

Excerpts From:

REFORM ZIONISM

AN EDUCATOR'S PERSPECTIVE

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Shabbat in Telem¹ Noar²

My starting point in discussing the subject of Shabbat in Telem is the element of uniqueness — or sanctity, if you will — that distinguishes Shabbat from the other days of the week. In order to explain the principles behind my approach, I will propose two basic assumptions:

- a. In setting apart that which is sacred, we should express the sacred and unique elements of the Jewish people, namely:
 - The People of Israel.
 - The Torah of Israel.
 - The Land of Israel.
- b. We must interpret the sources in order to create movement activities and a movement experience that will shape a Shabbat character reflecting the sanctity of these elements.

In relating, as I do above, to the Triple Covenant of People, Torah and Land, a particular value-based direction already begins to emerge. *The guideline is that for the people in its own land, the sanctity of Shabbat, the sanctity of the Land and the sanctity of the sources must be integrated in order for the people to fully express its uniqueness.*

In terms of educational activities, this implies study and experience of Torah study and study and experience of the Land of Israel as an element of equal value to ritual religious worship. I do not want to discuss here in depth the ramifications relating to religious worship and Torah study. I am convinced that it will prove necessary for the subject of religious worship, in the sense of prayer, to be brought before an additional Educational Council in the near future. However, the subject of the study and experience of the Land of Israel does require here some principled comments in terms of my position.

Firstly, I refer to study of the Land of Israel in the widest sense of the word “study” — not merely study of sources relating to this subject. An approach in the spirit of the verse “In all My paths is knowledge” requires study of the principles

1. Telem: Tnuah L’Yahadut Mitkademet: The (Israel) Movement for Progressive Judaism.

2. Proceedings, First Education Council, 1980, (translated from Hebrew). The article was published in 1980 but was discussed at Educational Councils during 1981-1982

dictating what is permitted and what is prohibited on Shabbat. We must interpret our sources in the context of our own reality, and in the context of the educational objectives outlined above.

Telem Noar and Shabbat rules

While this is not the time or place to engage in systematic study of the laws of Shabbat, I must relate to the distinction between “*avoda*” (permitted types of work) and “*melakha*” (types of labor prohibited on Shabbat).

“God finished His work which He had made” (Genesis 2:2).

“Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. Six days shall you labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath unto the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any manner of work.” (Exodus 20:9).

Even Shoshan’s dictionary gives three meanings for the Hebrew word *melakha* (work):

- 1) Work — manual labor.
- 2) Craft — the making of various tools.
- 3) The art of preparing objects from a raw material.

This implies that *melakha* relates above all to the concrete making of some object; to making in order to make a living. To use the terms used by economists, *melakha* is about an action that adds value to the materials involved.

In the Biblical sense, the word also has another meaning, namely: to give a service according to someone’s instructions. This is used in the expression “*malekhet avoda*” (“an act of labor”). Here, the work is performed by way of a service (just as the angels — *melakhim* — are servants of God’s will). “You shall have a holy convocation; you shall do no manner of servile work” (Leviticus 23:7). Hertz’s English translation, on which the translation here is based, supports the perspective of traditional Judaism in translating “*malekhet avoda*” as “servile work” — i.e., work performed at another’s behest. The word “servile” is derived from the Latin word for slave (*servus*).

I shall not discuss the other express prohibitions here, but I would note that, in my personal opinion, we must attempt to be faithful to express prohibitions such as “You shall kindle no fire” (Exodus 35:3). On the other hand, while the express prohibition against gathering in the harvest (Exodus 34:21) was interpreted by the rabbis as forbidding uprooting and plucking of any kind, I do not believe that this applies in the context of an activity relating to the study of the Land of Israel, which is another form of religious worship. I do not believe it is

justified to prohibit the collection of specimens from nature, including the uprooting or plucking of non-protected plants. I do not feel that it is necessary to prohibit hammering on a rock in order to investigate its properties (since in this context, this is not *melakha*). Neither am I sure that in modern-day reality writing constitutes *melakha* (though this is debatable).

Driving is another story altogether. I believe that this should be examined not from the standpoint of "You shall kindle no fire," but rather in terms of performing *melakha* (driving could be seen as *malekhet avoda*). We should note, however, that Shaul Lieberman of the Conservative movement has permitted driving on Shabbat when the purpose is to participate in religious worship in a setting that sanctifies the people.

As a general principle, I do not believe that our starting point can be the traditional definition of 39 types of work prohibited on Shabbat.

We must accept the principle of not performing any *melakha* (adding value), and we must interpret religious worship as including matters relating to the sanctity of the Land of Israel.

The question should be whether an action is intended to serve the sacred work of Shabbat, without infringing a Biblical prohibition, or whether the action is an everyday act of work — i.e., work designed to create a material livelihood, as opposed to work designed to create a spiritual livelihood.

I believe that at Kallot¹ and other discussions, we must develop proposals on the subject of Shabbat in Telem Noar. The needs of the movement must be taken into account in adopting basic positions on these issues.

It is evident that our way is the hardest and least convenient one. We must accept the yoke of the commandments (unlike secular movements) while clarifying and studying our sources, and without confining ourselves to the interpretations and interpretative methods used by the rabbis (as do the "religious" movements). Thus Shabbat in Telem Noar is also a challenge to us in terms of *renewing tradition*. Renewing the tradition in such a key area as Shabbat — a renewal by which we can live and act — will have educational ramifications on wide circles, including many outside our movement.

1. Kallah (pl. Kallot): learning seminar.