correspond to the instances of the words “labor,” “his labor,” and “the labor of” that appear in the Torah, forty-less-one times.

According to Rabbi Ḥanina bar Ḥama, it seems that there is no source that there are specifically thirty-nine labors. Rather, the Sages simply added up the important labors performed in the Tabernacle and found that there were thirty-nine of them.³⁹ By contrast, Rabbi Shimon, son of Rabbi Yossi ben Lakonya, maintains that there is an actual source which teaches that there are thirty-nine such labors, as the term “labor,” in its various forms, appears thirty-nine times in the Torah. Several of the *Rishonim* (e.g., *Tosafot*, s.v. *keneged*; Ritva, s.v. *keneged*) contend that even according to Rabbi Shimon, son of Rabbi Yossi ben Lakonya, the primary categories are derived from the Tabernacle. His point is that whereas the labors performed in the Tabernacle can be counted in various different ways,⁴⁰ the Sages categorized them in such a manner that they would number thirty-nine.⁴¹

39. Some understand the opinion of Rabbi Ḥanina bar Ḥama differently, as explained below, note 46.

40. Thus for example, Winnowing, Selecting, and Sifting are listed as three separate labors, despite the fact that they serve an identical purpose and could have been combined into a single labor (see below, pp. 767–771, in the chapter on Selecting).

41. Some maintain that Rabbi Shimon, son of Rabbi Yossi ben Lakonya,

The opinion of Rabbi Shimon, son of Rabbi Yossi ben Lakonya, is hard to understand, as the term “labor” in its various guises appears in the Torah sixty-five times, not thirty-nine. The *Rishonim* explain that with regard to this issue not all mentions of “labor” are included. Those *Rishonim* attempt, with some difficulty, to find the criteria for which instances of “labor” count and which do not (see, e.g., Rabbeinu Ḥananel and Ramban ad loc.; Raavan, 350; *Tosafot Yom Tov* 7:2).⁴²

The **Yerushalmi** (7:2) suggests a different source for the number of thirty-nine primary categories:

Rabbi Yossi, son of Rabbi Bun, [said] in the name of Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahmani: They correspond to forty-less-one instances that it is written with regard to the Tabernacle “service” and “labor.”

Unfortunately, this derivation is also problematic, as the number of appearances of “service” and “labor,” in connection to the work of the Tabernacle does not reach thirty-nine.⁴³ The **Bavli** and the **Yerushalmi** mention other possible sources for the number thirty-nine, although these are certainly mere allusions.⁴⁴

rejects the derivation of the labors from the Tabernacle, as in his opinion the Sages used logical reasoning to deduce the thirty-nine prohibited labors (see note 23 above).

42. See also an article by **Rav Yoel Ben Nun**, “Shabbat: The Labor of Man and the Labor of the Tabernacle,” *Meshalev* (periodical of Yeshivat HaKibbutz HaDati, Ein Tzurim) 38, p. 21.

43. The *Torah Shelema* (vol. 23, pp. 117–18) cites an opinion that if one adds to these mentions of the instances in connection to the labor of the Tabernacle where the word *maaseh* [the work of] is employed (e.g., “the work of the skillful workman,” “the work of the weaver”), one arrives at thirty-nine, and perhaps this is the meaning of the statement of the Yerushalmi (but see ad loc. in parentheses, where it is noted that even this number is imprecise).

44. For example, the **Gemara** (70a) expounds the phrase “These are [*eleh*] the matters” (“These are the matters which the Lord has commanded, that you should do them. Six days shall work be done, but on the seventh day there shall be to you a holy day” [*Shemot* 35:1–2]). The numerical value of

Both the Bavli and Yerushalmi indicate that there is a tradition that the number of labors is thirty-nine, and the different expositions are attempts to anchor this number in the verses.

A firmer anchor for the number thirty-nine appears in the *Midrash HaGadol*. At the start of *Parashat Vayak'hel* (*Shemot* 35:10–19), immediately after Moshe mentions the prohibition of labor on Shabbat, he commands the Israelites to prepare various items required for the Tabernacle. Adding up the items the Israelites are commanded to prepare in these verses, one arrives at **thirty-nine items**.⁴⁵

Corresponding to the thirty-nine items in the work of the Tabernacle

And let every wise-hearted man among you come, and make all that the Lord has commanded: (1) the Tabernacle, (2) its tent, (3) and its covering, (4) its clasps, (5) and its boards, (6) its bars, (7) its pillars, (8) and its sockets; (9) the Ark, (10) and its staves, (11) the ark cover, (12) and the veil of the screen; (13) the Table, (14) and its staves, (15) and all its vessels, (16) and the showbread; (17) and the Candelabrum for the light, (18) and its vessels, (19) and its lamps, (20) and the oil for the light; (21) and the Altar of incense, (22) and its staves, (23) and the anointing oil, (24) and the sweet incense, (25) and the screen for the door, at the door of the Tabernacle; (26) the Altar of burnt-offering, (27) with its grating of brass, (28) its staves, (29) and all its vessels,

the word *eleh* is 36; “matters,” a plural term, is at least two, and “the matters” adds another one, which makes a total of 39. The aforementioned passage of the *Yerushalmi* states that the term *eleh* by itself alludes to 39, as the letters *heh* and *het* are interchangeable, which would mean that the numerical value of this word is 39.

45. This is on condition that the last verse is interpreted as saying that the “plaited garments” are the priestly vestments, and the verse proceeds to explain that such clothing is divided into two types: the garments of Aharon and the garments of his sons. According to this explanation, this entire verse can be counted as a single item, and thus there are thirty-nine. Yet, many of the commentaries (e.g., **Rashi**, **Ibn Ezra**, **Rashbam**) maintain that the “plaited garments” are not the priestly vestments but the fabrics with which the sacred vessels were covered during journeys. If so, there are more than thirty-nine items in this passage.

(30) the laver (31) and its base; (32) the hangings of the court, (33) its pillars, (34) and their sockets, (35) and the screen for the gate of the court; (36) the pins of the Tabernacle, (37) and the pins of the court, (38) and their cords; (39) the plaited garments, for ministering in the holy place, the holy garments for Aharon the priest, and the garments of his sons, to minister.

Accordingly, the *Midrash HaGadol* (ad loc.) finds a link between these verses and the thirty-nine primary categories of prohibited labor. It enumerates the various items included in this command, before declaring:

These are thirty-nine commands, corresponding to thirty-nine primary categories of labor that are prohibited on Shabbat.⁴⁶

It can be further added⁴⁷ that Moshe's statement with regard to Shabbat: "These are **the matters which the Lord has commanded**, that you should do them" (*Shemot* 35:1), corresponds to his statement several verses later in connection to the Tabernacle: "This is **the matter which the Lord commanded** . . . And let every wise-hearted man among you come, and make all **that the Lord has commanded**" (*Shemot* 35:4, 10). If so, it can be suggested that just as "this is the matter which the Lord commanded" includes thirty-nine items, so too "the matters which the Lord has commanded" incorporates thirty-nine prohibited labors on Shabbat. Perhaps this parallelism led the Sages to enumerate the labors in such a manner that they would reach thirty-nine.

46. Rav Menachem Mendel Kasher (*Torah Shelema*, vol. 23, pp. 118–19) cites this midrash and suggests that it should be interpreted in a similar manner to the aforementioned statement of Rabbi Ḥanina bar Ḥama, that the number thirty-nine "correspond[s] to the labors in the Tabernacle." See also the article of Rav Yoel Ben Nun (note 42 above), pp. 13–24, who offers further support in the direction of the *Midrash HaGadol*, as he shows that in the parallel list in *Parashat Pekudei* (39:33–41) the Torah details thirty-nine labors.

47. Based on the aforementioned article of Rav Yoel Ben Nun.

Shabbat and the Tabernacle

Shabbat and the Tabernacle are juxtaposed in the Torah, including an explicit warning that even when building the Tabernacle the people must be careful to observe Shabbat. The Sages derive from here that labors performed in the Tabernacle are prohibited on Shabbat. The Tabernacle is considered a continuation of the creation of the world, as it is the creation of a spiritual world. God rested on the seventh day from creating the material world, and correspondingly, we rest on the seventh day from the labors performed in the creation of the spiritual world, the Tabernacle.

