VAYAQHEL: Shabbat, From Fire To Cellphones

לא תבערו אש בכל מושבותיכם ביום השבת

WHAT CANNOT BE DONE ON SHABBAT?
There are 39 categories of prohibited activities on Shabbat. These activities are called in Hebrew melachot or in the singular melacha. Melachot are not necessarily lucrative jobs or activities that require physical exertion, as is popularly believed. God did not “work” during the 6 days of creation, but he created with his word. And on the seventh day the Creator did not rest but “finished” the creation of him. Melachot are actually creative tasks or activities (מלאכת מחשבת) and interestingly, many are related to what we do in our residences after daily work: for example, cooking, sewing, writing, painting, etc.
One of the 39 melachos, perhaps the best known, is mentioned in this week’s Perashah (Shemot 35:3):
“You shall not light any fire, in all your residences, on the Sabbath day.”
What is special about this task or melacha is that it was explicitly mentioned in the Torah, while all the other melachos are deduced directly or indirectly from the activities carried out for the construction of the Mishkan, the Temple or Tabernacle that was built in the desert: to build the Tabernacle
Each of these melachot is considered a “category” of activity (אבות). But on Shabbat derivatives or extensions of each of these categories are also prohibited. This means that the melachot are not limited to a specific task, but include other activities similar in essence to that category.

WRITING and its EXTENSIONS
Let’s give a simple example. One of the 39 categories is “to write” (hakoteb). In the construction of the Mihshkan, letters were written on the wooden beams to mark their location in the

“skeleton” construction of the Mishkan. The Talmudic tradition includes in the category of writing other derivative or similar activities, for example, drawing or sealing (using a seal with ink), etc. Now, based on this principle, that the melachos also include their derivatives, the contemporary rabbis understood that the melacha of “writing” must also be extended today to: printing, typing on a keyboard, writing a text message, using the method speech-text, etc (that is, apart from the topic of electricity). With the clarification that some of these “new” prohibitions will be considered rabbinic and not biblical. Now that we have perhaps better understood the concept of extensions of a melachah, we can better understand why turning on a light or activating an electrical device is considered an extension of the biblical prohibition against lighting a fire.

A FIRE WITHOUT FLAME

Fire is one of the most important agents when it comes to modifying or improving something. Metals are modified by fire; food is prepared using fire; cold is fought with fire. Using the same principle of fire, that is to say heat and energy, modern man invented machines activated and moved by steam, coal, fuels and in our days: electricity. But are these modern forms of energy similar to lighting a fire? The question becomes more visual when we understand that unlike lighting a fire, modern energy sources don’t always produce heat or visible energy, or a flame, or a spark, or anything like that. Should we then include the activation of a non-visible form of energy within the category of “lighting a fire”?

FIRE and ELECTRICITY

Although contemporary Rabbis dispute the halakhic nature of these activities (Biblical, Rabbinical, Hab’ara, Beniya, etc.) there is a Rabbinical consensus about the prohibition of the activation of any form of electrical energy on Shabbat. This consideration is based on the fact that in the Gemara (5th century of the common era) a very interesting case was

discussed: what happens if a metal bar is heated, which will then be used, for example, to boil water? The rabbis of that time understood that although it is not fire itself, and obviously there is no visible flame, that hot metal rod acts in the same way as fire, as a source of energy, and therefore 1500 years ago back they determined that such a hot metal should be considered under the category of "fire" on Shabbat (See Masechet Shabbat 41a).
Based on this consideration and other Talmudic sources that define a hot metal or a source of energy as "fire", Maimonides (1135-1204) stated: "He who heats a metal rod to temper the water in it has violated the prohibition biblical way of lighting a fire" (MT, Shabbat 12:1). This metal is definitely considered an extension of the "fire" melakha, even though it does not produce a flame. Therefore, the use of a car, appliance, cell phone, or any other electronic device also falls under the primary category of "lighting a fire" and is not permitted on Shabbat.

Rabbi David Tzvi Hoffman states that (Exodus 35:3) "*You shall not light a fire in any of your residences on the day of Shabbat" describes the prohibition against creating fire of any sort. "Current flowing through a filament and causing it to glow creates fire despite the absence of a 'flame' and regardless of whether that which is on fire is or is not consumed… Based on the position of Rambam, which most commentaries accept, the overwhelming majority conclude that turning on an electric light on Shabbat violates the biblical prohibition of lighting a flame."*

REFORM JEWS vs. RABBI SAADIA GAON

In the time of the haskala (European illuminism, middle of 19th century) many reform Jews argued that the reason the Tora banned lighting a fire was because in Mosaic times lighting a fire represented an exhausting work: fire was started with stones in a lengthy and tiring process. And that is why it was forbidden to light a fire on the day of rest. And this is why,

the first reformers reasoned, it should be permitted today, when we can ignite a fire with a simple match.

Jewish tradition, however, never identified melakhot with prohibitions associated with physical effort or with the idea of physical rest. On the contrary: Jewsih law says that if you live in the 12th floor of an apartment building, you should walk up the stairs, which obviously implies a big physical effort, instead of using the elevator, which will definitely increase your state of restfulness.

It is the nature of the action or task, especially its connection with the idea of “creating something”, what defines an activity as a melakha, not the physical effort that it demands.

Rabbi Sa’adia Gaon’s (882-942) referred to this idea, ironically, when writing about “lighting a fire”.
When he translated to Arabic the pasuq “Do not light a fire in your residences on the day of Shabbat” (Shemot 35:3) he wrote “Do not *even* light a fire on Shabbat… “. Why did he say “even”? Because, *hab’ara* (the word the Tora used for “lighting” the fire) does not mean “igniting”, starting a fire from nothing. It means: transferring a fire from an existing source of fire. And transferring a fire, is possibly the easiest conceivable melakha, the epitome of an effortless and a minimal creative activity.

In his opinion, the Tora singled out “hab’ara” to convey precisely that even an effortless, but minimally creative act, is still forbidden on Shabbat.