



## Pardes's Parsha Discussion with Rabbi Alex Israel

*TORAH TO DISCUSS WITH TEENS AND ADULTS AROUND YOUR SHABBAT TABLE*

### **Emor. Unplugged! Fostering a Shabbat Atmosphere**

As our world becomes more automated, as sensors and smart-home devices become more prevalent, should we be allowed to make use of automated technologies on Shabbat? After all, we don't really activate the mechanism; they respond to us!

In response to Coronavirus, many have speculated that we will do away with light switches, which can easily transmit diseases. Instead, we will use more voice and movement responsive devices. How will Halakha respond to these issues?

In the wake of Coronavirus, there was an extensive Rabbinic debate about whether Zoom could be used to help those alone, especially the elderly who were quarantined and celebrating the Pesach Seder alone. The Orthodox Rabbinic consensus was that Zoom should not be used on a religious holiday.

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Our Parsha this week speaks of Shabbat and the Festivals. On these days "You shall do no manner of work." But in addition to this, these days are labelled: "Shabbaton." Nachmanides asks what this word indicates, after we have been already instructed to decrease from any manner of labor, precluding the classic 39 categories of "melakha"! Once I cannot perform my work, am I not in a state of "Rest"?

Nachmanides writes:

It appears to me that the meaning of the phrase "Shabbaton" is that we are commanded on Yom Tov to rest from those activities that technically do not qualify as "melakha". We should not be active all day measuring our grain, or weighing out our fruit and possessions, filling vessels with wine, or clearing out our homes. If these things were permitted, we could carry stones from house to house or from one location to another if located in a walled city (where carrying in the public domain would be allowed), we could load up our donkeys, and even wine, grapes, figs and all packages could be delivered on Yom Tov; and the marketplace would be filled with ongoing commerce, the shops would be open and money changers tables strewn with coins, and the workers would get up at the crack of dawn to earn a livelihood like any other day of the week, and so on. These and similar activities, whether on Yom Tov or even Shabbat itself, all these activities do not technically constitute melakha! Therefore, the Torah commands us "Shabbaton" -- that these should be days of rest and cessation of work, and not days of labor and toil. And this is a good and beautiful interpretation.

Ramban is telling us that many areas of commerce are not forbidden according to Torah law; and exhausting work such as filling casks with wine, or hauling building supplies are not prohibited in the rubric of the 39 forbidden categories. Money, contracts and transactions are allowed, and so Shabbat could become the market day, the busiest shopping day of the week! For this reason, the Torah articulates that beyond the 39 categories of Melakha, we need “Shabbaton” – to rest and craft a day in which we detach, unplug, and disengage from our daily pursuits.

Interestingly, Ramban paraphrases verses from the book of Nehemiah which depicts the precise scenario that took place in the city of Jerusalem. The Rabbis note that it was Nehemiah who instigated the laws of Muktzeh, restricting the handling of items on Shabbat that do not serve the purpose of the day. Nehemiah reports:

“At that time, I saw men in Judah ... bringing heaps of grain and loading them onto asses, also wine, grapes, figs, and all sorts of goods, and bringing them into Jerusalem on the sabbath. I admonished them there and then for selling provisions. Merchants from Tyre brought fish and all sorts of wares and sold them on the Sabbath to the Judahites in Jerusalem. I censured the nobles of Judah, saying to them, “What evil thing is this that you are doing, profaning the sabbath day! ...I gave orders that the city gates be closed, and ordered them not to be opened until after the Sabbath. I stationed some of my servants at the gates, so that no goods should enter on the Sabbath. (Nehemiah ch.13)

So the Torah mandates a “Shabbaton”, a cessation of our weekday activities and a 25 hour period in which we generate a different state of being. A great example of this is the Talmud’s mandate that “the way you walk on Shabbat should be different from the manner in which you walk during the week” (Talmud Shabbat 113b). Avi Rockoff beautifully depicts the unique mode of walking on Shabbat:

“Observe a group of Orthodox Jews as they leave services around noon on Saturday. A few souls leave in a hurry, but the rest of the crowd spills out at a leisurely pace...many do indeed walk not on the sidewalk but in the street. If these people are going anywhere, they seem in no hurry to arrive. This behavior is striking, different not only from that of others, but from their own at other times. Today they have no clear intent, and are out walking not to exercise, burn calories, watch birds, or get somewhere to do something. They are, instead, just walking.

...The strollers are not walking on Saturday at all; rather, they are walking on Shabbat. ...It differs from time off, from days off, from vacations. ...Shabbat is not free time, but sacred time. ...When travel is utilitarian as usual, a street is a way to get from one place to another. For dwellers in the realm of Shabbat, however, which banishes ordinary purposes, a street is just another place to walk; not a place to use, but a place to be... They walk together, defiantly purposeless. By doing this they proclaim a respite... from the march of progress.” (Avi Rockoff, Sh’ma: A Journal of Jewish Responsibility. Dec 1993)

In the selfsame spirit, regarding the recent question of the “Zoom Seder”, Prof Chaim Saiman explains rabbinic opposition precisely because of the principle of “Shabbaton” or the spirit of Shabbat.

“The screen has become the totemic signifier of our inescapably digital modern lives. Our workweek, our obligations, our deadlines, and our modern stresses are all mediated by the screen, through which we access news, politics, and business, the secular and the profane. This barely three-dimensional portal draws us away from our immediate familial and spiritual setting into the vast expanse of the human universe. Few objects draw greater contrast to the Torah’s concept of “shabbaton” —cessation—that Sabbath and holidays aim to impart. In short, the screen represents all that is prohibited on Shabbat.” (Prof. Chaim Saiman. <https://mosaicmagazine.com/essay/religion-holidays/2020/05/in-rejecting-the-zoom-seder-what-did-orthodox-judaism-affirm>)

**Please Discuss:**

- What is the Ramban's reading of the mitzva of "Shabbaton"?
- How should we generate a different atmosphere on Shabbat? IS Shabbat a day that you like, or is it a day that is boring for you?
- Do you think that playing basketball (or another sport) should be allowed on Shabbat? Is this a way of advancing "Shabbaton" or is it a violation of that principle?
- Do you think that the rabbis were correct to disallow the "Zoom Seder"? Are you happy that we don't use our screens on Shabbat? What benefits does it give us?

Shabbat Shalom!