

This teaching from the Jewish point of view is presented by Grace Notes to provide context and comparison of Jewish ideas with Christian, in particular in relation to expositional teaching of the book of Acts and the life and epistles of Paul the Apostle. [Warren Doud]

Jewish Teaching: The Sabbath ¹

The importance of the Sabbath in Jewish life is stressed from the story of Creation in Genesis, to the Ten Commandments, which state that people are to refrain from labor on the 7th day. The basic injunction is restated several times in the Torah and many times by the prophets.

The basic idea of the Sabbath as a day of rest seems very simple, but a number of problems arise when it is put into practice.

For example, the definition of “labor” must be established. The term might be interpreted to mean “any work that entails excessive activity, or activity for which payment is made,” for example. But any definition lends a new dimension to the command and changes the way in which the Sabbath is observed.

The oral tradition, in particular the Mishnah, which relies on detailed analysis of the biblical sources, arrives at another conclusion based on the concept of “imitating God.” This idea relates “labor” to the acts of deliberate creation in the physical world. Just as God ceased from His labor, creation of the world, on the Sabbath, so the children of Israel should refrain from creative work on this day.

The work of the Talmud scholars down through the centuries, then, was to choose a basic model for those actions prohibited on the Sabbath, to create a means for defining what is really a rather abstract idea.

The model chosen was the work on construction of the Tabernacle in the wilderness, on which work on the Sabbath was explicitly prohibited in the Torah.

Most of the legal discussions, then, in the Talmud, on forbidden and permitted acts, form an elaboration and expansion of this basic model, and the practical conclusions derived from it.

¹ This material is taken primarily from Adin Steinsaltz’ excellent book, “The Essential Talmud,” Chapter 15, The Sabbath, Bantam Books, 1976.

The first task was to analyze the categories of activity carried out during Tabernacle construction. This analysis was summed up in the list of “thirty-nine basic labors,” or acts of creation, that were carried out at that time.

The 39 Activities of the Mishnah

Mishnah: “The primary labors are forty less one”

1. sowing
2. plowing
3. reaping
4. binding sheaves
5. threshing
6. winnowing
7. selecting
8. grinding
9. sifting
10. kneading
11. baking
12. shearing wool
13. bleaching
14. hackling
15. dyeing
16. spinning
17. stretching the threads
18. the making of two meshes
19. weaving two threads
20. dividing two threads
21. tying [knots]
22. untying
23. sewing two stitches
24. tearing in order to sew two stitches
25. capturing a deer
26. slaughtering
27. flaying
28. salting it
29. curing its hide
30. scraping it [of its hair]
31. cutting it up
32. writing two letters [characters]
33. erasing in order to write two letters
34. building
35. pulling down
36. extinguishing
37. kindling
38. striking with a hammer
39. carrying from one domain to another

These 39 activities are the prototypes of work forbidden and permitted on the Sabbath. The

MISHNAH in which this list appears classified the types of work by objective, from preparation and cultivation, to processing of leather, metal, and fabrics.

Each of the 39 prototypes has its offspring (TOLADOT), types of labor similar in essence, even if different in detail.

Milking cows, for example, comes under the category of Threshing. The association becomes clear when you realize that threshing is an action aimed at extracting the edible content from an object that is not itself earmarked at the time for consumption. Milking is the same function, although in a different sphere.

[See the Grace Notes topic on the 39 Categories of Work from a modern perspective.]

There is also the question of quantity when discussion labor. How much of a certain activity is meaningful? For example, what are the limits of writing on the Sabbath? The scholars decided that writing two letters (characters) on the Sabbath constituted a significant amount of work, so writing more than one letter was forbidden.

Other acts, which might not of themselves be thought of as creative, become creative when associated with other acts. So that, while demolishing a building is not a prohibited creative effort, it becomes prohibited if the destruction is done to make way for a new building.

There is also extensive discussion in the Talmud on the question of intention, with fine distinctions being drawn among various aspects of intention, knowledge, and intentional and unpremeditated consequences of actions.

Based on many scriptures, like Isaiah 58:13, "Call the Sabbath a delight," the sages fashioned the image of the Sabbath as a time of "sanctity, rest, and delight."

Another aspect of Talmudic development was the construction of a whole network of fixed boundaries, within which a person is permitted to act, to walk, and so on, on the Sabbath. From Exodus 16:29, "Let no man go out of his place on the seventh day." This is, in fact, the first Sabbath command, actually preceding the Ten Commandments.

Some sects, like the Karaites, did not go outdoors on the Sabbath for any reason. The Talmud tradition is more liberal, but much more complicated.

The Sabbath boundary was the first idea to be discussed, leading to the establishment of 2000 cubits being a Sabbath Day's journey.

Generally speaking "four authorities" were established for the Sabbath – four types of areas defined according to the way in which they were bordered and by practical usage.

The first was the "exempt location", an unrestricted area where carrying burdens on the Sabbath is permitted. Then, there were areas like fields, oceans, semi-built-up areas, on which there were certain restrictions. The third authority was the "private domain", areas which are clearly marked out; and finally "the public domain."

These ideas lead, in King Solomon's time, to the concept of the *irubin*, the expansion of the concept of the fixed boundary, extending it to include forms of demarcation that are not so evident to the eye, but are no less real. The Tractate IRUVIN deals with this whole range of subjects about borders and such.

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