

## Introduction to Tractate Besah

Tractate *Besah* (a.k.a. *Yom Tob*, “a good day,” festival) deals with the preparation of food on the festival day itself. It is not permitted to prepare food on the Sabbath, but on the festival day Scripture permits doing so: “On the first day you shall hold a holy assembly, and on the seventh day a holy assembly; no work shall be done on those days; but what everyone must eat, that only may be prepared by you” (Exo. 12:16). What is permitted on the first and seventh days of Passover is also permitted on Pentecost and on the first and seventh days of Tabernacles.

The tractate covers preparing food on the festival day.

- I. Cases and their implications
- II. Designating food before the festival for use on the festival
- III. Doing actions connected with preparing food on a festival day in a different manner from ordinary days; other restrictions
- IV. The status of a person’s possessions in respect to the Sabbath limit

One may prepare food on the festival days of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. Scripture is explicit on that point. But the law of *Besah* wishes to raise searching questions. If I had to select the most pervasive principle of law in this tractate, it is the insistence on designating food before the festival for use on the festival on the one hand, and linking the status of the household to the status (e.g., as to location) of one’s possessions on the other. In advance of the occasion the householder must designate for use on the festival what he is going to prepare on the festival.

Doing so represents an act of particularization, this batch of food for this festival in particular, and this act of particularization is entirely familiar to us in a different context. From the law of *Pesahim*, we recall that the Temple and its offerings define that context where the animal to be used for a Passover offering must be designated for that purpose. Once an animal is thus designated, without appropriate rite it cannot be used for some secular purpose or even for some other sacred purpose. So also an animal designated for use as a sin-offering must be linked to a particular sin; the farmer who presents it must have in mind the inadvertent transgression that the animal is set aside to expiate. A general statement that a given animal expiates generic sin will not do. *Besah* insists on the same procedure in connection with the bulk of food and utensils to be used for food preparation for the festival. It treats the food for the table as comparable to the food for the altar. The same rule governs the identification and particularization of both food and utensils, each for its respective purpose.

The governing principles are these. First, food for use on the festival must be available and designated for that purpose, actually or potentially, prior to the festival. Second, may one or may one not carry on the preparation of food on the festival in exactly the same way in which one does on an ordinary day? Third, may one or may one not prepare what is required for the preparation of food, that is, secondary or tertiary acts of labor, in the same manner in which one does on an ordinary day? Finally, may one or may one not do such acts of labor at all? It is the Sabbath that supplies the governing analogy. The tractate distinguishes the actual preparation of food, which the written Torah permits, from acts of

labor required for the preparation of food, that is, acts of labor indirectly involved in food preparation. The analogy of the Sabbath is ever present.