

Introduction to Tractate Shabbat

Tractate *Shabbat* deals with the Sabbath, with special attention given to the definition of Sabbath repose, preparing for the Sabbath, and acts of labor not to be carried out on the Sabbath.

- I. Dimensions: space, time, and the Sabbath
 - A. Space
 - B. Time
- II. Preparing for the Sabbath: light, food, and clothing for the Sabbath
 - A. The Sabbath lamp
 - B. Food for the Sabbath
 - C. Ornaments for animals, clothing for persons
- III. Prohibited acts of labor on the Sabbath: not transporting objects from one domain to another
 - A. The generative categories of prohibited acts of labor
 - B. Domains and the prohibition of transporting objects from one domain to another
 - C. The prohibition of carrying on the Sabbath across the lines of domains
 - D. Throwing objects from one domain to another
- IV. Prohibited acts of labor
 - A. What constitutes a whole act of labor
 - B. Healing on the Sabbath
 - C. Knot-tying, clothing, and beds
- V. Actions that are permitted on the Sabbath
 - A. Saving objects from a fire on the Sabbath
 - B. Handling objects on the Sabbath in private domain
 - C. Circumcision on the Sabbath
 - D. Preparing food for man and beast
 - E. Seemly and unseemly behavior on the Sabbath

The Israelite household at rest recapitulates the celebration of God at the moment of the conclusion and perfection of creation, at the end of the sixth day of creation and sunset on the eve of the seventh day. Then the Israelite household, like creation at sunset marking the end of the sixth day of creation, is sanctified: separated from the profane world and distinguished as God's domain. With all things in place and in order, at the sunset that marks the advent of the seventh day, the rest that celebrates the perfection of creation descends. The sanctification takes place through that very act of perfect repose that recapitulates the one celebrated at the climax of creation. Like God at the celebration of creation, now man achieves perfect, appropriate rest. That takes place when time and

circumstance, but space, too, come together. The advent of the Sabbath marks the time; the household, the space; and the conduct of home and family life, the circumstance.

The Sabbath marks the celebration of creation's perfection (Gen. 2: 1–3). Food for the day is to be prepared in advance (Exo. 16:22–26, 29–30). Fire is not to be kindled on that day, thus there is to be no cooking (Exo. 35: 2–3). Servile labor is not to be performed on that day by the householder and his dependents, including his chattel (Exo. 20: 8–11; 23:12; 31:12-17; 34:21). The *where* matters as much as the *when* and the *how*. People are supposed to stay in their place: “Let each person remain in place, let no one leave his place on the seventh day” (Exo. 16:29), understanding by place the private domain of the household (subject to further clarification in due course).

At issue in Sabbath rest is not ceasing from labor but ceasing from labor of a very particular character, that is, the labor which imitates God's work in making the world. Why are the issues of space, time, and activity important? Given the division of space into public domain, where nothing much can happen, and the private domain of the household, where nearly everything dealt with in the law at hand takes place, we realize that the Sabbath forms an occasion of the household. There man takes up repose, leaving off the tools required to make the world and ceasing to perform the acts that sustain the world.