

# Jewish Teaching, Categories of Work

## **The Thirty-Nine Categories of Sabbath Work**

In order to present some idea of Sabbath rest, we will here outline the thirty-nine categories of ritual work. This is only the barest of outlines, and is meant to present the spirit, rather than the details of the law. For the latter, the appropriate codes should be consulted.

These are the thirty-nine categories:

### **1. Carrying**

This category involves carrying in a public place.

This is one of the few categories of work that is actually mentioned in the Torah. It is also the very first type of work that was prohibited.

As we discussed earlier, the initial commandment of the Sabbath was given in connection with the Manna. But what possible type of work was involved in gathering a portion of Manna for one's family? Obviously, this is carrying. Thus, when Moses told the people (Ex. 16:29), "Let no man leave his place on the seventh day," he was telling them that they could not carry the Manna.

The Torah also gives an account of a man who was put to death for gathering wood on the Sabbath. Here again, according to some commentators his violation of the Sabbath involved carrying.

In a third place, the Prophet Jeremiah specifically warns his people not to carry on the Sabbath. He says (Jer. 17:21-22), "Take heed and carry no burdens on the Sabbath ... Also do not carry any burden out of your houses on the Sabbath."

Carrying is really the prototype of all other types of Sabbath work. As mentioned earlier, the definition of such work is any act where man demonstrates his mastery over nature. But the first act by which man demonstrates such mastery is by taking things from nature and carrying them where he needs them. This was the deed of the man gathering wood. Therefore, if we are to relinquish our mastery over nature, the first requirement is that we not carry anything away.

In a sense, by not carrying, we also relinquish our ownership of everything in the world. A main sign of ownership is that one may take something wherever he pleases. On the Sabbath, we give up something of this ownership. Nothing may be removed from the house. When a man leaves his house, he may carry nothing but the clothing on his back. It is G-d, not man, who owns all things.

This category absolutely forbids all carrying in the street. Even such trivial things as a key or a handkerchief must be left at home. Certainly pocket-books, purses, wallets and key chains may not be carried. The only thing one may carry outdoors are things that are actually worn.

We can get some idea how serious carrying on the Sabbath is from the following law. When Rosh HaShanah falls on the Sabbath, the Shofar (ram's horn) is not sounded. This was legislated by the Sanhedrin for a most interesting reason. Suppose that a synagogue has only one Shofar, and it became lost or damaged. Imagine the embarrassment and breach of ceremony involved in not being able to sound the Shofar on this most solemn day of Rosh HaShanah. How great the temptation to carry a replacement Shofar from another synagogue or from someone's home! But this would involve a gross violation of the Sabbath. To avoid this problem the Sanhedrin decreed that the Shofar never be sounded on the Sabbath at all.

Carrying in a private home is permitted on the Sabbath. It is only in a public domain that it is forbidden. When a semipublic domain is involved the Rabbis prohibited carrying to it from a public domain and vice-versa without an Eruv.

The spirit of the law, however, forbids the carrying or handling of unnecessary objects, even indoors. The Sanhedrin therefore legislated the categories of Muktzah, things which may not be handled on the Sabbath. These include such useless things as pebbles and stones. They also include things which may not be used on the Sabbath, such as pencils, candles and money.

The spirit of the law also forbids the transfer of ownership, even inside a building. The Sanhedrin legislated a prohibition against all forms of buying, selling, trading and other commerce for a variety of reasons. The Sabbath must be a day when all business stops.

It is interesting to note that the prohibition against commerce is one of the few types of legislation actually recorded in the Bible. Thus, we find (Nehemiah 10:32), "If the (non-Jewish) natives of the land bring any goods or food to sell on the Sabbath day, we will buy nothing from them on the Sabbath or on any holy day."

## 2. Burning

This involves making a fire or causing anything to burn.

Even throwing a toothpick into a fire is considered a violation of the Sabbath under this category.

This is another category of work mentioned specifically in the Torah, as we find (Ex. 35:3), "You shall not light a fire at home on the Sabbath day."

The use of fire is one of the prime ways in which man demonstrates his mastery over nature. Indeed, the use of fire is one of the cornerstones of human civilization. It is fire that allows man to extract energy, his most basic requirement, from nature. Thus, in a sense, it is also a prototype of Sabbath work.

Obviously, this category forbids such acts as striking a match or turning on a stove.

It also prohibits smoking on the Sabbath.

An automobile engine works by burning gasoline. Turning on the ignition and stepping on the accelerator causes it to burn. It is therefore forbidden to drive a car on the Sabbath.

Heating a piece of metal so that it glows is also in the category of burning. When an electric light is turned on, its filament is heated white hot, producing light. This is therefore forbidden on the Sabbath.

In general, any use of electricity violates the spirit of the Sabbath, since it involves extracting energy from nature. According to many authorities, electricity has the same status as fire with regard to the Sabbath. In any case, the practice of all observant Jews is to avoid turning any electrical appliance on or off. Since a telephone also works by electricity, it also should not be used.

## 3. Extinguishing

This includes extinguishing or lowering a flame in any way.

As such, it is the opposite of burning.

Thus, for example, one may not turn down the gas on Shabbos. Similarly, it is forbidden to turn off the lights or any other electrical appliance.

The Sabbath, however, may be violated wherever there is any possible danger to human life. Therefore, in case of fire, anything necessary must be done where life may be endangered.

## 4. Finishing

This includes completing any useful article, even where no other category of work is involved.

It includes all forms of repairs and adjustments.

For example, putting together a machine is in this category, even when no other type of work is done.

It is similarly forbidden to put together any other article, unless it is made to come apart.

Smoothing a stone and planing wood is also in this category. It therefore precludes all forms of sculpture and shop work. Sharpening a knife is also in this category.

This heading also forbids us to cut or tear paper in any way. To take a very mundane example, one may not tear toilet paper on the Sabbath. Religious Jews therefore only use pre-cut paper.

Putting the finishing touch on any article is also in this category. Thus, for example, one may not put new laces into shoes.

Any form of adjustment comes under this heading. Thus, one may not wind a clock or set a watch.

It is similarly forbidden to tune any kind of musical instrument.. The Rabbis forbade the use of all musical instruments on the Sabbath.

Blowing up a balloon or water wings also comes under this category.

The same is true of setting the sails on a boat. For this reason, the Sanhedrin forbade the riding of small boats on the Sabbath. (One may, however, ride a large ship piloted by non-Jews, as long as he does not embark or disembark on the Sabbath.) There is a special rabbinic enactment that swimming is not permitted on the Sabbath.

## 5. Writing

This includes all forms of writing and drawing.

Typing, printing, and using a rubber stamp all come under this heading.

The main objective of writing is the keeping of records, and therefore, the spirit of the law forbids any activity normally requiring a written record. Thus, the Sanhedrin forbade all sorts of business activity, as well as marriage and divorce on the Sabbath.

Calculations and measurements are also included, since they also normally involve writing.

Gambling and playing games of chance also are included in this category.

## **6. Erasing**

This includes erasing or destroying any form of writing.

Breaking apart or tearing through words or letters also is included in the spirit of this category.

Although it is permitted to tear a package to get the food inside, this should be avoided when it involves tearing through the writing on the package.

Likewise, when words are stamped on the edge of a book (as is the case with most library books), these letters are separated when the book is opened, and this should not be done unless the book is urgently needed.

## **7. Cooking**

This includes all forms of cooking and baking.

Even boiling water falls under this category.

It also includes any form of heat treatment of non-foods.

Thus, melting metal or wax and firing ceramics are all included.

The prohibition against cooking does not prevent us from eating hot food on the Sabbath. Indeed, part of our Sabbath joy (Oneg Shabbos) consists of eating hot food. However, this must be prepared in such a manner that no act of cooking actually takes place on the Sabbath.

In order to prevent one from forgetting and adjusting the flame, the stove must be covered with a tin or blech. This must also cover the controls, making it impossible to adjust the flame. Hot cooked food may then be kept on this tin.

Under some conditions, it is also permitted to re-warm food that is already cooked. These laws appear very complex when put in writing, while being

very simple in actual practice. The best thing is to see how a true Sabbath observer prepares hot food for Shabbos.

## **8. Washing**

This includes washing or bleaching a garment in any manner.

It also includes removing any spot or stain from clothing.

Wringing out a wet garment also falls under this heading.

## **9. Sewing**

This includes all forms of sewing and needlework.

Pasting, taping and stapling paper are also included. Thus, one may not seal an envelope nor attach a postage stamp on the Sabbath.

Fastening something with a safety pin, however, is permitted, since this is only a temporary fastening.

## **10. Tearing**

This includes undoing any form of sewing.

It also includes tearing a garment.

Separating glued papers falls under this heading.

## **11. Knotting**

This includes tying any permanent knot.

Tying a bow, however, is permitted. Therefore, for example, one may tie shoes on the Sabbath.

## **12. Untying**

This includes untying any permanent knot.

If a knot is not made to be permanent, however, it may be untied. This is true even if it is a permanent type knot. Thus, for example, if one's shoes accidentally become knotted, they may be untied.

## **13. Shaping**

This includes cutting any object to a desired shape.

Cutting material for a dress would fall under this category. So would cutting out pictures or newspaper articles.

Working wood or metal on a lathe or mill also falls under this heading.

Foods are not included in this category, and may be cut to be served.

## **14. Plowing**

This includes any work that improves the ground.

Digging up a garden and fertilizing it fall under this heading. Also included is raking a lawn.

### 15. Planting

This includes all forms of planting and gardening.

Also included is anything that encourages plants to grow. Thus, one may not water plants on the Sabbath.

It is likewise forbidden to place cut flowers in water, or even to change their water.

### 16. Reaping

This includes cutting or plucking any growing thing.

Agriculture is again one of the main ways in which man shows his dominance over nature. This category is therefore also one of those mentioned in the Torah, as we find (Ex. 34:21), "Six days shall you work, but you shall rest on the seventh; in plowing and in harvesting, you shall rest."

Such activities as plucking a flower and plucking a fruit from a tree come under this heading. The same is true of mowing a lawn.

It was also legislated that we do not handle any growing flowers or plants. It is also forbidden to climb a tree or smell a growing flower.

Fruit which falls from a tree on the Sabbath may not be used on the same day.

The use of animals as well as plants is forbidden since there is the concern that one might forget and inadvertently pluck a branch for use as a switch.

### 17. Harvesting

This includes all harvesting operations such as binding grain into sheaves or bales.

Gathering fallen fruit into piles, or placing them into baskets also falls under this heading. This is even true in a private enclosed yard where carrying is permitted.

### 18. Threshing

This includes all operations where food is separated from its natural container.

Both solid and liquid foods are included.

The prime example is threshing grain to remove it from its husk.

Squeezing a fruit for its juice is also included. The same is true of milking a cow.

### 19. Winnowing

This includes all activities where food is separated from its inedible portions by means of the wind.

The prime example is winnowing grain, where it is thrown up in the air, allowing the chaff to blow away.

### 20. Selecting

This includes separating unwanted portions of food by hand.

Thus, for example, if one is eating berries, he may not pick out the bad ones before eating the good ones.

One may, however, eat the good ones and leave the bad. It is likewise permitted to peel fruits and vegetables for immediate consumption.

This category also forbids one to pick the bones out of fish. This is one reason for the custom of eating Gefilte Fish on Shabbos, since its bones are already removed.

If one must remove something inedible, a small amount of food should be removed along with it.

The spirit of this category also forbids all sorts of sorting and filing activities.

### 21. Sifting

This includes separating the unwanted portions from food by means of a sieve.

It includes the sifting of flour and the straining of liquids.

### 22. Grinding

This includes all grinding and milling operations. The prime example is milling grain.

Grinding coffee or pepper, filing metals, and crushing substances in a mortar, all fall under this heading.

Its spirit also forbids the grating of cheeses and vegetables and the grinding of fish and meat, as well as herbs used for medicine.

The Sanhedrin therefore legislated to forbid the use of all nonvital medicines and treatments except for a sick person.

An initial exception, however, was made in cases of acute pain and actual illness, where necessary medical treatments may be used.

Where life is actually in danger, the Sabbath may be violated in any necessary manner. Our sages

teach us that it is better to violate one Sabbath in order that another may live to keep many.

### **23. Kneading**

This includes combining a powder with a liquid to form a dough or paste.

The primary example is making a dough or batter for bread or cake.

Also included would be making instant puddings, even where no cooking is required.

### **24. Combing**

This includes combing wool or cotton in preparation for making it into thread.

### **25. Spinning**

This includes all threadmaking and rope-making activities.

Making felt is also included.

### **26. Dyeing**

This includes changing the color of any object or substance.

Dyeing clothing, painting, and mixing paints and dyes all come under the heading.

The spirit of this law also prohibits the use of lipstick and eye shadow. However, there are permanent cosmetics that can be put on before the Sabbath and last the entire day.

### **27. Chainstitching**

This includes all crocheting, knitting, and braiding activities.

Also included are basket weaving and net making.

The prime example involved setting up a loom for weaving. A chain of threads was looped across the loom to hold the warp.

### **28. Warping**

This includes setting up the warp on a loom, even when no actual weaving is done.

### **29. Weaving**

This includes all weaving operations.

Also included are all sorts of needlework, such as embroidery, needlepoint, and rug hooking.

### **30. Unraveling**

This includes unraveling any woven or knitted material.

### **31. Building**

This includes all building and assembling activities.

All building repairs come under this heading, even driving a nail into a wall.

Also included is pitching any kind of tent.

The spirit of the law even forbids the opening of an umbrella (even when it will not be carried outside), since it affords the same protection from the elements as a tent.

### **32. Demolishing**

This includes undoing any building operation.

Thus, for example, even a temporary tent may not be taken down on the Sabbath.

Taking apart any kind of machinery is also included.

### **33. Trapping**

This includes capturing or restricting the freedom of any living creature.

The prime example is trapping an animal. However even catching an insect in one's hand comes under this heading.

### **34. Shearing**

This includes removing hair, wool or feathers from any living creature.

Also included are such things as haircutting, shaving and cutting one's fingernails. Eyebrow plucking is also forbidden.

The spirit of the law also forbids the combing of hair on the Sabbath, since this normally also pulls out hairs. Using a soft brush, however, is permitted.

### **35. Slaughtering**

This includes the killing of any living creature.

Swatting a fly or mosquito is also included, as is wounding or bruising an animal or human being.

Deadly snakes and wasps, which pose a danger to human life, may be killed on the Sabbath. This is another case where human life overrides all other considerations.

### **36. Skinning**

This includes skinning any animal to obtain its hide

### **37. Tanning**

This includes all tanning and softening processes used to make hides into leather.

Also included is any process that softens or improves leather. Rubbing oil or saddle soap into leather thus comes under this heading.

### **38. Smoothing**

This includes all smoothing and polishing operations.

The prime example is the preparation of leather, where the hair is removed and the surface rubbed smooth.

Shining shoes is also included under this heading.

The same is true of polishing silver or any other metal.

### **39. Marking**

This includes marking or scoring lines on a surface in preparation for cutting or writing.

It applies even when such marking does not come under the category of writing.