SHABBAT: From fire to electricity (Part 2)

Last week we explained that there are 39 categories of *melakhot*or creative activities, which we are not allowed to perform on Shabbat. One of them is called: *hab'ara*, which mean to light a fire. We also explained that lighting fire was singled out in the Tora, unlike the other 38 *melakhot*, and we offered one explanation for this (see **here**)

Before we analyze the similarities and differences between fire and electricity, and in order to better understand them, I must explain first how the exceptional nature of fire vis-a-vis the rest of the *melkahot* was viewed and interpreted.

In the time of the haskala (European illuminism, 19th century) many reformers argued that the reason the Tora did not authorize to light a fire was because in Mosaic times lighting a fire constituted an exhausting work: fire was started with stones, and it was a lengthy and exhausting process. That is why it was forbidden. And this is why, the first reformers reasoned, it should be permitted today, when we can obtain fire with a simple match.

Jewish tradition, however, **never** identified *melakhot* with prohibitions associated necessarily with physical effort. On the contrary: if you live in the 12th floor of an apartment building, you should walk up the stairs. It is *the creative nature* of the act what might define it as a *melakha*, not the physical effort that it demands.

This idea, applied to our case, could be illustrated by rabbi Sa'adia Gaon's (882-942) explanation of the pasuq "Do not light a fire in your houses on the day of Shabbat" (Shemot 35:3). He translated this pasuq: "Do not ***even*** light a fire on Shabbat… "even" because, *hab'ara*—which in Biblical Hebrew means "lighting a fire from a previous fire" not from stones—is the easiest conceivable *melakha*, i.e., the epitome of an *effortless* and a minimal creative activity. The Tora singled out *hab'ara* to convey that even an effortless but minimally creative act is still forbidden on Shabbat.
(*to be continued…*)

SHABBAT SHALOM

Candle lighting in NYC: 7:44
Shabbat ends in NYC: 8:53
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