

## דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



## Is It Right?

Yehudah Webster, JTS Slifka Fellow

Cowardice asks the question: is it safe? Expediency asks the question: is it politic? Vanity asks the question: is it popular? But conscience asks the question: is it right? And there comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular—but one must take it simply because it is right.

—Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., “A Proper Sense of Priorities”

In Dr. King’s speech, he took a firm stand against the Vietnam War, explaining, “I’m not a consensus leader. I don’t determine what is right and wrong by... taking a Gallup poll of the majority opinion.” In Parashat Ki Tissa, Aaron unfortunately does exactly this. Caving to the pressures of the anxious Israelites awaiting Moses’s return, Aaron fashions the infamous golden calf for the Israelites to worship. Though Aaron must have known what was right, his pride or fear spurred him to do what was popular or safe. Regardless of his motivations, what is clear is that Aaron did not allow his conscience to ask what was right.

Dr. King’s lesson and Aaron’s failure serve as especially important reminders as we pursue justice in this era of social media and viral trends. Too often we determine which areas of justice to pursue based on an issue’s popularity. Though we may know we need to take a stand on certain human rights crises, we often fail to have the moral courage to act alone, choosing instead to do what is safe. May Dr. King’s words and Aaron’s failure inspire us and remind us to steel our priorities of justice, based not on the expectations of others, but rather on what we know to be right.

Shabbat Parah  
Ki Tissa 5777שבת פרה  
כי תשא תשע"ז

## Doing Shabbat, Together

Rabbi Judith Hauptman, E. Billi Ivry Professor  
of Talmud and Rabbinic Culture, JTS

Parashat Ki Tissa covers many topics. They include fashioning utensils for the Tabernacle, constructing the golden calf, and Moses seeing God’s image. Sandwiched in between these weighty matters are some very famous verses about the Sabbath.

Following the instructions for preparing incense for future offerings, six verses speak of the Sabbath (Exod. 31: 13-18). Two of them appear in our siddur and are sung in most synagogues on Friday night and Shabbat morning (vv. 16-17). Probably because the words are so familiar, I have tended to overlook their precise meaning.

When I did pay attention to these six verses recently, I noticed two peculiarities. The first is that v. 14 says that those who desecrate the Sabbath will be put to death, but then goes on to say that an individual who performs labor (*melakhah*) on the Sabbath will be “cut off from his people.” These two different punishments appear in the same verse for essentially the same transgression. Even if we don’t know the exact meaning of “being cut off” (*karet*), it is surely not the same as being put to death.

The second peculiarity is found in v. 16, which first says “the people of Israel will observe the Sabbath” (*veshameru . . . et hashabbat*) and then goes on to say that they will “make” or “do” the Sabbath (*la’asot et hashabbat*). The verb *la’asot* appears several other times in these six Sabbath verses and consistently means “to perform labor,” or “to create,” as in “God created the heavens and the earth in six days” (v. 17). How are we supposed to “do” or “create” the Sabbath?

Traditional and even contemporary commentators all say that the phrase *la'asot et hashabbat* means that we must perform work *before* the Sabbath so that we benefit from it *on* the Sabbath. To my mind, such an interpretation does not do justice to the simple meaning of the words. My interpretation of this unusual phrase is that we “do” or “perform” the Sabbath by giving it positive content. Yes, the Mishnah’s list of 39 forbidden Sabbath labors is very well-known (Shabbat 7:2). It says no plowing, no harvesting, no baking, no building, no sewing, and so on. And there are not just 39 forbidden labors but many, many more. The Rabbis add, for example, no cooking and no laundering, also called “labors” in Mishnah Ketubot (5:5), which records the tasks a wife is expected to perform for her husband.

So what does it mean to “do” the Sabbath? Unlike the traditional commentators, I think there is great ingenuity in using the same verb, *la'asot*, to describe what we are told *not* to do on the Sabbath and what we are told *to do*. Far too often the Sabbath gets a bad reputation among Jews and non-Jews because it has so many restrictions. To counteract that perception, we need to stress how to actively “do” the Sabbath. Many of these acts are already suggested in the Talmud and might even represent how the rabbis understood the phrase “*la'asot et hashabbat*.” Here they are: Recite Kiddush over wine Friday night (M Berakhot 8:1); eat a lavish Friday night meal by candlelight (M Shabbat 2:6, BT Shabbat 118a); engage in sexual activity (BT Ketubot 62b); attend prayer services at which the Torah is read (M Meg 4:2); attend a study session in the afternoon (M Shabbat 16:1); have three meals on the Sabbath, not just the standard morning and evening meals (BT Shabbat 118a ff.); recite Havdalah at the end of the Sabbath over a cup of wine with spices to smell and a lamp to light (M Berakhot 8:5). These kinds of activities can aptly be described as “doing” or “performing” the Sabbath. They turn the Sabbath into a period of pleasure and holiness rather than a day of denial.

Returning to the first peculiarity, why does v. 14 prescribe two different punishments for a person who violates the Sabbath? The great commentator Rashi claims that the severe punishment of the first part of the verse is for those who violate the Sabbath after being warned not to do so, whereas the more lenient punishment of the second part of the

verse is for those who violated the Sabbath but were not previously warned. Here is another possibility: God says that one who desecrates (מחלל / [*mehallel*]) the Sabbath, who turns it into an ordinary day (חול [*hol*]), should be put to death. The reason for this punishment appears in the next part of the verse: because someone who does so cuts herself off from the Jewish people. The ways to “do” the Sabbath—meals, prayer, study—all involve others. One who avoids engaging with others on the Sabbath is, in effect, distancing herself from them. It is as if God first says, *a Sabbath violator should be put to death*, but then goes on to say, *no need to execute her. She has already left the community by performing labor on the Sabbath, by turning her back on “doing” the Sabbath together with fellow Jews.*

So these six verses about the Sabbath encapsulate two great ideas: a Jew needs to actively celebrate the Sabbath, and the celebratory acts need to be performed together with other Jews. These concepts perhaps explain the comment of the great essayist Ahad Ha’am in an 1898 article (“Shabbat and Zionism”): **כי יותר משישראל שמרו את השבת שמרה אותם**, more than the Jews have preserved the Sabbath, the Sabbath has preserved the Jews.

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