

The Prohibited Labor of Grinding (*Tohen*)

How should one prepare a salad on Shabbat?

Is it permitted to chop vegetables into slices or strips?

Definition of the labor

The labor of Grinding involves dividing a single body into smaller homogenous components. The **Rambam** (7:5) cites the definition of this labor when he seeks to demonstrate the fundamental difference between a primary category of labor (*av melakha*) and its subcategory (*tolada*):

A subcategory is a labor that is similar to one of these primary categories. How so? One who finely chops a vegetable in order to cook it is liable, because this labor is a subcategory of Grinding, **as one who grinds takes a single entity and divides it into many entities**. Any action of this kind is a subcategory of Grinding. Similarly, taking a strip of metal and shaving it in order to use its filings, in the manner of goldsmiths, is a subcategory of Grinding.

In other words, the **primary category of the labor** of Grinding is **actual Grinding**, when one turns a substance into tiny granules or into a powder, whereas **cutting up an item into small pieces** is a **subcategory** of Grinding. As stated in the introduction (pp. 46–49), the *Maggid Mishne* (4) cites this example in his clarification of the basic distinction between a primary category of labor and a subcategory:

Grinding is a primary category of labor; thin slicing is a subcategory

Any labor which is absolutely comparable to the primary category... is a primary category like it, but a labor which is [only] somewhat similar to it is called a subcategory... for example, cutting up a vegetable, which is similar to grinding only in terms of forming many bodies from one body; although **grinding totally changes the first entity** and cutting up [vegetables] does not, it is a subcategory.

In other words, only actual grinding, which totally changes the original substance, is a primary category, whereas merely dividing one entity into many entities, which is not completely similar to the primary category, is defined as a subcategory.

This reasoning leads to a difficulty: According to this principle, **shaving metal** should be considered a primary category, as it involves grinding, and yet the **Rambam** (ad loc.) writes that this is only a subcategory. What is the difference between grinding wheat or ingredients for dyes, as was performed in the Tabernacle, and shaving metal and grounding it into powder?

It is possible that the answer can be inferred from the first part of the Rambam's statement: "One who finely chops a vegetable **in order to cook it** is liable." This implies that one is liable due to Grinding only by chopping up the vegetable in order to cook it. A similar conclusion is implied by the wording of the **Rambam** elsewhere (21:18). If so, chopping an item into small pieces is prohibited only if one does so in order to prepare the item for cooking, which would explain why shaving metal is not included in the primary category of Grinding. But in that case the reverse question arises: Why is shaving metal prohibited by Torah law at all? After all, the metal is not designated for cooking.

We can explain that the definition of the primary category is **preparing an item for cooking by means of grinding**.¹ In effect, the

1. The opinion of the **Rambam** as well as the definition of the primary category and the subcategories of Grinding require further study. This chapter presents the conclusions which seem most reasonable.

The prohibition of chopping into small pieces applies only when done for purposes of cooking

The primary category is grinding only for the purpose of cooking

definition of the primary category contains two elements: (1) **actual grinding**, and (2) **preparing for cooking**. Therefore, the classic examples of Grinding all involve both factors: In the Tabernacle, the plant extracts were ground and then cooked; and in the bread-making process, one grinds the wheat and subsequently bakes it. When **only one of these two elements** is present, it is a **subcategory** of Grinding, and when **neither element is present**, the act is **permitted by Torah law**.

Therefore, one who **chops** a vegetable **in order to cook it** is liable, because the second condition, preparing for cooking, has been met. This act is only a subcategory, not a primary category, because the first condition has not been met, as this was not a proper action of grinding. Similarly, one who **shaves metal** is liable due to Grinding, as the first condition has been met, because there is actual grinding here. Nevertheless, this too remains a subcategory, since the second condition remains unmet, as there is no preparation for cooking. The same applies to one who creates **sawdust** (Rambam 8:15). According to the Rambam, one who chops vegetables in order to eat them raw has not violated a prohibition by Torah law, as neither condition has been met: It is only chopping, not a full-fledged act of grinding, and it is not in preparation for cooking either.

As will be seen, many *Rishonim* disagree with the Rambam and maintain that chopping vegetables into small pieces is prohibited by Torah law even when one eats them raw, and indeed in practice the generally accepted ruling is to be stringent. Nevertheless, even those *Rishonim* might accept the basic structure of the Rambam's opinion, with one caveat: The second element of the labor is not preparation for cooking, but preparation for cooking **or eating**.

TO SUMMARIZE, properly grinding a food item in order to ready it for cooking or eating violates the primary category of Grinding. When one grinds for other purposes, or if one chops a food item into very small pieces for the purpose of cooking or eating, this is a subcategory of Grinding. By contrast, if one chops an item in an ordinary manner for other purposes, this is not prohibited by Torah law.

In any case, it should be kept in mind that there is no fundamental difference between a **primary category** and a **subcategory**, as both are **prohibited by Torah law**, as explained in the introduction.

