

Discerning the Will (*Ratzon*) of God

Daily in Jewish prayers, we thank God for our essential nature by saying:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, שֶׁעָשָׂנִי כְרִצּוֹנוֹ:

Ba'ruch A'tah A'do'nai, E'lo'hei'nu Me'lech Ha'O'lam, she'a'sa'ni kir'tzo'no.

Blessed are You, Eternal One our God, Ruler of the Universe,
who has made me according to the Divine Will.

That is to say, we make the tacit assumption that we are God's creatures, and that our very existence is desired / willed by God. As Jews, we believe that we live out that existence best by fulfilling what our traditions teach us to be the mitzvot, the divine commandments. These are divided into two categories: chukkim and mishpatim. The mishpatim (ethical matters) are the most straightforward, as these are understood to be laws that all rational beings could discern or deduce, like not committing murder or bearing false witness. No society worthy of the name would tolerate each person simply doing what s/he feels like. More difficult to understand are the chukkim, laws for which there is no obvious moral imperative. Most Jewish ritual observances, including the keeping of Shabbat, fall into this category.

Some mitzvot are expressed directly in the Torah as coming from the mouth of God, like the Ten Commandments. Others (often the particulars of observance) are discerned through centuries of study by our rabbinic sages. Thus, for example, the fourth commandment in Exodus 20:8-11 reads:

זְכוֹר אֶת-יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת לְקַדְּשׁוֹ: שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים תַּעֲבֹד וְעָשִׂיתָ כָּל-מְלַאכְתֶּךָ: י וְיוֹם
הַשְּׁבִיעִי שַׁבָּת לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לֹא-תַעֲשֶׂה כָּל-מְלַאכָה אַתָּה וּבִנְךָ וּבִתֶּךָ עַבְדְּךָ
וְאִמְתֶּךָ וּבַהֲמֹתֶךָ וְגֵרְךָ אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעְרֶיךָ:
י א כִּי שֵׁשֶׁת-יָמִים עָשָׂה יְהוָה אֶת-הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת-הָאָרֶץ אֶת-הַיָּם
וְאֶת-כָּל-אֲשֶׁר-בָּם וַיִּנַּח בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי עַל-כֵּן בֵּרַךְ יְהוָה אֶת-יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת
וַיְקַדְּשֵׁהוּ:

8. Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.

9. Six days shall you labour, and do all your work;

10. But the seventh day is the sabbath of the Eternal One your God; in it you shall not do any work: not you, nor your son, nor your daughter, your manservant, nor your maidservant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger that is within your gates;

11. For in six days the Eternal One made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore God blessed the sabbath day, and made it holy.

Sounds simple, but there are major questions here. First of all - what is WORK? And what is REST? Not all people would define these in the same way. Gardening, for example, might be a relaxing pleasure for some, whereas for others, it is a chore. Should we leave it up to individuals to decide? Certainly not after ritual observance, rather than cultic sacrifice, became the main expression of Jewish duty. The rabbis' goal in the early centuries of the common era was to have general agreement in the community of what best expressed the fulfillment of God's will. Thus, they attempted to categorise and codify Jewish practice, beginning with the Mishnah, and completed by the Gemarra (TALMUD) and later codes of law, like the Shulchan Aruch.

39 Kinds of Work Traditionally Prohibited on Shabbat – compiled from the Mishnah and Internet sources including Wikipedia and AskMoses.com

What are they? The 39 melachot are not so much activities as *categories* of activity. For example, while "winnowing" usually refers exclusively to the separation of chaff from grain, it refers in the Talmudic sense to any separation of intermixed materials which renders edible that which was inedible. Thus, filtering undrinkable water to make it drinkable falls under this category, as does picking small bones from fish. (Gefilte fish is a traditional Ashkenazi solution to this problem.)

Many rabbinical scholars have pointed out that these labours have something in common -- they prohibit any activity that is creative, or that exercises control or dominion over one's environment. Some say that they were drawn out from the portion of the Torah that immediately follows the giving of the laws, which describes what is to be done to build a dwelling place for God amongst the people. Since work on the Temple - clearly work for God - was prohibited on Shabbat, this must hold the key.

The 39 categories of activity prohibited on Shabbat can be divided into four groups.

I. The first 11 categories are activities required to bake bread

The first 11 of the 39 concern that indispensable staple of life--bread, since bread was baked on a weekly basis for the Temple service. Since the bread tree has yet to be genetically engineered, various things must be done to bring forth bread from dirt: planting wheat, plowing the field, reaping grown wheat stalks, binding sheaves of wheat, threshing, winnowing, sifting kernels, grinding, sifting flour, kneading dough, and finally, baking. Any and all of the above are Shabbat no-nos. But since most of us are not farmers, it's unlikely that you'll find yourself doing any of these over the weekend. However, there are many tuldots that originate in these 11 prohibitions.

II. The next 13 categories are activities required to make a garment

In the Tabernacle and later the Temple, richly colored, ornately decorated and intricately woven materials were the fabric of daily life: the priests' uniforms, the exquisite cloth partitions, and the giant leather and cloth sheets that served as a multi-layer roof. Preparing these textiles involved the next 13 *melachot*: shearing, bleaching, combing and dyeing wool; spinning and weaving thread/yarn, making two loops (as an anchor on which to base material); sewing two threads together, separating two threads, tying a knot, loosening a knot, sewing two stitches (to attach sections of material), and tearing (other threads or material) in order to sew two stitches. Though stupendous be thy sartorial skills, sorry, they'll have to sit Shabbat out.

III. The next 7 categories are activities required to make leather

Our textual tour through the creation of the Mishkan takes us to the Desert Leather Factory, where the Jews of old created portions of the Mishkan's roof out of animal hides. Making leather and parchment entails seven steps, which make up Melachot Nos. 25-31: trapping deer, slaughtering it; and flaying, salting, curing, scraping and cutting its hides. Today, this translates into no weekend deer or duck huntin' out in them thar backwoods, and no leatherworking, on the Day of Rest.

IV. The remaining 8 have to do with building

The remaining eight *Melachot* comprise the bulk manual labours that manual labour is comprised of--when you're a working person, you can't avoid the following, and neither could the Mishkan-makers: writing two letters, erasing (old text) in order to write two letters, extinguishing a flame, igniting a flame, striking with a hammer, and carrying (an object) from one domain to another. Today, you can't avoid these either; the tuldot originating from these eight have been interpreted by Halachic authorities to prohibit much of work as we know it. Among the most prominent tuldot issuing from this block of melachot are the prohibitions of using a writing instrument (source: "writing two letters"), driving (source: "igniting a flame," as in your car's combustion engine), and carrying your briefcase out your front door and down the street (source: "carrying from one domain to another").

Whilst Orthodoxy has always taken a very firm line on continuing to follow the traditional practices that developed, Progressive Judaism has tended to feel that stringent observances without understanding can lead to alienation from our community entirely. That is why we adopt the stance that whilst ethical laws are equally binding on all, in regards to ritual matters. we encourage learning, active engagement and informed choice. This is entirely consistent with our position that the whole of the Bible, including the Torah, is the product of human efforts to understand what God wants of us. We do not accept it as the literally dictated word of God, divine in origin.