

6. Internalizing that we are flesh and blood

What is a person's task in the world? **Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik** (*The Lonely Man of Faith*, pp. 9–12) describes one of a person's primary tasks: "Fill the earth and subdue it:"

Our job: To conquer the world!

Adam the first wants to be human... and to be human means to live with dignity... Man of old who could not fight disease and succumbed in multitudes to yellow fever or any other plague with degrading helplessness could not lay claim to dignity. Only the man who builds hospitals, discovers therapeutic techniques, and saves lives is blessed with dignity. Man of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries who needed several days to travel from Boston to New York was less dignified than modern man who attempts to conquer space... In doing all this, Adam the first is trying to carry out the mandate entrusted to him by his Maker who, at dawn of the sixth mysterious day of creation, addressed Himself to man and summoned him to "fill the earth and subdue it."

Rav Soloveitchik beautifully describes the importance of modern industrial and scientific development. People in modern times,

who know how to build hospitals, save lives, and travel to outer space, thereby fulfill, in a wonderful manner, the task given to us by God: “Fill the earth and subdue it” (*Bereshit* 1:28). We have achieved tremendous mastery of the world: “You have made him but little lower than the angels” (*Tehillim* 8:6).

A person declares:
I need rest

This role is important and inspiring, but it has a drawback. One might come to think that they have divine power, that they themselves are gods. Perhaps this is why we are commanded to stop and rest on one day a week. One understands and even declares on Shabbat: I am not a god! I am not capable of working constantly, without a break. I am human, and I need rest.

In this way, we also internalize another point. One can feel active during the week, one can be creative, and can accomplish. One’s power can lead to a feeling that “my power and the might of my hand made me these riches” (*Devarim* 8:17). Shabbat emphasizes that it is all from God. Halting our activities demonstrates that we are but flesh and blood, and it is God, the Creator of the universe, who stands behind everything.

7. Cessation of activity

The prohibited labors do not make sense if the point is relaxation

A review of the prohibited labors would seem to contradict the ideas we have put forth above. There are people who feel very relaxed specifically when they are writing, or at least are anxious when they cannot write something down that they do not want to forget. Turning on lights or heating up food in a microwave do not take much effort, yet these and many other similar activities are prohibited on Shabbat.

There are activities that are prohibited on Shabbat despite the fact that these prohibitions actually cause us to work harder. An example of this is the labor of Selecting. The *Shulhan Arukh* (319:2) rules:

One who selects waste from food even with one hand is liable.

The **Rema** adds:

Even if there is more food, and it is more burdensome to select the food, nonetheless one should not select the waste.

For example, if there is a pile of rice and in the middle there is a spoiled kernel or some other unwanted item, one would have to select the good kernels, which can be quite difficult, or find another solution, such as removing the waste together with some of the food (see pp. 833–840). In any event, one will have to work harder in order to achieve the desired result; the easiest solution, which is simply to remove the spoiled kernel, is exactly what the Torah prohibits. The Torah prohibits separating waste material from food under all circumstances, and permits selecting only in a very specific manner (removing the food from the waste, by hand, for immediate use). This proves that **the guiding principle is not the difficulty of the action but some other idea.**

When one closely examines the Torah's commands regarding Shabbat, one can see that the Torah does not focus primarily on **rest and relaxation** [*menuḥa*] but on a different term, *shevita*. For example, in *Parashat Beshalah* (*Shemot* 16:25–30) the Torah describes the manna that fell in the wilderness for the Jewish people. The manna did not fall on Shabbat, and a double portion fell on Friday:

The point of Shabbat: Cessation of activity

Moshe said: Eat it today for today is Shabbat of the Lord; today you will not find it in the field. Six days you shall gather it and on the seventh day, it is Shabbat, there will be none in it... See that the Lord has given you the Shabbat; therefore, He gives you on the sixth day bread for two days. Remain each in his place, no man shall leave his place on the seventh day. **The people rested** [*vayishbetu*] **on the seventh day.**

The Torah here speaks about *shevita*. What is *shevita*? In order to understand this term, we will examine another passage where it appears. When Noah leaves the ark, he sacrifices an offering to God. In response, God promises not to bring another flood upon the world (*Bereshit* 8:21–22):

The Lord smelled the pleasing aroma and the Lord said in His heart: I will not continue to curse the ground anymore on account of man, as the inclination of man's heart is evil from his

youth and I will not continue to smite every living being anymore, as I did. As long as the earth endures, planting and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night **shall not cease** [*yishbotu*].

In this context, the meaning of the word *yishbotu*, a form of the word *shevita*, is clear. During the flood, the sun was not visible, causing a blurring of the seasons of the year and even night and day. From here on, this will no longer be the case; the systems of the natural world “shall not cease” to function.

The meaning of the term *shevita* is cessation. When the Torah discusses Shabbat, it does not speak about rest and relaxation but about *shevita*, meaning a **cessation of activity**. All week long, people are active and creative, but on Shabbat they must desist from their creative activities.

In fact, the very name of Shabbat is derived from the term *shevita*, cessation. Even if one of the elements of Shabbat is rest, as discussed above, its main goal is not relaxation but the cessation of creative activity. Therefore, the activities that the Torah prohibits are not those that are the most difficult and exhausting but rather the activities that enable a person to create or to bring about constructive change.

The question of whether Shabbat is primarily about rest or cessation of creative activity may depend on the meanings of Shabbat. As stated above, the Torah itself provides two primary reasons for Shabbat, i.e., to commemorate the creation of the world and the exodus from Egypt. The **commemoration of the exodus from Egypt** connects more to the idea of **rest**. As slaves in Egypt the Israelites did not have a chance to rest, and resting on Shabbat is an expression of the concept that as free people we can rest from the toil of our weekday activities. This rest expresses our freedom, as well as our responsibilities toward God, who granted us the ability to rest by redeeming us from slavery. The connection between rest and commemorating the exodus from Egypt is indicated by the verses in *Parashat Va'ethanan*: “That your manservant and maidservant may rest [*yanuah*] as well as you. You shall remember that you were a slave

Rest or cessation of activity: It depends on the meanings of Shabbat

in the land of Egypt” (*Devarim* 5:14–15). The meanings of Shabbat pertaining to family and social equality also relate to rest.

By contrast, the **commemoration of the creation of the world** correlates more closely to rest in the sense of **cessation** from creative activity than to relaxation. God does not need rest, and His cessation from creation on the seventh day certainly did not stem from the need to relax. In fact, the verses that describe the completion of the creation of the world (*Bereshit* 2:1–3) speak of *shevita*, cessation, rather than *menuḥa*, rest:

The heavens and the earth and their entire host were completed. God completed on the seventh day His works that He had made; **He rested** [*vayishbot*] **on the seventh day** from all His works that He had made. God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it; because on it He **rested** [*shavat*] from all His works that God created to make.

This is how the **Hizkuni** explains the term in his commentary to that verse:

Because on it He rested [*shavat*] – this is not a term denoting relaxation [*menuḥa*], as it is said of God that “He neither tires nor wearies” (*Yeshayahu* 40:28), and He did not exert Himself in creating His world. Rather, this is a term denoting cessation, as in “the manna ceased [*vayishbot*]” (*Yehoshua* 5:12), “the three men ceased [*vayishbetu*]” (*Iyov* 32:1), and “day and night shall not cease [*yishbotu*]” (*Bereshit* 8:22), meaning: **On it He ceased performing labor.**

If the goal of Shabbat is to emulate God’s behavior on the seventh day of creation, and to thereby declare our belief in God’s creation of the world, it is reasonable to conclude that the main objective of Shabbat is not rest and relaxation but rather the cessation of creative activity. The verses in *Parashat Ki Tisa* (*Shemot* 31:16–17) also indicate that the commemoration of the creation of the world is related to cessation from creative activity: “The children of Israel

shall observe the Sabbath... For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth and on the seventh day, **He rested** [*shavat*] and was invigorated.¹⁵

By Torah law the primary goal is cessation of creative activity; by rabbinic law, one should also rest

The Torah emphasizes the concept of cessation of creative activity to a greater degree than it emphasizes the concept of rest. Even when the Torah mentions rest, it discusses *shevita* for the sake of *menuḥa*: “And on the seventh day you shall rest [*tishbot*] so that your ox and your donkey will rest [*yanuah*]” (*Shemot* 23:12). “But the seventh

15. In *Parashat Yitro* (*Shemot* 20:10) the Torah explains the mitzva of Shabbat as commemorating that God **rested**, from the term *menuḥa*, on the seventh day of creation: “Because in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea and everything that is in them and **He rested** [*vayanaḥ*] **on the seventh day.**” This can be explained in two ways:

- a. There are those who maintain that the term *menuḥa* is also used in the Torah in the sense of cessation. Thus, for example, **Rav Se’adya Gaon** (*Emunot VeDeot*, *Maamar* 2, 12) explains that the term *vayanaḥ* in that verse does not refer to rest from toil and exertion but rather to the cessation of activity: “Even though it states *vayanaḥ*, it means nothing more than cessation from creation.” The **Rambam** (*Guide of the Perplexed* 1:67) explains the verse similarly and cites proof from another verse (I *Shmuel* 25:9): “David’s young men came, and they spoke to Naval according to all those words in the name of David, and **waited** [*vayanuhu*].” According to the Rambam, the term *vayanuhu* in that verse means that they stopped talking. Nonetheless, presumably Rav Se’adya Gaon and the Rambam would concede that in the verse: “That your manservant and maidservant may rest [*yanuah*],” the term *yanuah* indicates rest and relaxation, as this term can mean either cessation or rest. This is indicated from the Rambam’s statement that will be cited below.
- b. It is possible that the Torah here describes God’s activities by employing terminology relevant to people. This is a style employed in numerous verses, such as in the verse: “And He was saddened in His heart” (*Bereshit* 6:6). This is the explanation of **Rashi** (*Shemot*, ad loc., citing *Mekhilta*, *Yitro* 7), who adds that God employed the term *menuḥa* in order “to teach by *a fortiori* inference that people, whose labor requires toil and exertion, should rest on Shabbat.” According to this approach, although God ceased from activity rather than resting, it is derived from here that one should rest. This is in contrast to what was stated above that commemorating creation leads to the concept of cessation of creative activity rather than resting.

day is the **Shabbat** of the Lord your God . . . so that your manservant and maidservant may rest [*yanuah*] as well as you” (*Devarim* 5:13). As stated above, the word Shabbat itself is derived from the term *shevita*, and the nature of the acts prohibited on Shabbat are more closely associated with a cessation of creative activity than with ensuring rest and relaxation.

It is possible that the Sages expanded the prohibitions of Shabbat in order to ensure that it is a day of rest in addition to a day of cessation of creative activity. The **Rambam** (24:12) explains why the Sages prohibited moving *muktze* (set aside) items on Shabbat. He writes:

The Sages prohibited moving some items on Shabbat as one does on a weekday. Why did they institute this prohibition? They said: If the prophets commanded that the manner in which one walks on Shabbat should not be like the manner in which he walks on a weekday, and his conversation on Shabbat should not be like his conversation on a weekday . . . how much more so that his moving of items on Shabbat should not be like his moving of items on a weekday, so that [Shabbat] should not be like a weekday in his eyes, and he will come to lift . . . utensils from corner to corner or from room to room, or to store away stones and the like, as he is unoccupied and sitting in his house and he will look for something to occupy himself with, and it will turn out that he did not rest, **and he will nullify the reason stated in the Torah, “so that . . . will rest [*yanuah*].”**

According to the Rambam, one reason why the Sages instituted the prohibition of *muktze* is due to the concern that an individual might work hard on Shabbat without violating any technical prohibition. They will not kindle a fire, write, or perform any labor that is prohibited by Torah law; but will move various items from one place to another, organize their store, and will work the whole day. This individual would have observed the obligation of *shevita*, as they will not have performed any creative activity, but will not have observed the concept of *menuha*, which is also mentioned in the Torah. The

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Sages instituted some prohibitions in order to ensure that one will actually rest, and not just cease creative activities.¹⁶