

VAYAKHEL

PARSHA GUIDE

Welcome to the Aleph Beta Study Guide to Parshat Vayakhel!

Getting to Thirty Nine

What does “work” mean to you? Does it mean earning a paycheck? Breaking a sweat? As most of us know, the Torah prohibits work on the Sabbath – but the word means different things to different people. Can you run a marathon on the Sabbath? What if it doesn’t *feel* like “work”?

The Talmud answers these questions in detail, listing fully thirty-nine different categories of work, along with all of their sub-categories and sub-sub-categories. The Sages identify hundreds of laws that govern the observance of the Sabbath: laws about how to cut and heat your food, about what and where to carry, and about how to tie your shoes. And where do they look to formulate these laws? **The Sages say that the basis for understanding what “work” is comes from this week’s parsha, Parshat Vayakhel.**

Looking at the Verses

So when you open this week’s parsha, you expect to find a lot of information. You might expect that there would be at least thirty-nine verses focusing on the topic of the Sabbath, spelling out the distinct categories of work and explaining what each one entails. But that’s not what we find. Instead, we find a mere three verses, at the very beginning of the parsha, in which Moses commands Israel regarding Sabbath observance.



LOOK INSIDE

Read through Exodus 35:1-3. Would you say that these verses paint a clear picture of what is prohibited on the Sabbath?

Exodus 35:1-3

1 Moses called the whole community of the children of Israel to assemble, and he said to them: “These are the things that the Lord commanded to make. **2** Six days work may be done, but on the seventh day you shall have sanctity, a day of complete rest to the Lord; whoever performs work thereon [on this day] shall be put to death. **3** You shall not kindle fire in any of your dwelling places on the Sabbath day.”

שמות לה:א-ג

א וַיִּקְהַל מֹשֶׁה, אֶת-כָּל-עֵדֻת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל--וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם: אֱלֹהִים, הַדְּבָרִים, אֲשֶׁר-צִוָּה יְקוּה, לַעֲשׂוֹת אֹתָם. **ב** שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים, תַּעֲשֶׂה מְלָאכָה, וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי יִהְיֶה לָכֶם קֹדֶשׁ שַׁבַּת שַׁבְּתוֹן, לִיקוּה; כָּל-הַעֲשֶׂה בּו מְלָאכָה, יוּמָת. **ג** לֹא-תִבְעְרוּ אֵשׁ, בְּכָל מִשְׁבְּתֵיכֶם, בְּיוֹם, הַשַּׁבָּת.



INSTRUCTIONS

There are a lot of divrei Torah on the parsha. How is this different?

At Aleph Beta, we believe that the Torah is a guidebook that answers life's biggest questions, offering profound insights about how we should live our lives. Moreover, we believe that Jewish tradition has always recognized the right of all readers, in every generation, to look at the text themselves and try to decide what they think it means. That means you. That's why you are the most important author of this quest through the sources. We think that this guide offers a fun, stimulating and relevant path through the sources, but if you get wrapped up in a stimulating discussion and never make it past page 2, we'll consider that a success!

Is this guide for self-study or should I study it with others?

Either works! You can gather a small group of friends to explore it together, share it with a chevruta (learning partner), or go through it by yourself.

Do I need to prepare anything or can I just jump in?

Just jump in! Even if you're planning to use this for a group discussion, just open up to page 1 and get going. (If you read it in advance, it will spoil the fun!) The only thing you should do in advance is print out copies of the "Source Sheet" for the other participants, so everyone can follow along and engage with the sources.

About the Author

Most of the material within – although not the particular language contained in this guide - was first developed and taught by Rabbi David Fohrman, founder and CEO of Aleph Beta, and is presented in his video, "Parshat Vayakhel: What Does It Mean To Be Created in the Image of God?" (available for viewing at www.alephbeta.org). This guide was written by Yaakov Trump, Writer at Aleph Beta, edited by Rivky Stern and Beth Lesch, and arranged by Laura Schembre.

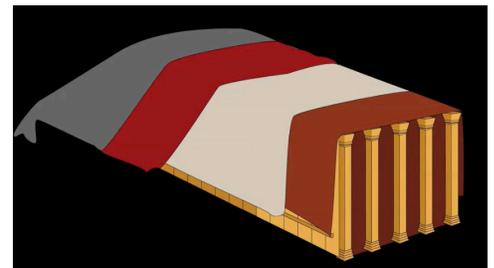
If you didn't know anything else about the Sabbath, and you read this passage, you would not have a clear sense of what to avoid on the Sabbath. You would know that "work" -- or "melacha," in Hebrew -- is off limits - but you wouldn't really know what "melacha" is. The only specific you could point to is: no kindling a fire in your home. There's certainly nothing here about preparing food, carrying, or tying shoes.

It sort of makes you wonder: If the Sages derive their understanding of prohibited Sabbath work from this parsha, what were they seeing that we're missing?

A Critical Juxtaposition

It turns out that the Sages weren't just looking at these three verses. They were also looking at the very next topic of discussion.

Immediately after these verses about the Sabbath, we're told about a commandment to construct the Mishkan (Tabernacle). The Sages took note of this – that these two topics, Sabbath and Mishkan, are discussed one right after another in the text. So they made a startling inference. They said that the template for prohibited work on the Sabbath can be derived from the way the Mishkan was constructed¹. In other words, if you want to understand what it is that you're *not* allowed to do on the Sabbath, just look at what the people *did* when constructing the Mishkan.



¹ Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 49b

To make the Mishkan, the people wove beautiful linens - so no weaving on the Sabbath. They used a range of colors to dye the linens - so no dyeing on the Sabbath. The Sages identify thirty-nine different activities that were used to build the Mishkan - and all are prohibited on the Sabbath.

Probing the Inference



PONDER THIS

This explanation that we just offered - for why we derive the laws of the Sabbath from the laws of the Mishkan - might be familiar to you, or you might be hearing it for the first time. Either way, think about it and ask yourself: Are you satisfied with this explanation? Does it resonate with you? If not, what do you find dissatisfying?

It's one thing to understand the *legal inference* that the Talmud is making here – but let's ask a broader, conceptual question. Is there some deep connection between Sabbath and Mishkan that we're supposed to see? Because at first glance, these two things seem to have nothing to do with each other, aside from the fact that they appear back-to-back in the Torah. *Why* would God ordain that our experience of Sabbath should derive from what people did to make the Mishkan? What are we meant to understand from that? You can't help but feel that it's sort of arbitrary.

Let's start by looking at one of the verses which describes the Mishkan, and we'll see if we can find any clues.

The Missing Link



LOOK INSIDE

Take a look at this verse, from later in the same chapter, which describes the building of the Mishkan. Do you notice anything that reminds you of the Sabbath?

Exodus 35:21

21 Every man whose heart uplifted him came, and everyone whose spirit inspired him to generosity brought the offering of the Lord for the work of the Tent of Meeting, for all its service, and for the holy garments.

שמות לה:כא

כא וַיָּבֵאוּ, כָּל-אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר-נִשְׂאוֹ לִבּוֹ; וְכָל אִשׁ
נְדָבָה רוּחוֹ אָתוֹ, הֵבִיאוּ אֶת-תְּרוּמַת יְקוּהָ
לְמִלְאכַת אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וְלִכְל-עֲבֹדָתוֹ, וְלִבְגָדֵי
הַקֹּדֶשׁ.

Did you see it? In the middle of the verse, the word “work²”? That’s the very same word that we found in the Sabbath verses – “melacha” – the word whose definition eluded us. Isn’t that curious?

This word “melacha” links Sabbath and Mishkan – it turns out that this is the key to unearthing the deeper connection between the two concepts. In order to see it, we’ll need to trace the word “melacha” all the way back to the beginning, to the first time that it appears in the Bible.

Back to the Beginning



PONDER THIS

When is the first time that the Bible uses the word “melacha”?

Hint: Think about the “Vayechulu” that we say at the beginning of kiddush on Friday night. Where does that come from?

The first time that we find the word “melacha” in the Bible is at the very beginning, in the story of the creation of the world:

Genesis 2:2

2 And God completed on the seventh day His work that He did, and He abstained on the seventh day from all His work that He did.

בראשית ב:ב

ב וַיְכַל אֱלֹהִים בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי מְלַאכְתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה; וַיִּשְׁבֹּת בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי, מְכַל-מְלַאכְתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה.



PONDER THIS

Based on this verse, how would you define the term “melacha”?

The verse says that God was abstaining from all of the “melacha” that He did. The term “melacha” seems to refer to everything God did when creating the world: making Light, separating waters, sprouting vegetation, forming luminaries, creating animals and so on.

Consulting the Dictionary

Let’s compare these two kinds of “melacha.” Because depending on which verse you look at, you end up with a very different definition of the word. If you look at the Mishkan, your definition is:

² מְלַאכְתּוֹ is really the same word as מְלַאכָה, but here it appears in a slightly different grammatical form. Technically, מְלַאכְתּוֹ means “the melacha of.”

melacha: the work that *Israel* did to build the *Mishkan*

But if you look at Genesis, then your definition is:

melacha: the work that *God* did to create the *world*



PONDER THIS

Think about these two definitions. What do they have in common? Come up with as many similarities as you can.

I want to make a bold claim. What if I told you that these two acts - creating the world and building the Mishkan - are really, conceptually, the same thing?

The key here is understanding what God was really doing when He created the world. Once we see that, the connection to the Mishkan -- and by extension, to the laws of Sabbath -- will become clear.

Nothing and Everything

So what *was* God doing when He created the world? As we said, it was a busy six days. But if you were to take a snapshot of "Before Creation" and compare it to "After Creation," what would be the major difference between them?

It seems like a completely absurd question to ask, doesn't it? Because before creation, there was *nothing* -- and after creation, there was *everything*! There's no comparison.



PONDER THIS

Think about that statement: "Before creation, there was *nothing* -- and after creation, there was *everything*." That's certainly true from *our* perspective. But it's not really true from God's perspective. Why not?

Assuming God's Perspective

Here's how I see it: From the human perspective, it makes sense to say, "Before creation, there was *nothing* -- and after creation, there was *everything*." As human beings, we live in a world of space and time, this universe of stars, planets, hydrogen, and oxygen. None of that existed before creation. *Nothing* existed.

But if you're God, you don't need stars, planets, hydrogen or oxygen in order to exist. Before creation, before all of those things existed, you were doing just fine. You were living in your own tremendous realm - outside of space, outside of time - as hard as it is for us humans to imagine. You were all that existed - and that *was* everything. You would hardly say that before creation, there was nothing.

The more you think about it, from God's point of view, creation didn't *make* everything. There already *was* an everything. If anything, creation was almost a kind of diminishment. It was like God carved out a space in His *everything* for something else, for something that wasn't God, for all of these physical things: the light, water, vegetation, luminaries, animals and so on. The Kabbalists called this idea "*tzimtzum*," which means contraction. God contracted Himself to make space for something else to exist.

The Question of Why

At first, God was all there was. And God decided to pull Himself back from a little corner of His existence, so that something else - our world - could occupy that space. *Why* did God do that?



PONDER THIS

Why do you think God created the world? Philosophers and theologians have grappled with this question for millennia, and have offered many answers. (But don't feel limited to explanations you've heard before!)

Here's my take: God did it for the same reason that many people have children. He wanted to grant life to a being, a separate being possessed of free will, to whom He could give, and with whom He could form a relationship. God created the world out of love.

The Necessary Elements

And what did God need to do, to give us life? Yes, He had to create our physical bodies, and breathe into our nostrils "the breath of life." But before all of that, God had to prepare the world for us. He created the sun, to give us light and warmth. He made plants sprout, so we would have something to eat and oxygen to breathe.

But God's work went beyond even that. Because in order to live in this world, we need more than just the sun and plants. We require perfectly calibrated laws of physics: a nuclear strong force in perfect ratio to a nuclear weak force, gravity, electromagnetism, Planck's Constant, the four laws of thermodynamics - the list goes on. All of these things need to be in perfect balance in order for the environment to work.

All of these highly technical laws of nature -- God doesn't *need* them at all. He can live without them, no problem. But the being that He created - man - does need them. And so God busied Himself with them, taking care that every aspect of this new world should be a perfect home for His new creation. And God did all of that out of love.

The Space Within

The whole process of creating the world was very much akin to the biology of having a child. A womb is a space within a person that, strangely, isn't there for themselves. Your whole body, all of your organs, every last one of them, it's all there to nourish your life -- except for one part of the human body that isn't there for you, but for someone else. And that's the womb. It's a little piece of your everything which is carved out to make space for something which isn't you.



And what is it like inside of the womb? The conditions have to be just right. Everything is optimized to give the fetus exactly what it needs. Because a developing fetus couldn't exist in our world. Just like how mankind can't exist in God's world.

Two Apartments

Let's recap: When God created the world, He was really carving out a space in His everything, creating an "apartment," of sorts, for the one that He loved. To do so, God had to pay attention to a bunch of highly technical laws -- not because *He* needed them, but because *we* did.



PONDER THIS

So let's ask the question again: What's the similarity between God creating the world, and Israel building the Mishkan?

Isn't that exactly what Israel did in building the Mishkan? The people looked at *their* everything: the universe of space and time, and they said: *We're going to carve out a little section of our world, and set it aside as a home for God.*

In doing so, they had to pay attention to lots of highly technical laws -- laws of *tumah* (impurity) and *taharah* (purity), *kodesh* (sacred) and *chol* (profane), laws about what color, what material, and precisely what size the inner curtains needed to be. These are laws that have nothing to do with the human realm. *We* don't need them in order to exist. They're laws that pertain to God's realm. But the people observed them because they cared about God and wanted the Mishkan to be a "comfortable" environment for Him. It's much the way that God maintains the laws of physics for us.

The Mishkan is the apartment that we make for God, the one that we love. It's the way that we reciprocate what God did for us, when He created the world.

That's why the word "melacha" is used in both places: to describe God's creation of the world, and to describe Israel's building of the Mishkan. Yes, one involved forming the sun and the stars, while the other involving weaving and dyeing curtains -- but on a fundamental level, they are really the same thing: creating a home for the one you love.

The Looming Question



PONDER THIS

We're finally ready to come back to the question about our Sabbath. Why do we look to the Mishkan, of all places, to derive the laws of prohibited labor?

Hint: Recall that God spent six days creating an “apartment” for us - and on the seventh day, He rested from all of that work.

Here's how I see it: God rested from the “melacha” that He did when he created the apartment for us. That was God's Sabbath. So we rest from the “melacha” that we did to create God's apartment. That's *our* Sabbath. That's why we get our laws from the labor of the Mishkan. It all adds up. We're just doing what God did.

The Epitome of Creation

And doesn't it make sense that we should do what God did? After all, when God created human beings, He created us *b'tzelem Elokim*, in His image:

Genesis 1:27

וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ, בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים
And God created man in His image; in the image of God

Being created *b'tzelem Elokim*, in God's image, means that we are meant to imitate Him. Little creator is meant to imitate big Creator. Just like God created a home for us, His loved ones, so too, we built a home for God, the One who we love. Building the Mishkan was an expression of our truly reflecting God's image.

The Builder

Let's take a look at one final detail from our parsha. *Who* actually builds the Mishkan?

Exodus 35:30–31

30 Moses said to the children of Israel: “See, the Lord has called by name Bezalel, the son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah. **31** He has imbued him with the spirit of God, with wisdom, with insight, and with knowledge, and with [talent for] all manner of work.

שמות לה:ל-לא

ל וַיִּאֶמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, רְאוּ קָרָא יְקוּהָ
בְּשֵׁם, בְּצִלְאֵל בֶּן-אוּרִי בֶן-חֹוּר, לְמִטֵּה יְהוּדָה.
לא וַיִּמְלֵא אֹתוֹ, רוּחַ אֱלֹהִים, בְּחָכְמָה בְּתַבּוּנָה
וּבְדַעַת, וּבְכָל-מְלָאכָה.

Yes, all of the people contribute to the Mishkan - but God appoints a primary builder and He calls him בְּצַלְאֵל ("Betzael").



PONDER THIS

Betzael is a pretty interesting name. What if you were to break the word apart? Does it sound like anything we've encountered in this guide?

How about:

Genesis 1:27

בְּצַלְמֵ אֱלֹהִים
In the image of God

If the Mishkan is the ultimate example of our imitating God, then it makes perfect sense that Betzael – he who is in the *image of God* – should be the one to build it. Betzael is the one who realizes the vast potential of humanity to be like God. He represents all of us in attaining our collective potential. He is our agent, in a way, to realize our very humanity. He allows us all to attain our destiny as *tzelem Elohim*, being Godlike, creating the apartment for the One who we love.

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Thanks for understanding - we love you guys, too.

Exodus 35:1-3

1 Moses called the whole community of the children of Israel to assemble, and he said to them: "These are the things that the Lord commanded to make. **2** Six days work may be done, but on the seventh day you shall have sanctity, a day of complete rest to the Lord; whoever performs work thereon [on this day] shall be put to death. **3** You shall not kindle fire in any of your dwelling places on the Sabbath day."

שמות לה:א-ג

א וַיִּקְהַל מֹשֶׁה, אֶת-כָּל-עֵדֻת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל--וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם: אֱלֹהִים, הַדְּבָרִים, אֲשֶׁר-צִוָּה יְקוּה, לַעֲשׂוֹת אִתְּם. **ב** שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים, תַּעֲשֶׂה מְלָאכָה, וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי יִהְיֶה לָכֶם קִדְוֹשׁ שַׁבַּת שַׁבְּתוֹן, לִיקוּה; כָּל-הַעֲשֶׂה בּו מְלָאכָה, יוּמָת. **ג** לֹא-תִבְעֲרוּ אֵשׁ, בְּכָל מִשְׁבְּתֵיכֶם, בַּיּוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת.

Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 49b

[A certain group of Sages] sat again and they raised a dilemma: That which we learned [in the Mishnah]: The primary categories of labor, [which are prohibited by Torah law on Shabbat,] are forty-less-one; to what does this correspond? Rabbi Chanina bar Chama said to them: They correspond to the labors in the Tabernacle.

בבלי מסכת שבת מט:

הדור יתבי וקמיבעיא להו: הא דתנן אבות מלאכות ארבעים חסר אחת כנגד מי? אמר להו רבי חנינא בר חמא: כנגד עבודות המשכן

Exodus 35:21

21 Every man whose heart uplifted him came, and everyone whose spirit inspired him to generosity brought the offering of the Lord for the work of the Tent of Meeting, for all its service, and for the holy garments.

שמות לה:כא

כא וַיָּבֹאוּ, כָּל-אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר-נִשְׂאוֹ לִבּוֹ; וְכֹל אֲשֶׁר נָדְבָה רוּחוֹ אֹתוֹ, הֵבִיאוּ אֶת-תְּרוּמַת יְקוּה לְמַלְאכַת אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וּלְכָל-עֲבֹדָתוֹ, וּלְבִגְדֵי הַקֹּדֶשׁ.

Genesis 2:2

2 And God completed on the seventh day His work that He did, and He abstained on the seventh day from all His work that He did.

בראשית ב:ב

ב וַיְכַל אֱלֹקִים בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי, מְלָאכְתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה; וַיִּשְׁבֹּת בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי, מִכָּל-מְלָאכְתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה.

Exodus 35:30-31

30 Moses said to the children of Israel: "See, the Lord has called by name Bezalel, the son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah. **31** He has imbued him with the spirit of God, with wisdom, with insight, and with knowledge, and with [talent for] all manner of work.

שמות לה:ל-לא

ל וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, רְאוּ קָרָא יְהוָה בְּשֵׁם, בְּצִלְאֵל בֶּן-אוּרִי בֶן-חֹר, לְמִטְה יְהוּדָה. **לא** וַיִּמְלֵא אֹתוֹ, רוּחַ אֱלֹקִים, בְּחָכְמָה בְּתַבּוּנָה וּבְדַעַת, וּבְכָל-מְלָאכָה.