

8. You shall be like God

Why is it prohibited for a gentile to observe Shabbat?

The **Gemara in *Sanhedrin*** (58b) states:

A non-Jew who observed Shabbat is subject to the death penalty, as it is stated: “Day and night shall not cease” (*Bereshit* 8:22).

A non-Jew who observed Shabbat is subject to the death penalty. This does not mean that he is executed; he is subject only to death at the hands of heaven. Yet, it is clearly prohibited for a non-Jew to observe Shabbat. Consequently, a non-Jew in the process of

16. The **Ramban** (*Vayikra* 23:24) writes, citing the *Mekhilta*, that one who works hard all Shabbat without performing any act defined as a prohibited labor has not just violated a rabbinic prohibition; they have **negated a positive mitzva by Torah law**. The Torah refers to Shabbat and Festivals as days of rest [*shabbaton*], indicating that they must be days of rest rather than toil: “We are commanded by the Torah to have a day of rest on a Festival, even from acts that are not a prohibited labor. One may not exert himself all day to measure the grain, weigh the produce and gifts, fill barrels of wine, move utensils and stones from house to house and place to place . . . and the market will be full of all [types of] commercial activity and the store will be open and the storekeeper giving credit and the moneychangers at their tables with gold coins in front of them, and the laborers will get up early to go to their work and hire themselves out as on a weekday for these activities and the like, and these Festivals will have been abrogated, and even the Shabbat itself, as all of these activities do not involve any prohibited labor. Therefore, the Torah said *shabbaton*, that it should be a day of rest and relaxation, not a day of exertion.” According to this opinion, **individual acts** of moving *muktze* items or of commercial activity are prohibited by rabbinic law, but one who engages in these activities **all Shabbat** and acts as though it is a weekday nullifies the biblical mitzva of *shabbaton* even if they do not perform an act of prohibited labor. Other *Rishonim* agree, including the **Ritva** (*Rosh HaShana* 32b). The *Maggid Mishne* (21:1) suggests understanding the **Rambam** (loc cit.) in this manner as well, as explained above (p. 12, note 9). In the **Responsa *Hatam Sofer*** (5:195) it is claimed that this is the plain meaning of the verses in the book of *Nehemia* (13:15–22).

converting to Judaism must make sure to violate Shabbat, at least in some small way, until the actual conversion.

What is wrong with a non-Jew observing Shabbat? The Gemara provides proof to the prohibition from the verse: “Day and night shall not cease.” The world must continuously function, and therefore, a non-Jew who stops working is subject to the death penalty.

But this is still difficult to understand. Non-Jews are also permitted to take a break from their work! Additionally, many non-Jews observe a sabbath on Friday or Sunday; are they in violation of the verse: “Day and night shall not cease”?

The answer is that there is a **fundamental difference between our Shabbat and the secular Sunday**. Sunday is a day of rest [*menuḥa*], which is legitimate and even desirable. Our Shabbat is a day of *shevita*. **A non-Jew is permitted to rest, but not to have *shevita*!**

A gentile may have rest [*menuḥa*], but not cessation of creative activity [*shevita*]

To clarify: As indicated above, the most essential point of Shabbat is not the *menuḥa* but the *shevita*. There are activities that do not require any exertion but are nonetheless prohibited on Shabbat. One of the most obvious examples is the prohibition of **Carrying an item from one domain to another**. Walking out into the public domain with an item in one’s pocket violates a prohibited labor by Torah law. A non-Jew is not permitted to observe Shabbat at the level of avoiding even these types of prohibitions.

At a basic level, the world is supposed to keep functioning and producing continually. “Day and night, shall not cease.” There are times when a person must rest, but the rest is meant to provide the strength to keep working. The goal of the world is creation, productivity.

The world is supposed to work continuously

God rested on Shabbat. This does not mean physical rest but rather a cessation of creative activity in the physical world, a withdrawal from this world and connection to a higher world, the World to Come.

This cessation of activity is not meant for the creatures who live in this world. The physical world continues to function. On Shabbat, only God rested, while the natural world continued to function as normal.

A person who ceases his creative activity commits a double transgression:

1. Undermining the foundation of the natural world, which is supposed to continuously function in a creative manner.
2. Taking the crown of the King. Cessation of creative activity on Shabbat is specifically for God, and when human beings act in this manner they act as though they are able to use something that is special for the king.

Shevita on Shabbat:
Being similar to
God

God gave the Jewish people a gift. He instructed them to cease creative activity on Shabbat, to **detach themselves, for one day a week, from the world of creation.** This is not a detachment for the sake of rest, but rather a total detachment that allows one to be similar to God. This is not rest resulting from physical weakness but rather the opposite, a cessation of activity that allows one **to be like God.** The Torah says about Shabbat: “And the seventh day is **Shabbat for the Lord your God**” (*Shemot* 20:9). Shabbat belongs to God. Shabbat is beyond the reality of this world. We, as human beings, are granted a great privilege in the ability to connect to God’s Shabbat.¹⁷

Shabbat: A
microcosm of the
World to Come

The Sages state in several places that Shabbat is a microcosm of the World to Come. For example, the **Gemara in *Berakhot* (57b)** states:

Shabbat is one-sixtieth of the World to Come.

On Shabbat we detach ourselves from the world of creative activity and connect to a more elevated world. We have the unique opportunity to spend a day in a reality that is beyond this world, a reality that is a microcosm of the World to Come. On Shabbat we draw from that elevated world, to come close to God and to be like Him.

17. I heard this point, and several others that will be cited below, from my father-in-law, **HaRav Eliyahu Blumenzweig.**

Resting on Shabbat is an expression of the completeness of the world. This is cited in the *She'iltot of Rav Aḥai Gaon* (*She'ilta* 1):

An expression of the completeness of the world

When the Holy One, blessed be He, created the world, He created it in six days and rested on Shabbat, and blessed it and sanctified it, like a person who builds a house, when he fixes it and completes his work he celebrates for one day . . . The Holy One, blessed be He, said to us: Rest on Shabbat, just as I rested.

God does not need to rest. His rest is an expression of **completeness, of having completed the world**, and the joy over what has been finished, just as a person is happy when he finishes building his house. We are privileged to be similar to God in participating in the rest that expresses completion, and which expresses the connection to a higher world, and to God Himself.

Shabbat is a reality of **sanctity**: “God blessed the seventh day, **and sanctified it**” (*Bereshit* 2:3). This is the deep meaning of the Torah when it refers to Shabbat as a covenant and a sign (*Shemot* 31:16–17):

An expression of the unique connection between the Jewish people and God

The children of Israel shall observe the Shabbat, to render the Shabbat for their generations **an eternal covenant**. Between Me and the children of Israel, **it is a sign forever**. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth and on the seventh day, He rested and was invigorated.

What are the sign and covenant between God and the Jewish people? Why are they expressed specifically through Shabbat? The answer is that Shabbat contains a Godly element that is not relevant to the earthly reality. Observance of Shabbat demonstrates the connection between the Jewish people and God, the **sanctification** of the Jewish people and their similarity to God. This sanctification points to the unique connection of the Jewish people with God, with an upper, elevated world.

A midrash (*Devarim Rabba* 1) describes Shabbat not just as an opportunity for the Jewish people to imitate God, but as creating a connection between God and the Jewish people, to the point that if

a non-Jew observes Shabbat it is comparable to a person intruding upon a meeting between husband and wife, or king and queen:

Why did you say that a gentile who observes Shabbat is subject to the death penalty? Rabbi Ḥiya bar Abba said that Rabbi Yoḥanan said: In the way of the world, if a king and queen are sitting and conversing with each other, isn't one who comes and inserts himself between them subject to the death penalty? So is Shabbat for the Jewish people and the Holy One, blessed be He, as it is stated: "Between Me and the children of Israel." Consequently, any gentile who comes and inserts himself between them before accepting upon himself circumcision is subject to the death penalty.

Rest per se is not a Jewish concept, but it stems from weakness; a person is not God and is therefore in need of periodic rest. **For the Jewish people, Shabbat does not stem from human weakness. On the contrary, Shabbat stems from a lofty reality, from being similar to God. On Shabbat one ceases creative activity in the physical world and engages in the spiritual, connecting to a splendid, elevated spiritual world.**

The Jewish Shabbat has an elevated, Godly source, to the point that it is almost impossible to understand how it can be relevant for human beings.

Delight in God

This understanding of the nature of Shabbat is compatible with ideas expressed in works of Kabbalah and *Ḥasidut* concerning Shabbat. *Netivot Shalom* (vol. 2, preface, chap. 2), for example, describes Shabbat as a time of deep connection between God and the Jewish people, when one can feel the closeness of God, in fulfillment of the verse: "Then you will delight in the Lord" (*Yeshayahu* 58:14):

The time of seclusion of the king and queen, the Holy One, blessed be He, and the Jewish people, is Shabbat, which is the power of the day of Shabbat, the day of attachment. This is the inner purpose of Shabbat, to feel the closeness of God and the pleasure of attachment [to Him], as the prophet stated: "If you restrain your

walking because of Shabbat . . . then you will delight in the Lord,” and as stated in *Mesilat Yescharim* . . . that this is the most sublime pleasure, in the sense of: “But as for me, the nearness of God is good for me” (*Tehillim* 73:28).

The prohibitions of carrying and the Shabbat limit: Withdraw from the public sphere!

Tractate *Shabbat* begins with the prohibition of Carrying items from one domain to another. As cited above (p. 59), the Torah’s first command concerning Shabbat, “no man shall leave his place on the seventh day” (*Shemot* 16:29), is also a reference to either carrying from one domain to another or traveling beyond the Shabbat limit. These appear to be minor, relatively insignificant infractions. The *Rishonim* refer to carrying from one domain to another as a low-level prohibited labor (see, e.g., *Tosafot, Shabbat* 2a, s.v. *pashat*). Yet, these prohibitions have great symbolic significance. The essence of Shabbat is to **disconnect from the public sphere**. This is not limited to abstaining from prohibited labor and other creative activity; the goal is to **fully disconnect from the mundane world in order to connect to an elevated world, a world without creative activity, which belongs to God**.

Disconnecting
from the public
sphere

The Torah states: “No man shall leave **his place**.” Aside from the formal prohibition of the Shabbat limit or of carrying from one domain to another, it may be understood that the Torah here is expressing a fundamental point. One’s place does not refer just to the physical point in space where one happens to be located; it refers to a person’s essence, the inner self. On Shabbat one is supposed to withdraw into “his place,” meaning the inner self.

Building one’s
inner world

During the week we must work, produce, and create. These activities enable us to **build and create the outer world**, but at times it prevents us from **contemplating and building our inner world**.

Activity in the physical world, which can lead one to think that the world functions on its own, cause God’s very existence to be

Revealing God’s
presence in our
midst

GATEWAY TO SHABBAT

concealed. The kabbalists and hasidic masters taught that before creation God would traverse the empty world in a revealed fashion. Once He began to create, the creation itself **hid** God's presence in the world. On Shabbat we strip away the physical, superficial reality and thereby facilitate the **perception of God's glory in our midst**.¹⁸

On Shabbat we disconnect from the world of action and focus on our internal world,¹⁹ facilitating a connection to God. The lack of creative activity, the cessation of creating ourselves, allows us to connect with the One who in fact is the ultimate Creator of everything (see *Sefat Emet, Bereshit* 5636, s.v. *bamedrash*). Cessation of activity allows us to **connect to our unique, inner God-given world**.