

The Prohibited Labor of Plowing (*Horesh*)

May children play in a sandbox on Shabbat?

Is it permitted to pull a wagon over dirt?

May one sweep the floor of a house or a yard?

May one wash a dirty floor?

Definition of the labor

The **mishna** (73a) lists the labor of Plowing as one of the thirty-nine prohibited labors: “The primary categories of labor (*avot melakhot*) are forty less one: One who sows, and one who plows...” It might have been thought that the order should be reversed, first Plowing and only then Sowing, as the act of plowing is generally performed before sowing. The **Gemara** (73b) explains that the mishna is referring to the practice in Eretz Yisrael, where they would plow twice, once before sowing to prepare the earth for the seeds, and again after sowing in order to cover the seeds with dirt. The mishna thereby teaches that even an act of plowing that is performed after sowing is prohibited due to Plowing.

The Gemara proceeds to state: “One who plows, and one who digs, and one who makes a furrow in the ground have all performed **one type of labor**.” Rashi explains that this is because “all of [these actions] serve to soften the ground.” According to this explanation, Plowing includes **any act which is designed to loosen the soil and**

Why does Sowing come before Plowing?

Rashi: The definition of Plowing is softening the ground for sowing

soften the ground. Consequently, digging and furrowing, which likewise loosen the soil, render one liable due to Plowing.

Apparently, Rashi derives this definition from a statement of the **Gemara** in *Moed Katan* (2b), where Rabba determines that one who waters seeds on Shabbat is liable due to Plowing:

“Just as the usual objective of plowing is to loosen the earth, so too, this watering loosens the earth.”

According to Rabba, watering loosens the soil, which is the essence of Plowing, the softening of the ground. It should be noted that Rav Yosef disagrees, maintaining that one who waters seeds is liable due to Sowing, because watering promotes plant growth (see chapter on Sowing, p. 585).

The removal of a protrusion from the ground

Later in the same passage in *Shabbat* (73b), the **Gemara** states with regard to removing a protruding mound of earth that if one did so in a house, they are liable due to Building, and if one did this in a field, they are liable due to Plowing. Here too, **Rashi** explains that one is liable for Plowing in a field because this act softens the ground.

Sealing a hole

The **Gemara** (73b) makes a similar distinction with regard to sealing a hole in the ground: If one did so in a house, they are liable due to Building. If one did so in a field, they are liable due to Plowing. But in this case, there is apparently no softening of the ground. **Rashi** explains:

The act of filling a hole with dirt is Plowing, because the dirt with which one fills it is **loose and good for sowing**, and this smooths that part of the ground so that it can be sown in the field.

In other words, the essence of the labor of Plowing is **preparing the ground for sowing**. One condition for sowing is that **the ground must be soft**, because only such ground accommodates sowing. Consequently, smoothing the ground or placing loose dirt into a hole in the ground renders one liable due to Plowing.

Rabbeinu Hananel:
The definition of Plowing is improving the ground in preparation for Sowing

Another opinion on the definition of the labor of Plowing can be seen in a statement of **Rabbeinu Hananel** (74a), based on the **Yerushalmi** (7:2):

Plowing, making a furrow, and digging are all the same prohibited labor... **one is liable due to Plowing for anything which serves to improve the ground in a field**, and one is liable due to Building for anything which is performed in the house in order to level [the floor]. [One who acted in order] to level the ground of a field is liable due to Plowing, as it is written: “When he has leveled the surface” (*Yeshayahu* 28:25). **And for anything which improves the ground one is liable due to Plowing**, as explicitly stated in the *Yerushalmi*. Likewise, with regard to Rabba’s statement about one who had a hole and filled it, this too is due to Leveling the surface of the ground.

According to this opinion, the labor of Plowing does not apply specifically to loosening and softening the soil, but rather **to any action which enhances and improves the ground**.¹ Although filling a hole does not soften the ground, it does serve to level the surface, and this enhances the terrain. This is shown by a more detailed examination of the verses that Rabbeinu Ḥananel cites: “Is the plowman never done with plowing to sow... When he has leveled the surface, does he not cast abroad the black cumin, and scatter the cumin, and put in the wheat in rows and the barley in the appointed place?” (*Yeshayahu* 28:24–25). In other words, smoothing the surface of the ground is one of the stages of plowing, after which one can start sowing and scattering seeds (e.g., caraway and cumin) on the surface.²

The **Rambam** suggests a similar explanation (8:1):

1. This opinion is supported by the ruling of the **Gemara** (103a) that one who plucks endives is liable even for picking a small quantity if the intent was **to improve the terrain**. Although the **Ramban** (111a) raises the possibility that the liability in that case is for Harvesting, not for Plowing, nevertheless he concludes, based on the *Tosefta*, that the liability is also due to Plowing. The **Meiri** concurs (103a).
2. The *Yerushalmi* (7:2) lists many other acts that improve the terrain, which are prohibited due to Plowing, such as fertilizing the ground and removing its stones.

One who plows any amount is liable. When one weeds the roots of trees . . . in order **to improve the ground**, this is a subcategory (*tolada*) of Plowing . . . similarly, one who levels the surface of a field, e.g., lowered and smoothed out a mound or filled up a hollow, is liable due to Plowing.

In any case, even according to the opinion of **Rabbeinu Ḥananel** and the **Rambam** it is clear that not every activity that improves the ground is included in the prohibition of Plowing, but only those which prepare the soil for sowing. Similarly, the *Or Zarua* (2:55) writes: “For any action that improves the ground and renders it easier to be sown, one is liable due to Plowing,” and the *Aḥaronim* state likewise.

Thus, according to Rashi, the definition of Plowing is specifically an act of **softening the ground in preparation for sowing**, whereas **Rabbeinu Ḥananel** and the **Rambam** maintain that Plowing includes any action that **enhances and improves the ground for sowing**.

Does the prohibition of Plowing apply only when one actually intends to sow in that place? The Gemara (73b) merely states that “in a field, one is liable due to Plowing,” which implies that one’s intent is not a determining factor. Thus, the **Commentary Attributed to the Ran** writes (73b):

“If one has a mound . . . in a field, he is liable due to Plowing” because one often plows with the sole intent of turning over the soil to improve the field, not in preparation for sowing. Thus, any improvement of the field is included in Plowing.

Yet, if the ground is **entirely unfit for sowing**, the prohibition of Plowing does not apply. This can be inferred from the **Gemara** in *Pesaḥim* (47b), which states that the prohibition of Plowing does not apply to hard, rocky soil, as it cannot be sown. The *Or Zarua* (2:55) and others explicitly state this conclusion.

What is the *halakha* with regard to ground that is in theory fit for sowing but in practice it is **not designated for sowing**, and there is no intent to sow it (e.g., a dirt lot in a public area)? The Gemara states,

The prohibition applies even when one does not intend to sow

The prohibition of Plowing does not apply to ground that is unfit for sowing

Ground that is not designated for sowing: A dispute between the authorities

as cited above, that one who levels the ground **in a field** is liable due to Plowing, and one who does so **in a house** is liable due to Building. It can be inferred from the *Magen Avraham* (526:10) that there is no prohibition by Torah law of Plowing in a place which is neither a field nor a house. By contrast, the *Eglei Tal* (Horesh 16) maintains that for the purposes of this *halakha*, every place must fall into one of these two categories, and is classified either as a field or a house:

The “house” is clearly not an actual house, but any place fit for residence . . . and “field” denotes any place that is fit to be sown and is not designated as a residence or a public thoroughfare. One is not liable due to Plowing in an area designated for residence, because if one were to sow there, this would negate its status as a residence . . . therefore, preparing the place for sowing is not considered an improvement, as sowing there detracts from its current purpose . . . Accordingly, every place is necessarily one of the two, either a house or a field: If it is a residential area or a public thoroughfare, it is classified as a house and one is liable due to Building; if it is not residential, one is liable due to Plowing.

As a matter of practical *halakha*, it is reasonable to adopt the opinion of the *Eglei Tal* that the prohibition of Plowing applies even to ground that is not designated for sowing. This can be inferred from the fact that the *Rishonim* and *Aḥaronim* discuss various questions involving unusual forms of Plowing, e.g., dragging furniture and wagons or playing marbles, and no one stipulates that the issue at hand applies only to a field designated for sowing, which would be an uncommon occurrence in inhabited areas. It can be inferred from the fact that they do not note this limitation that the prohibition applies even to dirt in a public place, as the area is in theory fit for sowing, even if it is not designated for that purpose.³

Practical *halakha*:
One should be
stringent with
regard to any
ground that is fit
for sowing

3. Nevertheless, the *Mishna Berura* implies otherwise. In the *Shaar HaTziyun* (336:18), he rules that it is prohibited to pour water in a field that is designated for plowing, from which one can infer that if it is not designated for plowing then the prohibition of Plowing is not applicable. He writes a