

The 39 Melachos of Shabbos

by Rabbi Jack Abramowitz

There are 39 categories of constructive labor called *melachos*. These are the acts that were performed in the construction of the Mishkan (Tabernacle). These and similar actions are prohibited on Shabbos. Following is an introduction to the concepts of each *melacha*. (Please note that these are mere bullet points and in no way substitute for a full study of the relevant *halachos*.)

MELACHA

#1

Choreish (Plowing)

The first eleven *melachos* are called “*sidura d’pas*,” “the order of (making) bread” and they are agricultural in nature (see Talmud Shabbos 74 and Rashi there). There were two reasons for agricultural activity. The first was to grow plants needed to produce necessary dyes; the second was to make the *lechem hapanim* (“showbread”) for the Mishkan.

The *av melacha* (primary labor) of *choreish* involves using a plow to loosen the soil so that seeds may be planted. For practical purposes, any act that loosens soil or makes it more suitable for planting is a *toldah* (derivative labor) of *choreish*.

A famous derivative of *choreish* discussed by the Talmud in Shabbos 29b is called “*goreir*,” meaning “dragging.” One may not drag a heavy chair or bench on the dirt because of the inevitability that it will carve ruts in the ground. Even though one does not intend to do so, he would be violating the prohibition on plowing.

Smoothing out the soil to fill holes or flatten bumps is also forbidden as a derivative of *choreish*. So, while walking on soil is permitted, rubbing one’s foot on it is not.

MELACHA

#2

Zorei’ah (Sowing)

The second *melacha* is *zorei’ah*, which is sowing (as in “planting,” not to be confused with *tofeir*, which is sewing with a needle and thread). *Zorei’ah* was one of the eleven agricultural labors used in constructing the Mishkan. *Zorei’ah* refers not only to placing the seed in the ground, but also to any activity that promotes plant growth.

Aside from actively planting seeds, one must be careful not to drop seeds from fruit one is eating on the soil where they might germinate.

According to some opinions, the *melacha* of *zorei’ah* is different from other *melachos* in that it would not be violated until the seed germinates three days later. According to this opinion, one could avoid transgression by removing the seed within this time frame. According to other opinions, the *melacha* is transgressed immediately upon planting. It is therefore advisable to pick up seeds that may fall from fruit one is eating. (Such edible seeds are not *muktza*, though other types of seeds may be. A full discussion of which seeds are *muktza* is beyond our scope.)

Not only planting seeds, but any activity that encourages plant growth is prohibited, such as watering. Accordingly, one may not spill out water, wash hands, or even spit onto grass. (According to most opinions, urinating on plants would not violate *zorei’ah* as it does not encourage plant growth, though it is to be avoided except in the most extreme case of need.) Similarly, opening the shades specifically to let the sun shine on a houseplant is prohibited as *zorei’ah* (although one may open the shades for one’s own benefit and if the plant gets light as well, so be it).

MELACHA #3

Kotzeir (Reaping)

Kotzeir (reaping) is the third of the eleven agricultural labors used in constructing the Mishkan. The *melacha* of *kotzeir* involves detaching a growing thing from its source of nourishment. (“A growing thing” is usually plant life or vegetation, but not exclusively.) Harvesting wheat, apple-picking and weeding the front lawn are all examples of *kotzeir*. Picking mushrooms is also *kotzeir*, even though mushrooms are fungi and not plants.

Many of the *melachos* have reciprocal relationships that are equally prohibited: writing and erasing, igniting and extinguishing, sewing and tearing, etc. *Kotzeir*, however, is not the reciprocal of *zorei’ah* (planting). For example, if one were to pull down the shade to prevent light from reaching a houseplant in order to impede its growth, that would be an oddly spiteful thing to do to a plant, but it would not violate the *melacha* of *kotzeir*. In order to transgress *kotzeir*, one would have to pluck the plant (or part of it).

Kotzeir is the reason that using a tree is rabbinically prohibited on Shabbos. Accordingly, one may not climb a tree or use something directly suspended from a tree, such as a swing or a hammock. This is also the reason that horseback riding (of all things) is prohibited on Shabbos. It is common for a rider to break off a branch from a nearby tree for use as a switch (see Talmud Beitza 36b).

MELACHA #4

M’ameir (Gathering)

In the constructing the Mishkan, *m’ameir* (gathering) involved binding sheaves together; it is the fourth of the eleven agricultural *melachos*. For practical purposes, *m’ameir* involves any collecting of scattered produce. It doesn’t have to be fruit, though—anything that grows from the ground is subject to *m’ameir*. For example, the *m’kosheish eitzim* (gatherer of sticks) who desecrated Shabbos in parshas Shelach (Number 15:32) might have been guilty of *m’ameir* (although he might have been guilty of *kotzeir* for breaking the sticks off of trees – see Talmud Shabbos 96b).

According to most authorities, *m’ameir* only applies (a) to things that have not been previously gathered and (b) only in the place where the things grow and their gathering normally occurs. Therefore, if you knock the bowl of fruit off your host’s Shabbos table, it’s okay to pick up the fruit and put it back in the bowl. However, if produce scatters outside, one is rabbinically prohibited from gathering it as a weekday activity that is dangerously close to *m’ameir* (see Talmud Shabbos 143b).

Additionally, once produce has been processed, such as weaving wool into a garment or carving a stick into a wooden spoon, *m’ameir* no longer applies.

MELACHA
#5

Dosh (Threshing)

Dosh (threshing) is the fifth of the eleven agricultural *melachos*. It involves removing something edible from its natural casing. Prototypical *dosh* involves the removal of grain kernels from their stalks. In pre-industrial days, this might have been accomplished by having oxen tread on the grain, but it can also be accomplished by hand. Extracting any fruit from certain types of inedible peels is a derivative labor (*toldah*) of *dosh*.

Dosh applies to things that ultimately draw their nourishment from the earth, but not exclusively plants. For example, milking an animal – or even a nursing mother expressing milk – is prohibited as a derivative of *dosh*. (If a nursing mother must express milk in order to alleviate pain, she may not collect the milk for later use.)

Dosh does not apply to all types of peels, only to more external shells that are typically removed well in advance of eating. A banana or an orange has a snug peel that typically remains on the fruit until it is eaten. Even peeling vegetables on Shabbos is permitted (although a vegetable peeler is *muktza*). But removing peas from inedible pods is *dosh* because the pod is not snug and is typically removed well in advance of eating. (Snow peas are another story, since the pods are edible.) Shucking an ear of corn is likewise the *melacha* of *dosh*.

One particularly applicable derivative of *dosh* is called *s'chitah*. *S'chitah* involves squeezing or wringing something out in order to extract a liquid. A lemon may not be squeezed into a cup of tea on Shabbos because of *s'chitah*. It may, however, be squeezed onto another solid food item that will readily absorb the juice. Therefore, one may squeeze lemon onto fish or onto sugar; the sugar may then be stirred into one's tea.

MELACHA
#6

Zoreh (Winnowing)

After threshing wheat, one would be left with a heap of debris – mostly chaff – with the desirable kernels mixed in among them. Winnowing involved tossing the mixture into the air so that the wind would carry away the papery chaff, while the heavier kernels would fall back to earth. *Zoreh* is unlike other selection-based *melachos* in that it relies on wind power rather than selecting by hand or with a utensil. (See Melacha #7 – *Boreir* and Melacha #9 – *Merakeid*.)

The *Rema* rules that scattering by wind power is a violation of *zoreh* even without any aspect of selecting (see *Orach Chaim* 319:17). Accordingly, blowing dust off of a book or shaking out a cloth into the wind would be problematic on Shabbos. Surprisingly, using a spray deodorant or similar aerosol product is permissible as those do not actually use air pressure as a propellant. Rather, the compression of a high-pressure fluid is used to propel another fluid through a nozzle.

In the previous *melacha*, we discussed how winnowing would cause the papery chaff to blow away in the wind. The heavier kernels would fall to the ground, but there would remain among them some forms of debris that were too heavy to blow away. These rocks and broken bits of plant stem would simply be picked out by hand. That is the *melacha* of *boreir*, sorting.

When it comes to Shabbos, *boreir* involves taking something from a mixture of things that are differentiated by taste, name or function. Raisins and nuts are different and can involve *boreir*. Red delicious apples and McIntosh apples are different and can involve *boreir*. Selecting a larger slice of chocolate cake from among smaller slices, however, does not involve *boreir* as the slices of cake are all of the same type.

Boreir is not limited to food. Anything that can be mixed together – silverware in a drain board or laundry in a bag, for example – can be subject to the laws of *boreir*.

In order to remove something from a mixture, three conditions must be met. The selection must be done “*miyad, b’yad* and *ochel min hapesoles*.” *Miyad* means that it must be done for immediate use. *B’yad* means that it must be done by hand, rather than using a special utensil. *Ochel min hapesoles* means that the person must remove the thing he wants from the thing he doesn’t want, not the other way around.

Some notes:

- One may pick out silverware to set the table for a meal that is imminent, but not for a meal that’s later, such as after shul or a nap in the interim.
- A fork or a spoon may be used to remove a potato one desires from the chulent as it is not a sorting device. It is still considered “by hand” as such utensils are used because picking up food with one’s bare hands is hot, messy and/or repulsive to other diners.
- One may not remove undesirable items from desirable items, but he can remove undesirable items together with desirable ones. For example, I can’t remove a fly from my soup. I can, however, scoop out a spoonful of soup that includes the fly. (You have to remove a reasonable amount of soup; the fact that the fly is wet is not sufficient.)

The *melacha* of *boreir* is the reason we have gefilte fish. Fish typically has small bones and removing them would be a violation of *boreir*. Gefilte fish, which is boneless, obviates the need to deal with potential problems.

The laws of *boreir* are among the most intricate of *melachos*. In-depth study is required to identify and deal with dozens of situations that present themselves every Shabbos.

MELACHA #8

Tochein (Grinding)

After the impurities were removed from the grain, it was ground to make flour. The *melacha* of *tochein* (grinding) involves breaking something down into smaller pieces, thereby making it useful for a new purpose. For example, while slicing vegetables is permitted on Shabbos, dicing them into small pieces may violate the *melacha* of *tochein*.

Tochein can apply to wood, stone, metal and other substances. Scraping dried mud off of one's shoes, causing it to crumble, is prohibited because of *tochein*. When it comes to food, however, *tochein* only applies to items that grow directly from the ground – basically, produce. Accordingly, cheese, meat, fish, etc. may be chopped very fine, though one may not use a utensil specifically designed for this purpose. (Chopping raw meat would violate *tochein* as it is inedible in that state and therefore considered a non-food item.) There are those authorities who permit mashing such foods as potatoes (again, not using a utensil designed for this purpose) on the basis that it forms a single mass rather than individual pieces; others prohibit this. (Ask your local *halachic* authority for guidance.)

As with some *melachos*, such as *boreir* (Melacha #7, above), one effectively accomplishes this act through the eating process. Accordingly, one is also permitted to chop something up just prior to eating it.

The *melacha* of *tochein* is the reason that medical treatments are not permitted on Shabbos for simple discomforts. Preparing medicine entails grinding – even today the mortar and pestle is a symbol of a pharmacy. For more severe illnesses, there is an increasing scale of permitted activities, far beyond our scope to address. Additionally, one may take maintenance medications that must be taken daily in order to be effective.

There is no particular size that determines when something steps over the line into violating *tochein*. Accordingly, when chopping something up on Shabbos, such as vegetables for a salad, it is advisable to err on the side of caution and make the pieces somewhat larger than one normally might.

MELACHA #9

Merakeid (Sifting)

After the grain was ground into flour, it was sifted to remove any kernels that might not have been sufficiently pulverized. The *melacha* of *merakeid* involves passing something through a sifter of some kind to remove an undesirable element.

A practical example of *merakeid*: some people keep a few grains of rice in their salt shakers to absorb moisture. Shaking salt from such a shaker is prohibited on Shabbos as the salt passes through freely but the larger rice is trapped behind. This is the exact definition of *merakeid*.

Another practical application of this *melacha*: drawing a tea bag from a cup of tea allows the water to drain out of the bag, while the tea leaves are trapped inside. This is a violation of *merakeid*. Rather, the bag should be drawn out with a spoon so that the liquid is not strained from the bag.

Filtering water is permitted if the water is already drinkable anyway, but not if it renders the water fit to drink. Accordingly, most of our filtration is permitted as it merely enhances already-drinkable water. There is a question as to whether New York City tap water requires filtering to remove tiny crustaceans called copepods. Pursuant to that, there is a question as to the permissibility of doing so on Shabbos. Such is far beyond our scope to address; consult your local *poseik* if you require guidance in this area.

MELACHA
10

Losh (Kneading)

After sifting, the flour was mixed with water to make dough. The combination of a liquid with solid particles to form a paste-like consistency (or firmer) is the *melacha* of *losh*. *Losh* includes both the initial introduction of liquid to these particles and the subsequent mixing.

Because of *losh*, one may not prepare such foods as oatmeal and mashed potato flakes on Shabbos, independent of cooking considerations. It may be permissible, however, to mix such things as baby cereal in a thinner consistency, more like a pourable cake batter. Even in such a case, one must employ a *shinui* (a difference in the act of preparation) in both the pouring and the mixing parts of the process. Anything that results in a pure liquid, such as stirring iced tea mix into a glass of water, is not *losh* and has no restrictions on its preparation.

Losh is not limited to food. Mixing cement on Shabbos would be violation of *losh*, as would playing with modeling clay.

MELACHA
11

Ofeh/Bishul (Baking/Cooking)

As noted earlier, the first eleven *melachos* are collectively referred to a “*sidurah d’pas*,” the order of bread. Accordingly, the eleventh *melacha* listed in the Mishna (Shabbos 4:2) is *ofeh* (baking), the final step in making bread. However, while the showbread was used in the Mishkan, it was not a part of its construction. In building the Mishkan, herbs were boiled to produce dyes for the curtains. This is called *bishul* (cooking). *Ofeh* and *bishul* are effectively the same *melacha*, referring to the use of heat to effect a change in food or other items (for example, firing bricks in a kiln). Here, we will refer to it by the more common name of *bishul*.

As mentioned, *bishul* occurs when something is heated to the point that a change occurs (though this is not the case with liquids). Normally, this change entails rendering food fit to eat. An object does not have to be completely cooked in order for the act to be considered *bishul*; one-half or even one-third cooked might be good enough for a person to eat in a pinch.

Bishul occurs at a temperature that is considered “*yad soledes bo*,” meaning that a person will instinctively draw his hand back upon touching it. This is generally accepted as being around 110 degrees Fahrenheit, plus or minus based on the authority you ask. In any event, one wouldn’t be measuring the temperature of a pot on Shabbos. If you touch it and pull your hand back, that’s *yad soledes bo*!

There are many *halachos* related to cooking on Shabbos and a person is likely to encounter a *bishul* issue at least once every Shabbos. (This especially true since we are specifically supposed to eat hot food on Shabbos – quite the dilemma, eh?) A few practical applications follow but these are very much just the tip of the iceberg:

- One may not help something to cook by moving it closer to the flame, by removing some of the food (so that the remainder cooks faster) or even by stirring the pot;
- One may not leave food to cook over Shabbos on an uncovered flame. Accordingly, we cover our stove tops with a sheet of metal called a *blech* (Yiddish for tin);
- Something fully cooked that was removed from the *blech* may be returned so long as it is still warm if one had the intention to do so and held on to it the whole time;
- A dry, solid item (such as a kugel or some chicken) may be warmed on Shabbos by placing it on top of something that is on the *blech* (though one may not place it on the *blech* itself);
- The pot on the fire is what's called a *kli rishon* (first vessel), and it cooks. Pouring the contents of the pot into something else makes the new utensil a *kli sheini* (second vessel), which doesn't cook in most cases. To make coffee or tea on Shabbos, one should pour water from a *kli sheini* into a *kli shlishi* (third vessel), then add the tea bag or instant coffee to the *kli shlishi*. *Halachically*, this is not cooking. (Yes, the water may still be pretty hot, but look how far removed it is from the original heat source!);
- One may not insulate a pot with a blanket in order to retain its heat. (This is called *hatmanah*; it is discussed in the Mishnaic chapter of *Bameh Madlikin*, which we read on Friday nights.)

Bishul is also the reason that one is not permitted to bathe on Shabbos – as a preventive measure against heating the water.

The laws of *bishul* are very many and we've barely begun to address them here. If any area of Shabbos observance calls for further study, this is it.

MELACHA # 12

Gozeiz (Shearing)

The first eleven *melachos* were agricultural in nature, relating to the production of dyes (and/or the *lechem hapanim*). The next thirteen *melachos* were those involved in making the curtains and coverings of the Mishkan. The first step in the production of cloth is *gozeiz*, shearing the sheep.

The *melacha* of *gozeiz* entails more than just shearing sheep or the analogous act of cutting hair. Removing any part of a human or animal's body, whether living or dead, would be considered *gozeiz*. Accordingly, such acts as cutting one's nails and biting one's cuticles would be prohibited on Shabbos because of this *melacha*.

Combing hair is problematic on Shabbos because of the likelihood that some hairs will inevitably be pulled out. Therefore, it is only permitted to brush one's hair using a brush with widely-spaced bristles, and even then only when there is no reason to expect that hair will be uprooted. One must also exercise caution when removing an adhesive bandage so as to avoid pulling out any hairs.

MELACHA
#13

Melabein (Laundering)

So, here we have wool that has been shorn off the sheep and we are ready to turn it into cloth. Wool is pretty filthy at this point, so the first step in the process is to clean it. The wool has to be scrubbed in water, and then bleached to purify it of debris. This step is the *melacha* of *melabein*. (There is a difference of opinion as to whether the scrubbing or the bleaching is the primary *melacha*, but in the final analysis both activities are prohibited on Shabbos. The word “*melabein*” more literally means whitening or bleaching, but “laundrying” has a broader application that better captures the scope of this *melacha*.)

Any form of laundrying that cleans or brightens a fabric is *melabein*. It has to be an absorbent material such as cotton or wool for *melabein* to apply; there is no *melabein* on rubber boots or a plastic poncho. Accordingly, if one gets *chulent* on his Shabbos shirt, he may not wet the spot to clean it. (*Melabein* is not limited to clothing; one may equally not wet a tablecloth, upholstery, etc.)

Three activities are forms of *melabein*: soaking, scrubbing and wringing out. So, not only may one not wet a garment or other fabric, one may not rub a spot (even without water) or squeeze something that has become wet. For this reason, one may wash dishes on Shabbos using a brush but not a sponge.

Brushing dust off of a garment is problematic because of *melabein*. This is because dust particles are minute and are virtually absorbed into a fabric. Removing something larger from a garment – pet fur, for example – is permitted, though one may not use a brush to do so.

There are parameters as to what is and isn't considered *melabein*. For example, one may walk to shul in the rain, even though one's clothes will get wet. That's because this is more tantamount to soiling his garments than improving them. (Similarly, one may dry one's hands on a towel, even though this makes the towel wet.)

MELACHA
#14

Menapeitz (Combing)

After shearing the wool off of the sheep and scrubbing it clean, the wool had to be combed to untangle it. This is the *melacha* of *menapeitz*.

Menapeitz applies to any material that can be processed into a textile-like form, whether it's wool, cotton, polyester or even straw. However, it only applies to hair or fur that is detached from a living creature. (Combing a living creature is forbidden under the *melacha* of *gozeiz* – shearing – due to the likelihood that some hair or fur will be pulled out as a result.)

Combing the fur collar of a coat is forbidden due to *menapeitz*. According to some authorities, combing a sheitel or a wig on Shabbos is problematic because of *menapeitz*.

MELACHA
#15

Tzovei'ah (Dyeing)

After combing out the wool, but prior to spinning it to thread, the material was dyed. The coverings of the Tabernacle were dyed by dipping them into various colored solutions; changing or enhancing an object's color is the *melacha* of *tzovei'ah*.

A permanent dye is prohibited Biblically; temporary coloring is prohibited rabbinically. Examples of temporary coloring are mugs that change color when hot water is added and certain types of make-up, such as eye shadow and rouge. Cosmetics of a longer-lasting nature, such as nail polish, may present issues of *tzovei'ah* on a Biblical level. (Clear nail polish is also prohibited because it still enhances the appearance of the nails.)

The incidental coloring of food, such as occurs when instant coffee is stirred into a cup of hot water, is permitted on Shabbos under a general rule that dyeing does not apply to food items. (Even so, there are those authorities who require that the water be added to the coffee, not the other way around. In this way, the coffee is diluted by the addition of the water rather than the water being colored by the addition of the coffee.) It is questionable whether this exemption also applies to food coloring for decorative purposes, so it would be advisable to avoid that situation.

Painting or coloring is prohibited because of *tzovei'ah*. Writing, though it dyes the paper, is a different *melacha* (called *koseiv*), as the purpose is to create a symbol rather than to enhance the writing surface.

MELACHA
#16

Toveh (Spinning)

By this point, we have nice combed, dyed wool, ready to be spun into thread. Spinning entails the twisting of fibers together; this is the *melacha* of *toveh*. This *melacha* can be accomplished manually or with a tool. (The spinning wheel may be the most familiar instrument for spinning thread, though the spindle is a much more basic utensil that accomplishes the same goal.)

This is a *melacha* that most people probably won't encounter too frequently. Twisting cotton to make a wick is a practical example of *toveh*.

One might think that twisting several threads together, such as to make twine or rope, is an example of *toveh* – and such is, in fact, the opinion of the Talmud Yerushalmi. However, the opinion of the Rambam is that this is actually an example of tying (*kosheir*). The operative difference between these two positions is that the Rambam likewise obligates one under the *melacha* of *matir* (untying) for unraveling such a rope. *Toveh*, on the other hand, has no such reciprocal *melacha*. (See Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Shabbos 10:8.)

MELACHA
#17

Maisach (Threading a warp)

We now enter the first of several *melachos* pertaining to the weaving process. There are several prerequisites that one must accomplish before sitting down to weave. The first is threading the warp.

Here's how weaving works: woven cloth is a series of perpendicular threads criss-crossing one another repeatedly. The vertical threads are called the warp and the horizontal threads are called the woof (or the weft). The first step in weaving is to string the warp threads on a frame so that they are taut. The woof threads are then passed over and under the warp threads. The first step, stretching the warp threads on a frame, is the *melacha* of *maisach*.

Our discussion of weaving continues in the next *melacha*.

MELACHA
#18

Oseh Batei Nirin (Setting the heddles)

After the warp threads have been stretched on the frame, the heddles have to be set. The heddles are the part of the loom, typically made of wire, that separates the warp threads. The heddles – “*batei nirin*” in Hebrew – raise the warp threads successively, enabling the woof threads to pass over and under them. Setting the heddles is the *melacha* of *oseh batei nirin*.

Now our loom is all ready to go. In the next *melacha*, we come to the actual weaving.

MELACHA
#19

Oreig (Weaving)

We have threaded the warp with the vertical threads (Melacha #17) and set the heddles to raise and lower these threads in succession (Melacha #18). Our loom is now ready to weave. Passing the woof threads perpendicularly over and under the warp threads is weaving, also known as the *melacha* of *oreig*.

One need not necessarily use a loom to weave. The basics of weaving are the same whether one is making a basket or a medieval tapestry. Accordingly, making a lanyard or fixing a wicker chair on Shabbos might be a violation of *oreig*. Similarly, attempting to repair a snagged thread on a garment by pulling it back into shape presents an issue of *oreig*.

Braiding a wig is also a form of weaving and therefore prohibited on Shabbos. Braiding the hair growing on one's head is not considered weaving, but it is forbidden under the *melacha* of *boneh* (building, Melacha #34). This is comparable to way that combing a wig may present issues of *menapeitz* (combing), but combing one's hair presents issues of *gozeiz* (shearing – refer back to Melacha #14 for more on this matter).

MELACHA
#20

Potzei'ah (Detaching from the loom)

In the past several *melachos*, we stretched our vertical warp threads on the frame, set the heddles, and wove our cloth. The final stage of the weaving process is *potzei'ah*, detaching the cloth from the loom. This requires cutting the threads that hold the finished material in place. Removing stray threads from a garment on Shabbos would be an issue of *potzei'ah*, as would be pulling a small wad of cotton from a larger cotton ball.

According to the Rambam, the *melacha* (which he calls *botzei'ah*, with a letter *beis*) entails separating woven fabric for a constructive purpose (such as re-weaving torn material). Rashi on Talmud Shabbos 73a describes *potzei'ah* as severing surplus threads. There are other opinions as to the details of this *melacha* that vary from authority to authority; gray areas notwithstanding, they all have to do with perfecting the woven cloth. (See Raavad and Ran, among others.)

In any event, pulling threads out of a garment on Shabbos is not permissible. Unraveling a string or other cord would be a derivative labor of *potzei'ah* according to some opinions. (It would probably be wise to defer to these opinions, which include the Rambam and other prominent authorities.)

MELACHA
#21

Kosheir (Tying)

Taking two threads – or two ends of the same thread – and tying them together in a knot is the *melacha* of *kosheir*. The Talmud in tractate Shabbos (74b) discusses the uses of tying in building the Mishkan. One use was to make the nets that were necessary to catch the *chilazon*, a shellfish whose dye was needed for certain coverings.

It is forbidden on Shabbos to make a knot that is either of a type that is typically intended to be long-lasting or a knot of a particularly expert type. An example of an expert knot is a sailor's knot, which is meant to tie up a boat indefinitely so that it doesn't float away. Knots of a decidedly temporary nature – such as neckties – may be tied on Shabbos. (Actually, there are those who are stringent in this matter, especially if the tie is not undone when it is taken off. It might be advisable to remove one's tie by untying it rather than slipping it over one's head and tossing it aside.)

Shoelaces may be tied normally on Shabbos with a regular bow. A tight double knot, however, is prohibited. And, of course, if your shoelace should break on Shabbos, you would not be permitted to tie the two ends together.

Issues of *kosheir* can come up many times on Shabbos, from trash bags to bathrobes, and from hair ribbons to twist ties. (I am by no means suggesting that all of these things are inherently forbidden activities on Shabbos, just that there are many areas in which questions of tying can arise.) It certainly behooves us to familiarize ourselves with the intricacies of this *melacha*.

MELACHA
#22

Matir (Untying)

The nets that were tied, as described in the previous *melacha*, sometimes had to be untied. This is *matir* (untying), the reciprocal *melacha* of *kosheir* (tying).

When a *melacha* has a reciprocal (such as writing/erasing, igniting/extinguishing, etc.) a good rule of thumb is that if you can't take something from status A to status B, you likewise can't take it from status B to status A. So, if you can tie a bow in a shoelace, you can untie it as well. If you can't tie a boat to a dock, you can't untie it, either.

However, there are certain knots that don't meet the Biblical definition of permanence and that are only prohibited to be tied rabbinically. When the Rabbis applied stringencies in the case of tying, they did not always impose corresponding stringencies on untying. For example, while a double knot may not be tied in a shoelace on Shabbos, it may be undone if it keeps you from putting the shoe on or off.

Of course, to know which knots may be untied on Shabbos even though they may not be tied on Shabbos entails understanding the differences in the various types of knots. While it is beyond our scope to delve into this in sufficient depth, we reiterate the importance of familiarizing oneself with the details of these *melachos*.

MELACHA
#23

Tofeir (Sewing)

The Mishkan was draped with a series of coverings. The coverings were made of individual panels that were sewn together into two large tapestries that were then joined by clasps. Connecting the individual panels one to another required sewing, which is the *melacha* of *tofeir*.

Tofeir entails joining any two objects together, not just through a needle and thread. Using staples, tape or glue would also be considered the *melacha* of *tofeir*. (In some cases, when objects are not meant to remain connected for a long period of time, sticking them together might be permissible. A practical example of this might be diapers with Velcro-like adhesive tabs.)

Closing the front of a garment with buttons or zippers is not *tofeir*, as it doesn't join two separate pieces into one. As there are many types of fasteners – refrigerator magnets, stickers, safety pins, Post-It notes, etc. – it is advisable to familiarize oneself with the details of this surprisingly common *melacha* in order to know which are permissible and which are not.

MELACHA
#24

Korei'ah (Tearing)

As mentioned in the previous *melacha*, the Mishkan was draped with coverings composed of several panels sewn together. Repairing these coverings required tearing the damaged area so that it might

be corrected and re-sewn. This *melacha*, called *korei'ah*, is the reciprocal of *tofeir*, the act of sewing. It's important to note that this tearing was done for the purpose of repair; all the *melachos* are constructive in nature. Accordingly, any tearing or ripping for a constructive reason is considered *korei'ah* at the Biblical level. An example of constructive tearing is opening an envelope, which not only allows access to the contents but also turns the envelope itself into a useful place to store the letter. (Purely destructive tearing is prohibited at the rabbinic level.)

Korei'ah only applies to pliable substances, not to firm material like wood. (That's not to say that breaking hard objects is necessarily permitted on Shabbos, just that it's not *korei'ah*.) It also does not apply to food, so one may tear off hunks of bread.

Korei'ah is extremely relevant when it comes to opening food packages on Shabbos. There's a wide variety of opinions and the details can vary depending on the type of packaging involved, so a person should consult with his or her halachic advisor for guidance in this area.

MELACHA #25

Tzod (Trapping)

The next seven *melachos* involve the hides that were used in the coverings of the Mishkan. The first step in getting these hides was trapping the animal. This is the *melacha* of *tzod*.

Tzod is an unusual *melacha* in that it is highly subjective. Closing the door to a room containing a loose bird might be considered trapping it, but it closing the same door when the room contains a spider would not. A horse in a corral is not considered trapped (at least at the Biblical level), but a horse in a stall is.

Trapping is only relevant to wild or untamed animals. A dog or cat that has been domesticated is considered already trapped through its submission to its owner. Therefore, one may close the door to a room containing a pet or put a leash on one's dog, since there's no concept of trapping an already-trapped animal. The same applies to domesticated barnyard animals on a farm.

The Biblical prohibition on trapping applies to animals that a person would trap because he wanted them, like deer. While the Sages extended the prohibition to include animals not normally hunted, they did not include potentially harmful creatures in the stringency. Accordingly, a person may cover wasps or bees with a cup on Shabbos if he fears being stung. (It goes without saying that one may confine an animal that is truly life-threatening.)

MELACHA #26

Shocheit (Slaughtering)

After capturing the animal, the next step in preparing the hides was to slaughter it. This is the *melacha* of *shocheit*. Practically speaking, *shocheit* includes killing a creature, even without causing it to bleed (such as by drowning or suffocation), plus causing bleeding, even without death.

Most of us don't go around indiscriminately killing animals, but we must be careful about insects. The Talmud in tractate Shabbos (107b) tells us that killing a tiny insect on Shabbos is the same *melacha* as slaughtering a camel.

The bleeding aspect of *shocheit* means that we should be careful on Shabbos not to do things that will cause bleeding. For example, if one is reasonably confident that picking his teeth will cause his gums to bleed, he must not do so. One must also be careful not to cause bruising, which is simply bleeding without breaking the skin.

As with trapping, one is permitted to kill an animal that presents an imminent threat to human life, such as a rabid dog.

MELACHA #27

Mafshit (Skinning)

After the animal was slaughtered, its hide was removed. This is the *melacha* of *mafshit*, skinning.

The *melacha* of *mafshit* can apply to any animal – mammal, fish or bird – that has a skin which can be removed.

Mafshit is one of those *melachos* that one is not likely to encounter very frequently. For a variety of reasons, the *melacha* does not apply to cooked animals that are being eaten as food, so removing the skin of chicken or fish on one's plate would not constitute *mafshit* (although one must still be careful of *boreir*).

Skinning a raw chicken would be *mafshit*. Since raw chicken is *muktza* on Shabbos, this is still not likely to be an issue on Shabbos, though it might be on Yom Tov, when cooking is permitted.

MELACHA #28

M'abeid (Tanning)

The hides that were removed from the animals had to be preserved and transformed into leather. This entailed salting the skins to remove all moisture, stretching the skins to flatten them, and working the leather to make it supple. Collectively, these actions constitute the process of tanning, though performing any one of them would violate the *melacha* of *m'abeid*.

From a Biblical perspective, *m'abeid* does not apply to preserving food. However, because it so closely resembles *m'abeid*, pickling and other forms of food preservation are rabbinically prohibited on Shabbos. There are likewise limitations to salting certain vegetables more than one piece at a time, even for eating.

In a completely different vein, oiling leather or breaking in a stiff shoe by pressing the leather by hand is prohibited on Shabbos because it corresponds to the final step of the process, making leather supple.

MELACHA
#29

M'macheik (Smoothing)

After tanning, the hides had to be scraped to remove any stray hair. Scraping a surface to make it smooth is the *melacha* of *m'macheik*. This *melacha* is not limited to animal hides and similar items; sanding a block of wood or scrubbing a pot with steel wool are likewise *m'macheik*. Even using bar soap on Shabbos involves issues of *m'macheik*.

M'macheik has a *toldah* (a subordinate activity) called *m'marei'ach*, translated as “smearing.” This applies to soft and pliable substances, such as wax, caulk or Vaseline. Because of *m'marei'ach*, one might not be able to use a variety of creams and ointments on Shabbos, possibly including toothpaste and hand lotion, according to the authority consulted. Even “liquid” soap may be problematic according to some opinions if the consistency is too thick. (A pure liquid that runs freely, however, is permissible. Diluting hand soap and dish-washing liquid prior to Shabbos renders it acceptable to all authorities.) Since the acceptable level of viscosity varies widely among the authorities, consult your own rabbi for guidance in this matter.

Under certain conditions, it may be permissible to use the rabbinically-restricted creams, for example if an infant requires diaper cream for a rash. In such circumstances, the cream should be placed on the affected area without spreading it. This is permitted even though applying the diaper or bandage may later cause the cream to smear.

As with many other *melachos*, *m'macheik* does not generally apply to foods. Therefore, one may spread peanut butter, margarine and similar foods in the normal fashion. However, the *melacha* does apply to food when it comes to presentation. Accordingly, one may not smooth platters of tuna salad (for example) for decorative purposes.

MELACHA
#30

M'sarteit (Scoring)

One thing about hides: they come in unusual sizes and shapes. In order to turn the hides into the coverings of the Tabernacle, they had to be cut into appropriately sized and shaped pieces. Before this could be done, guidelines had to be drawn into the hide. This is called scoring, the *melacha* of *m'sarteit*.

Drawing guidelines on just about any surface in order to indicate where to cut would be *m'sarteit*. For example, folding a piece of paper on Shabbos to indicate where to rip or tear even after Shabbos is scoring. However, as with all the *melachos* of preparing the hides, *m'sarteit* does not apply to food items. Accordingly, one may use a knife to draw guidelines on a cake to help cut the proper size slices. In fact, there is specifically a custom to score one's challah in order to indicate where to cut after making the bracha; this practice is in accordance with the halacha.

MELACHA
#31

M'chateich (Cutting to size)

The hides were scored to enable them to be cut to pre-measured sizes; doing so is the *melacha* of *m'chateich*. (*M'chateich* is more than just cutting; it specifically refers to cutting to pre-determined sizes and shapes.)

M'chateich applies to virtually all substances except food. One need not use a knife or scissors to cut; *m'chateich* can also be accomplishing by tearing something to size with one's bare hands. Examples of *m'chateich* can include opening a box of tissues or separating paper towels along the perforations. If one must tear bathroom tissue on Shabbos, he should do so in the middle of the sheet rather than on the perforations. In this way, a person avoids issues of *m'chateich*.

However, if a perforation is not intended to create a neat, measured cut, but only to facilitate opening a package, the item may be opened in the normal manner. Nobody cares if a packet of sugar or a bag of potato chips has a neat, measured opening. If it should happen to tear cleanly across a perforation, so be it. The person opening the package has no interest in the measured piece that results from his actions; such an outcome is both unintended and of no particular benefit.

MELACHA
#32

Koseiv (Writing)

The next (and final) group of *melachos* has to do with the assembling, disassembling and transporting of the Mishkan. Remember, the Mishkan was a portable Temple that was taken down as needed and moved from place to place, where it was then re-assembled. The Mishkan was made up of 48 boards that fit together with pegs and sockets. These boards had to be assembled in their proper order, so they were marked to identify them. (For example, one board might be marked AB, the next BC, the next CD, etc. so that one would know that the A's are meant to be adjacent, as are the B's, the C's, etc.) Putting these identifying marks on the boards entailed writing, the *melacha* of *koseiv*.

Koseiv involves creating any meaningful letter or symbol. It doesn't have to be with ink on paper. A rubber stamp, carving into stone or cutting a letter out of paper all involve *koseiv*. Even forming a letter out of something temporary – such as those toys where one uses a magnet to manipulate iron filings – is prohibited on Shabbos under this *melacha*. *Koseiv* applies to letters or symbols in any language, including Braille, Morse code and the like.

The Biblical prohibition only applies to permanent writing. Temporary writing is prohibited rabbinically. So, breathing on a window to fog it up then writing on it with one's finger (for example) is prohibited at the rabbinic level.

Since *koseiv* involves making meaningful symbols, not just letters, assembling a puzzle on Shabbos is problematic for an adult. Photography is likewise prohibited on Shabbos for this reason. Forming words out of existing letters is also an issue. Accordingly, those who play such games as Scrabble on Shabbos should be careful to maintain a small space between the letters. Games that hold the letters locked in place (such as Deluxe Scrabble and Boggle) are not permitted because of *koseiv*.

We do not conduct business on Shabbos in large part because of *koseiv*, as one typically writes such things down. Incidental writing, such as leaving the name of a shoe company imprinted in the mud by the soles of one's shoes, is not a problem; one doesn't particularly desire or benefit from this outcome, so the rabbinic restriction on temporary writing was not imposed in such a case.

MELACHA
#33

Mocheik (Erasing)

Remember those symbols that had to be written on the boards of the Mishkan so that they could be assembled in the proper order? (See the previous *melacha*, *koseiv*.) Well, sometimes a mistake would be made. When that happened, the error needed to be erased so that the correct symbols could be inscribed. This erasing is *mocheik*, the reciprocal *melacha* of *koseiv*.

As with all “destructive” *melachos*, the Biblical act of *mocheik* entailed doing it for a constructive purpose, in this case to clear the surface for the proper symbols. All such similar acts, such as erasing letters from a sheet of paper or from a whiteboard, are acts of *mocheik* at the Biblical level. Just as *koseiv* does not have to be with a pen or pencil, *mocheik* does not have to be with an eraser. Using Wite-Out to cover up letters is also *mocheik*.

The real challenge with *mocheik* comes with food, both on the packages and on the edible items themselves. Care should be taken when opening packages so as to avoid tearing the lettering. Similarly, cutting a cake with writing on it is a challenge; cutting through the letters should be avoided. However, eating something imprinted with words or letters, such as a Hershey bar or M&M's, is not problematic. As with many *melachos*, *mocheik* does not apply as part of the eating process.

MELACHA
#34

Boneh (Building)

As mentioned, the Mishkan was made up of a number of boards that were connected through a series of sockets and pins; the roof was made of hides that were spread on top. Assembling something (and/or making a shelter) is building, the *melacha* of *boneh*.

While the *av melacha* (primary labor) involves both assembling separate pieces into a unified whole and forming a shelter, either activity is prohibited on Shabbos, even if the other is not accomplished. Accordingly, one may not pitch a tent or throw *schach* on the roof of a Succah (forming a shelter in the absence of assembling pieces). Likewise, one may not put together pre-fabricated furniture (such as one might get at Ikea), even though doing so does not create a shelter. Even screwing the handle into a broom is assembling, and therefore *boneh*!

Home repairs are included under the *melacha* of *boneh*, as one is not permitted to add to an existing structure on Shabbos. Driving a nail into a wall for a picture hook or laying tile are adding to the building, and therefore *boneh*. It is not *boneh*, however, when an action reflects an object's normal mode of use. Therefore, if a sliding door comes off its track, it may be replaced. Similarly, one might replace the spring-operated dispenser that holds a roll of bathroom tissue. (This example is

illustrative if not particularly practical, as bathroom tissue may not be torn on Shabbos, rendering the need to do this fairly moot. But you can replace the dispenser if you want to!)

While one may not assemble furniture or other utensils on Shabbos, one may open and close folding objects such as tables, chairs, portacribs and strollers. One may not use an umbrella on Shabbos, however, because it creates a shelter.

Boneh has many details. This is a *melacha* that one may encounter many times each Shabbos without realizing it. Extra study in this area would therefore be appropriate.

MELACHA #35

Soseir (Demolishing)

Since the Mishkan was portable, it was meant to be assembled and disassembled on an as-needed basis. Disassembling is the *melacha* of *soseir*, though the word more literally means “demolishing.” *Soseir* is the reciprocal *melacha* of *boneh* and, as we have stated, all of the “destructive” *melachos* were performed for constructive purposes. (In this case, the Mishkan was disassembled so that it could later be re-assembled elsewhere.)

Even today, demolishing for the purpose of building is common. It doesn’t even have to be something major, like tearing down a supermarket to make room for a parking lot. Taking anything apart with the intention of using its component parts would fulfill this criterion and would be considered *soseir* at the Biblical level. (Destroying for a purely destructive purpose is forbidden rabbinically, so don’t go around knocking down any walls on Shabbos, even if you don’t intend to rebuild in that spot or use the bricks elsewhere!)

As is typically the case with reciprocal *melachos*, a good rule of thumb is that if you can’t put it together because of *boneh*, you can’t take it apart because of *soseir*.

MELACHA #36

Mavir (Igniting)

Fire was needed in building the Mishkan for heating the vats in which the dyes were made and for smelting the metal needed for the various utensils.

Unlike most *melachos*, *mavir* is explicitly stated in the Torah (“You shall not light a fire in any of your dwelling places on the day of Shabbos” – Exodus 35:3). Because of *mavir*, we may not light a fire on Shabbos, nor can we feed an existing flame. We may, however, benefit from fire that was made before Shabbos. For this reason, we light Shabbos candles, to counter the heretical interpretation that would suggest that we are meant to sit in the dark all Shabbos.

Aside from keeping us from lighting or turning up the fire on the stove, *mavir* impacts a number of other activities that on the surface may not be apparent that they involve using fire. The first of these is driving, though upon a moment’s reflection, it becomes clear just how much driving involves *mavir*. You place your key in the ignition (which, as the name suggests, ignites), spark plugs spark, you burn fuel – driving is all about *mavir*!

Mavir is also the reason we don't shower or bathe on Shabbos – as a preventive measure to avoid coming to heat the water.

The most obvious application of *mavir* in our society was a non-issue little more than a century ago: we don't use electricity on Shabbos. For the purpose of *mavir*, electricity is considered the same as fire. (The extent to which the use of electricity on Shabbos violates a Biblical or a rabbinic prohibition is beyond our scope. Suffice it to say that certain leniencies may be relied upon in emergency situations; consult your halachic advisor.) Because of *mavir*, we do not use the phone on Shabbos, we suppress the light bulbs in our refrigerators and we set lamps on timers. (The idea of a "Shabbos elevator" that runs automatically is more complicated than it might seem, as a passenger's weight might directly affect the amount of energy generated. Many *poskim* limit their use to the elderly or infirm. Again, consult with your own *rav* for guidance in this area.)

MELACHA #37

M'chabeh (Extinguishing)

The reciprocal *melacha* of *mavir* (igniting) is *m'chabeh* (extinguishing). As with all "destructive" *melachos*, such as erasing and demolishing, *m'chabeh* was done for a constructive purpose in the Mishkan: it was done to make charcoal. (This is the reason for the reference to charcoal in the chapter of Mishnayos called *Bameh Madlikin*, which is read on Friday nights: because making charcoal was the original purpose of *m'chabeh*. While prohibited in any event, replicating a *melacha* for its original purpose is more stringent than performing an act that is essentially similar for a different reason.)

Because of *m'chabeh*, we may not douse or decrease a flame on Shabbos, nor may we turn off electrical appliances. It makes no difference how the fire is put out – cutting off the supply of oxygen, such as by inverting a bowl over a flame is the same as pouring water on it. If a tablecloth catches fire on Shabbos and poses no threat to human life, the proper approach is to drench the areas of the tablecloth immediately adjacent to the flame to stop the spread and quench the fire indirectly. (As with all *melachos*, *m'chabeh* is suspended when one is presented with a threat to human life.)

If a lamp is on a timer, one may not tamper with it to make it go on or off earlier, but one is permitted to adjust the dial to maintain the status quo (that is, to keep an on lamp on or an off lamp off).

MELACHA #38

Makeh B'Patish (Completing)

The boards from which the Mishkan was assembled were covered with a thin layer of gold. These gold sheets were hammered to the boards with perfect symmetry. The final hammer blow was the one that finished the job. The *melacha* of *makeh b'patish* literally means the strike of a hammer, but it refers to an act of completion. Any act of perfecting an object or rendering it fit for use is considered *makeh b'patish* even if it doesn't involve a hammer (or any other tools).

Did you ever get a plastic fork that has pieces of plastic sticking out from the handle? Annoying, isn't it? Of course, we all scrape it off with our thumbnails to make the handle nice and smooth. On

Shabbos, this act of perfecting would be *makeh b'patish*.

Similarly, we may not render something fit for use for the first time. Putting new laces into a pair of shoes or placing a pendant on a chain for the first time is *makeh b'patish*. However, one may restore an object to its useful condition, so replacing a lace that came out of a shoe or a pendant that fell off of a chain would be permitted.

In the previous example, the shoelace or the pendant may be reinserted because they are not considered “broken” when separated. An object that is considered broken cannot be repaired on Shabbos because of *makeh b'patish*. Therefore, if an eyeglass lens falls out of Shabbos, one may not pop it back into the frame regardless of how it easy it would be to do so.

Makeh b'patish is the reason for the rabbinic prohibition against music on Shabbos. Instruments frequently need tuning and minor repairs, such as changing a string or a reed. Playing instruments and related activities were prohibited on Shabbos to keep us far away from the likelihood of transgressing this *melacha*.

MELACHA #39

Hotza'ah (Transporting)

The final *melacha* involves transporting things outside on Shabbos. When the Mishkan was moved from place to place, it had to be disassembled and the boards that formed the walls were loaded onto large wagons. The wagons traveled to where the Mishkan was to be re-assembled, where the boards were unloaded. The wilderness where the Jews traveled was a public domain (called a *r'shus harabim* in Hebrew); the wagons were of such a size that they constituted a separate private domain (a *r'shus hayachid* in Hebrew). Moving something between a private and a public domain or transporting something through a public domain is the *melacha* of *hotza'ah*, carrying. (Actually, carrying within a public domain is technically called *ha'avarah*, but we'll refer to the entire package as *hotza'ah*.)

While we may refer to *hotza'ah* as “carrying,” it more literally means “bringing out” and refers to any manner of getting an item from point A to point B. Throwing something from a private to a public domain, or rolling it through a public domain, is the same *melacha* as carrying it in one's hand or pocket. (“Wearing” something that is not a garment is still carrying it, so no “book hats” allowed!)

A public domain has certain parameters in terms of size and traffic flow. Many areas we treat as public domains are not truly such according to the Biblical definition, but we treat them so by rabbinic enactment. These areas may be “fixed” for carrying by setting up an “*eiruv*,” which is effectively a series of doors. (The details for where an *eiruv* may be established and what doing so entails are beyond our scope.)

Hotza'ah is so important that it's the reason we don't blow the shofar when Rosh Hashana falls on Shabbos – so that we won't come to carry the shofar to shul through a public domain.

The *melachos* of Shabbos are dealt with in the Talmudic tractate of Shabbos; *hotza'ah* is the very first topic. *Hotza'ah* is also the only *melacha* that has its own tractate, called *Eiruvin*. It should go without saying that this is an area that requires great study.