

From Parashat Vayakhel's juxtaposition of the injunction to refrain from Melacha (constructive labor) on Shabbat and the commandment to construct the Mishkan, our Sages derive that the Mishkan may not be built on Shabbat. Moreover, the specific 39 Avot Melachot – the categories of labor that are prohibited on Shabbat, such as planting, plowing, igniting a fire, and writing – are all gleaned from the acts that were necessary for the construction of the Mishkan.

Although the Torah clearly establishes the Mishkan's construction as the template for the 39 prohibited Shabbat labors, the Torah does not delineate the actual identity of most of these labors. Rather, the specific list of the 39 Avot Melachot comes from the Oral Tradition, the Mishnah (Shabbat 7:2), which introduces the litany with the header:

אַבוֹת מְלָאכוֹת אַרְבַּעִים חָסֵר אֶחָד

*The [number of] prohibited categories of labor on Shabbat are forty minus one (literally: forty, lacking one).*

The Mishnah's diction immediately draws attention. Instead of succinctly and directly listing the sum total of Melachot as "thirty nine" – which would adhere to the general Talmudic principle that *one should always teach in the most succinct manner* (Pesachim 3b) – it awkwardly opts for the mysterious mathematical equation of "forty minus one." While various technical explanations have been suggested for this unusual language, one cannot help suspect that the Mishnah, the magnum opus of the great mystic Rabbi Yehuda HaNassi, may also be alluding to something deeper.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps, the roundabout tally serves to subconsciously awaken us to the spiritual essence of why Melacha is prohibited on Shabbat. That is, the number of Melachot should be thought of not merely as forty "lacking one," but rather, as forty "lacking One" – *the One* – i.e., G-d. Although there are not many appellations that we can accurately apply to a transcendent and unknowable G-d, one of the few things we *can* accurately say is that He is One. He embodies the ultimate form of unity, both in this world and beyond. As such, "One" is perhaps the most suitable nickname to subtly allude to Him (cf. Berachot 28b).

The essence of Shabbat observance is completely immersing ourselves in the Presence of "the One" – G-d – taking a day to spiritually recharge and recalibrate, seeing His light in every aspect of our accomplishments and every inch of our existence. The Talmud teaches that the common principle linking each one of the prohibited Shabbat Melachot is that each Melacha constitutes a creative, productive step of physical human accomplishment (cf. Shabbat 105b). The nature of

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<sup>1</sup> Numerous works have demonstrated that the Mishnah and Talmud were written specifically to convey multiple levels of truths, ranging from the simple legalistic meaning to deeper esoteric principles (Cf. Shlah Klalei HaTalmud 13). In particular, the Ari taught that the words "משנה" and "נשמה" (soul) contain the same letters, alluding to the deep connection between the two.

productive work in the physical world is that it naturally leads us to forget G-d. We work hard and accomplish, and naturally say phrases like “*Look at the garden ‘I’ planted;*” “*Look at the piece ‘I’ wrote;*” “*Look at the cake ‘I’ baked.*” The more we emphasize the “me,” the more we lose G-d. Thus, any form of productive labor on Shabbat, by definition, involves something that creates a G-dless consciousness of “חסר אחת” – *lacking The One*.

On Shabbat, we completely and utterly desist from any trace of productive Melacha – even an act as microscopic as completing a circuit in a microchip on an electric device – thereby symbolically avoiding any action that can be identified with the “me.” Instead, we experience a day of stillness, in which we stay in what our Sages call the רשות היחיד – the *domain of the One* – seeing G-dliness all around us, reminding ourselves that anything and everything I have ever accomplished, succeeded at, or produced, is not “my” actual doing. In truth, none of us know “how” to think of a good idea; “how” to be successful; or even “how” to open our mouth. These are all gifts and powers that come to us every moment from G-d, but that we frequently usurp as our own. By refraining from any productive labor on Shabbat, we explicitly testify that the only reason we have ever succeeded in producing is because of His powers working through us as a vessel. The powers are not our own.

If I truly believe that the same Power that has given me my money, my success, and my ability to produce has also told me to temporarily stop producing today, I could never possibly think to do otherwise. For me to do anything otherwise would be to deny His involvement in my success, living the ego’s false illusion that I myself can accomplish everything, come up with my own ideas, and control my own success.

As humans, we live G-d into this world, so to speak, through our consciousness. Whenever we remain clearly aware of His loving Presence permeating every inch of existence around us, He may be said to “exist” in our world. The moment we forget about Him, we enter an entirely different world, a seemingly G-dless world of חסר אחת. It is specifically in this other world that anger, jealousy, low self esteem, and many other negative emotional states exist. It is for this reason that the Torah describes the performance of Melacha on Shabbat as “Chilul Shabbat” (Shemot 31:14). “חלל” means a vacuum, an empty space (even in modern Hebrew, outer space is called “חלל”). When we disregard the Source of our power by claiming our powers as our own, we have created a vacuum of G-d consciousness, in which we momentarily do not feel G-d’s Presence enveloping and empowering us.<sup>2</sup>

By refraining from productive Melacha on Shabbat, we are given the ability to see G-d’s light all around us, more than any other time of the week. We light Shabbat candles throughout our house

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<sup>2</sup> The same may be said for the term, “Chillul Hashem”

on Friday afternoon to represent this light.<sup>3</sup> We carry this light with us throughout the week, basking in it, knowing that wherever we go, we are fully surrounded by His Presence.

This awareness changes our life. When we live a life of G-d consciousness, we see beauty everywhere. We see potential in everyone. And we feel love towards everything. We are blessed with peace and serenity, as we are able to let go of our ego's need for constant control, knowing that at the end of the day, all we can do is try our best, but that the results and our successes are not actually in our hands – which is one of the greatest comforts we can receive in this life. We humbly recognize that neither we, nor President Biden, nor the head of Silicon Valley Bank, is ultimately ever able to guarantee our success, and that the one true Rock – the source of our strength and security in an ever-changing world – is our loving G-d. The more we can recalibrate our lenses to see G-d's light everywhere – to live in a world which is not *חסר אהת* – the more we will radiate His light to everyone we meet.

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<sup>3</sup> Although the primary Mitzvah of Shabbat candles is fulfilled in the dining room with actual candles, the Mitzvah actually requires that the entire home – hallways, bathrooms, etc – be illuminated as well. In these other rooms, electric lights that are switched on with the intent of serving as Shabbat lights (prior to lighting the dining room candles and reciting a blessing) can serve this purpose.