

# Understanding the Secret of the Sabbath

## Part 2

by Rabbi David Fohrman



# Exactly What *Was* God Doing on That Seventh Day?

We had asked the question: *Why would the Creator be so committed to His own day of rest?* It turns out that a clue comes from the verse in the Torah that first introduces us to the idea of Shabbat. One of these verses seems to contradict itself..

And God finished on the Seventh Day the work that He had made, and He rested on the Seventh Day from all the work that He had made (Bereishit, 2:2).

Perhaps you spotted the difficulty: *What, exactly, did God do on the Seventh Day? Did He rest or did He work?* The answer seems to depend on which part of the verse you focus upon.

And God finished on the Seventh Day the work that He had made, and He rested on the Seventh Day from all the work that He had made (Bereishit, 2:2).

The first part tells us that God finished on the Seventh Day the work that He had made. This seems to suggest that God did *some* work on the Seventh Day. He completed His efforts on that day.

And God finished on the Seventh Day the work that He had made, and He rested on the Seventh Day from all the work that He had made (Bereishit, 2:2).

But then the verse goes on to say that God rested on the Seventh Day from *all* the work that He had made. This second phrase seems to tell us that God was *not* working on the Seventh Day. To the contrary, He rested from *all his work* on this day.

“So which is it? Did God rest from all His work on the seventh day, or did He create something on this day?”

# Rashi's Answer

As it turns out, we are not the first to come upon this question. *Rashi* addresses it and gives two possible answers to the problem.

## Answer 1

*Rashi* suggests that perhaps God finished creating the world at the very instant that the Sixth Day ended and the Seventh Day began. In that way, He would have finished creating on the instant the Seventh Day began, but God still would have rested for the entirety of that day.

But *Rashi* gives a second answer as well, a solution that doesn't require us to split hairs in time between the Sixth and Seventh Day.

## Answer 2

*Rashi* suggests that the contradiction is just an illusion: that God indeed created something on the Seventh Day - and simultaneously, He was completely at rest on that day. The thing that the Almighty created on the Seventh Day, *Rashi* says, was rest itself. God brought rest into existence on Shabbat.

Now, this answer certainly seems ingenious: It allows us to see how God could both rest and create at the same time. But the answer smacks a bit of wordplay. Is rest something that needed to be created? Rest is just the absence of work.

If God wanted rest, all He would have to do is stop working. Right?

**Wrong.**

*Rashi* is suggesting to us that there is such a thing as rest that needs to be created. It is a kind of rest that is different from the rest we usually experience, the mere absence of labor. It is a rest which is not just a negative phenomenon, but a positive one. It is not an absence, but a presence.

# Understanding Rest by Understanding “Work”

To get a better handle on this elusive notion of God’s rest, we might do well to ponder for a moment the nature of God’s “work.” If we can understand more clearly what God was up to those first six days, we may be better able to understand what it means to say that He “rested” from this activity on the seventh.

The term that *halachah*, Jewish law and jurisprudence, assigns to labor on Shabbat is *melachah*. The word is borrowed from *Bereishit* chapter 2, which describes the “labor” that God was involved in when creating the world. The labor which we desist from on Shabbat corresponds in some fundamental way to the labor God desisted from on the original Shabbat.

The truth is, “labor” is probably the wrong word to be using here. The English term labor conjures up images of sweat and hardship – images which obviously have little to do with Divine creation of the Universe.

In fact, the more common word for work, *avodah*, indicates that mundane, run-of-the-mill kind of labor. It suggests the kind of work that requires exertion and makes you tired. *Melachah*, on the other hand, calls to mind something else entirely.

## Definitions of Labor

**a:** expenditure of physical or mental effort especially when difficult or compulsory

**b:** physical or mental work, especially of hard or fatiguing kind

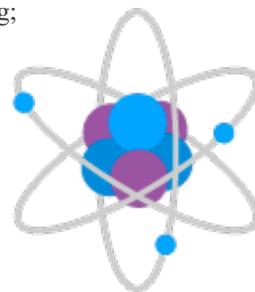
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### Melachah Acts

Jewish law classifies thirty-nine basic acts as *melachah*. With the possible exception of carrying, the common denominator of all thirty-nine is the idea of transformation; of taking a certain substance present in the world, and transforming it into a higher, more developed state of being, through an intelligent agent’s conscious intervention. When I bake something, I take mere raw ingredients and make them into a cake. When I weave something, I take mere threads and create a cloak. I am developing the world around me, molding it to suit my will.

It was this kind of work that the Almighty engaged in for most of the six days of Creation.

In the first moment of *Bereishit*, God made something from nothing. First there was Nothing; then, all of a sudden, there was Something. From then on, though, He was doing something else -- taking that which was, and molding it into something more complex and sophisticated. He was taking electrons and protons and molding them into hydrogen atoms. He was taking water, and causing species of marine life to arise from it (*Bereishit* 1:20). He was taking earth, and fashioning out of it the body of a human being (2:7). God was performing *melachah*, the kind of thing you do when you want to create a world.



## God's Melachah; Man's Melachah

We are now, incidentally, ready to respond to that coworker, acquaintance or seatmate on a plane who asks about the funny way we seem to observe Shabbat.

The answer lies in an understanding of the nature of *melachah*.

When God created the world, His activity had very little in common with dragging a heavy table around the house. But it had everything to do with igniting the filament inside a light bulb.

Dragging a table just moves things around; it isn't transformative in any way. Igniting the filament, though -- as routine as it seems -- is an act of *melachah*, one in which man purposefully transforms his surroundings to suit his needs. Every time one kindles fire, plows, weaves -- no matter how easily and routinely he does it -- he masters the world around him and molds it to suit his liking in a way that animals could never do. In fact, one might even argue that the more routinely man engages in these actions, the more his mastery is evidenced. When man takes the raw material of the world around him and molds it -- brings it into higher states of being in accordance with his will -- he imitates his Heavenly Creator.



God refrained from *melachah* on the Seventh Day. And He deemed the rest, which replaced that *melachah*, to be the ultimate meaning of His creation.

So that's why we're allowed to move furniture at whim, but can't flick a simple light switch on or off. But we still haven't answered the question that we opened with: Why did God need to rest after creating the world? Whether it's *melacha* or *avodah*, why would an All-Powerful Being need to take a breather?

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