

The Shabbos Melacha of Koseiv

In this week's article we will continue our series on the thirty-nine *melachos* of *Shabbos*. In our last installment, we concluded the group of *melachos* that were required in order to process the animal hides needed for the construction of the *Mishkan*. The *melachos* are categorized in various groupings, food preparation, processing fabrics and processing hides, the last eight *melachos*, which we will now begin, are referred to as "*sidura debinyan*," "the order of construction" (see *Chiddushei Chasam Sofer, Shabbos* 102b, s.v. *haboneh*). These *melachos* deal specifically with the actual construction of the *Mishkan*, as will be explained as we cover each of them. As always, the purpose of these articles is to educate and provide background information. Those having *halachic shaylos* are encouraged to seek guidance from their *rav* or *posek*.

Koseiv in the Mishkan

In the *Mishkan*, the *melacha* of *koseiv*, writing, served a very interesting purpose. The walls of the *Mishkan* were constructed of *kerashim* (wooden boards) – twenty on each of the northern and southern sides, eight on the west, and two in the northwest and southwest corners. In order for these boards to retain their original positions whenever the *Mishkan* was assembled, each was marked with a letter. Those letters indicated each board's placement (*Shabbos* 103b). Thus, the function of *koseiv* in the *Mishkan* was to write those letters.

The Torah prohibits writing even the smallest marking on *Shabbos*. However, one is not liable for punishment until he writes two characters. This is similar to the idea that although it is forbidden to eat even the smallest amount of non-kosher food, one is not liable for punishment unless he eats a *kezayis*. The same is true for all other Torah prohibitions (*Mishnah Berurah* 340:22).

Not Limited to "Writing"

If asked to define "writing," most people would say something like, "using a pen or pencil on a piece of paper." While this is definitely true, *koseiv* is not limited to this. Rather, *koseiv* includes any method of creating a letter, number or symbol on a surface, and includes scratching or engraving on a surface. Also, forming raised letters on a surface by chiseling away at the surrounding area is included in *koseiv* (*Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim* 340:3; *Mishnah Berurah* 340:11 and 24; *Beis Shmuel, Even Ha'ezer* 125:3). It is similarly forbidden to perforate a piece of paper or the like where the perforations form a letter, number or symbol (*The 39 Melochos*, vol. IV, page 945).

"Writing" by Erasing

One can transgress the *melacha* of *koseiv* by erasing part of a letter or word that creates a new letter or word. The *Gemara's* example (*Shabbos* 104b) is erasing part of the letter *ches*. The *ches*

in *Kesav Ashuris* is formed by writing two *zayins* and connecting them with a “*chatoteres*” (what appears to be an inverted “v”). If one were to erase the *chatoteres*, he transgresses the *melacha* of *koseiv* for creating two *zayins*. The same is true with the letter “m”. Erasing half the letter, creating the letter “n” is *koseiv*.

Not Limited to Letters

The prohibition against writing on *Shabbos* is not limited to writing letters of the alphabet. Rather, it is forbidden to write any letter, number, symbol, character or drawing that has some meaning or conveys some idea or thought. Thus, doodling or scribbling does not transgress a Torah prohibition (although doing so with a writing instrument transgresses the *halachos* of *muktzah*). Furthermore, the prohibition includes writing in any language and using any font (*Shabbos* 103b; *Rambam, Hilchos Shabbos* 11:9; *Mishnah Berurah* 340:22; *The 39 Melochos*, vol. IV, pp. 946-7).

Rosheim: Making a Marking

It is forbidden to make even a simple marking such as a straight line on any surface if the purpose in doing so is to serve as a message or reminder. For example, if one sees a typo or a printing error on *Shabbos*, he may not make an indented line even with his fingernail in order to serve as a reminder to fix the mistake. It should be noted that when the material being marked is parchment, only a marking with a sharp instrument will be forbidden, but not a fingernail, as parchment is too hard. However, when making a mark on paper, even a fingernail is sufficient (*Mishnah Berurah* 340:24-25).

Permanence

In order for the writing to be prohibited *min haTorah*, there has to be some permanence. This idea has two aspects:

- 1) The material upon which he is writing is durable, e.g., paper or parchment. Included in this is engraving into stone or etching into wood or animal hide.
- 2) The substance that one writes with must have permanence, e.g., ink or paint.

If either aspect is missing, i.e., the material upon which he is writing, or the substance he is using, the writing is still prohibited *miderabbanan* (*Rambam, Hilchos Shabbos* 11:15). We will discuss this further when we speak about the rabbinic prohibitions of *koseiv*.

Drawing Pictures

As we have seen, the *av melacha* of *koseiv* is writing a letter, number or a symbol. One of the *tolados* of this *melacha* which is also forbidden *min haTorah* is drawing a picture or sketching an image (*Rambam, Hilchos Shabbos* 11:7).

With the Dominant Hand

In order to transgress a Torah prohibition when writing, one must use his dominant hand, i.e., righties with their right and lefties with the left. Writing while using the non-dominant hand is forbidden *miderabbanan*, as this is doing the *melacha* in an unusual manner. Other types of unusual methods of writing that are also prohibited *miderabbanan* include:

- 1) Using the back of the hand, i.e., holding the writing instrument in between the fingers and writing with the palm facing upwards.
- 2) Writing by holding a pen with one's foot or in one's mouth.
- 3) Writing while holding the pen opposite the elbow, in the joint connecting the upper arm with the forearm.

Someone who is ambidextrous and can write well with both hands transgresses a Torah prohibition regardless of which hand he uses (*Mishnah Berurah* 340:22.7).

Mechanical Printing

Concerning *Hilchos STaM*, i.e., the writing of *Sifrei Torah*, *Tefillin* and *Mezuzos*, there is a disagreement among the great *Acharonim* and *poskim* whether mechanical printing is considered like actual writing (see *Shu"t Tzitz Eliezer*, vol. IX, #10.7 for a list of the relevant authorities). As that subject is beyond the scope of this article, we will not be discussing it here. What is relevant to our discussion is that the disagreement is limited to *Hilchos STa"m*, and does not apply to *Hilchos Shabbos*. Therefore, some authorities maintain that printing on *Shabbos* transgresses a Torah prohibition. For example:

- 1) Using a manual typewriter
- 2) Using a rubber stamp

It is interesting to note that according to some authorities, it is prohibited *min haTorah* to stamp paper with a rubber stamp whether one uses the right hand or the left, since there the quality of the print is unaffected (*Sefer Harokei'ach* #280; *Magen Avraham* 32:57, citing the *Rama MiFano* that printing is like writing; *Shu"t Avnei Nezer* 209:9).

Letters on the Edges

Sometimes words are written on the edges of the pages of a book; when the book is closed, the words can be read, and when it is open, they cannot. The *poskim* debate whether it is permitted to use such books on *Shabbos*. Some contend that opening the book erases letters and closing it constitutes *koseiv* (*Magen Avraham* 340:6; *Levush*).

The *poskim* propose several possible reasons why one may be lenient in this situation. As this whole discussion has ramifications in other scenarios on *Shabbos*, we will mention two of the reasons for leniency:

- 1) The *halacha* is that one may not take a wooden board and fix it in place in a doorway on *Shabbos* in order to close it. Such an act transgresses the *melacha* of *boneh*, building, as by doing so, one adds on to the existing structure. If so, why is it permitted to close a door on *Shabbos*? The *poskim* explain that since the door's function is to be opened and closed and not to add to the structure, closing the door does not transgress *boneh*. The same is true concerning a book; its purpose is to be opened and closed. The fact that there happen to be letters on the edges of the pages which disappear and reappear is irrelevant, as that is not the function of the book (*Mishnah Berurah* 340:17).
- 2) The letters on the edges of the pages are always there. When opened and its pages spread apart, nothing has been erased; rather the parts of the letters have become separated. Similarly, when the book is later closed and the letters are now visible, no *kesivah* has taken place, rather the parts of the letter have been put back together (*Shu"t HaRema* #119).

The *Mishnah Berurah* (340:17) writes that the custom is to be lenient and allow the use of the book on *Shabbos*. However, he suggests that if one has another book to read, it is preferable to be stringent (*Shaar Hatziyun* 340:25).

These concerns are only when letters are written on the edges of the pages. There is no concern about opening and closing a book that has only designs printed on the edges of its pages (*Shemiras Shabbos Kehilchasah*, chap. 28, footnote #8).

A Torn Page

Similar to the previous case is a book that has a torn page and the tear goes through letters. Is it permissible to place the two sides of the torn page together so as to enable one to read the torn letter, or does doing so transgress the *melacha* of *koseiv*?

Based on the explanation of the *Rema* (*Shu"t HaRema* #119) that that bringing together pieces of a letter is not *koseiv*, it is permissible to place the two halves of the torn page together even though the torn letters are now readable (*Shemiras Shabbos Kehilchasah* 28:3; see *Orchos Shabbos*, chap. 15, footnote #19 for a lengthy discussion as to how the two cases are dissimilar).

Rav Moshe Feinstein (*Shu"t Igros Moshe, Yoreh Dei'ah*, vol. II, #75, towards the end) discusses this very question. He writes that in most cases where the letter is torn, it is possible to recognize the letter from the half that is on one of the sides of the tear. In that case, putting them together is permissible, as doing so does not accomplish anything. The only scenario in which there would be an issue is if the letter cannot be recognized from its half. Then, placing the two sides of the torn page together would be forbidden. However, Rav Moshe writes that one does not have to be concerned about such a possibility and it is only an issue where he knows definitely that the situation exists. (The explanation of Rav Moshe's ruling is beyond the scope of this article. Those interested in pursuing this matter are directed to *Orchos Shabbos*, chap. 15, footnote #19.)

Placing the two halves of the torn page next to each other with a separation in between is certainly permitted (*Orchos Shabbos* 15:12; *Shu"t Igros Moshe, Orach Chayim*, vol. IV, #40.22).

If one finds a torn page in a book, he does not have to be concerned that when he closes it the letters will come together. This is because, even if the letters did come together, it is useless to him, as the book is now closed (*Orchos Shabbos* 15:12 and footnote #13 ad loc.).

Children's Games

There are numerous types of children's games where pictures and words are formed from the various pieces. Let us discuss some of them:

1) Cards that have fragments of a picture. The individual cards are placed next to each other on the table and by doing so, the picture fragments on each card form a complete picture. Since there is nothing connecting the cards together, this is not considered to be *koseiv*. This is based on the rulings of Rav Moshe Feinstein (*Shu"t Igros Moshe, Orach Chayim*, vol. I, #135) and Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach (*Shemiras Shabbos Kehilchasah* 16:24 and footnote #67), that when the parts are placed in such a manner that lacks any type of connection, it is not considered to be *koseiv* (*Orchos Shabbos* 15:13).

2) Puzzles: If the pieces interlock or are held together in a frame, according to both Rav Feinstein and Rav Auerbach, it is forbidden to assemble the puzzle. The only way it is permitted is if there is nothing holding the pieces together. However, *Orchos Shabbos* (15:14) rules leniently even where they are held together (see footnote #23, ad loc. for the reasoning).

3) If the pieces that have segments of a larger picture have magnets, and by placing the pieces on a piece of metal, a picture is formed, it would seem that the ruling of the previous example applies. This is because the metal sheet holds the pieces in place and it is similar to placing puzzle pieces into a frame (*Orchos Shabbos* 15:15).

Scrabble

May one play Scrabble on *Shabbos*? There are actually two separate issues concerning playing Scrabble on *Shabbos*, and they both relate to the *melacha* of *koseiv*. The first is not specific to Scrabble, but rather applies to all games where points are counted. The *Chayei Adam* (38:11) prohibits playing any game that usually involves writing, out of concern that one will forget and write on *Shabbos* (*Shemiras Shabbos Kehilchasah* 16:32). One authority writes that if a person is accustomed to playing the game without writing down the points, he may play on *Shabbos* (*The 39 Melochos*, vol. IV, pg. 978).

The second issue concerning playing Scrabble is the forming of words by placing tiles one next to the other. According to the opinions of Rav Feinstein and Rav Auerbach that we have cited, there will be a difference between the deluxe and standard versions of this game. While the board in the standard edition is smooth and the tiles can be moved easily, the deluxe edition has a raised grid system which holds the tiles in place. Therefore, it is forbidden to play the deluxe edition on *Shabbos* (see *Orchos Shabbos* 15:17 and the footnote there, who laments reasons to rule leniently).

Cutting Food into Shapes

Although “writing” is usually thought of as applying a substance to a surface, i.e., ink on paper, or forming a letter or symbol, the *melacha* of *koseiv* applies even to forming letters, symbols or objects out of any material. For example:

- It is forbidden to cut out letters, symbols, etc. out of paper or cardboard.
- One should not form the shape of a fish out of tuna fish salad.
- It is forbidden to cut vegetable or fruits into flowers or other decorative shapes.
- One should not cut a watermelon into the shape of a basket.
- When baking cookies on *Yom Tov*, it is forbidden to shape the dough into flowers, animals, and the like.
- When cutting cake, one should not cut out the shape of a number or letter (see *Chayei Adam*, *Hilchos Yom Tov* 92:3; *The 39 Melochos*, vol. IV, pp. 951-2).

We learned earlier that in order to transgress *koseiv*, the written symbol must carry some meaning. Based on this, it is permissible to cut food into simple squares, circles or triangles, as such shapes do not convey anything (*Shulchan Aruch*, *Orach Chayim* 500:3; *Mishnah Berurah* 500:17; *The 39 Melochos*, vol. IV, page 947).

Guidelines

Although I mentioned this point in the previous article in this series dealing with the *melachos* of *Shabbos* (i.e., *mesarteit*, scoring), I am repeating it here briefly, as it is also relevant to *koseiv*. There is a well-known custom that before one recites *hamotzi* on *Shabbos* to make a small mark on the *challah* with a knife. This is to minimize the amount of time between the *bracha* and cutting the bread, because he has already decided where he will begin cutting (see *Magen*

Avraham 273:1, who cites this custom from earlier authorities; see also *Machatzis Hashekel* ad loc; *Mishnah Berurah* 273:5).

We see from this custom, that making the line on the *challah* does not run afoul of either *mesarteit* or *koseiv*. This is true notwithstanding that it is forbidden to make even a simple line on *Shabbos* because of *koseiv*. Based on this, the *poskim* maintain that it is permissible to make guidelines on a cake with a knife before cutting in order to ensure that one cuts straight or in order that the pieces be the same size (*Orchos Shabbos* 15:26).

Decorating a Cake

Decorating a cake with cream or frosting on *Shabbos* or *Yom Tov* entails three possible cases:

- 1) Spreading and smoothing the frosting over the surface of the cake without any intent to create designs or the like. Everyone agrees that this is permissible.
- 2) Using the cream or frosting to create flowers, letters, numbers or meaningful symbols. Everyone agrees that this is considered *koseiv* and is forbidden on *Shabbos* and *Yom Tov*.
- 3) Using the cream or frosting to fashion simple shapes such as circles or squares. According to some, this is forbidden (*Orchos Shabbos* 15:27), while others maintain that since such shapes have no inherent meaning, it is permissible (*The 39 Melochos*, vol. IV, pp. 946-7).

Concerning cutting cake that has letters and the like made out of frosting, we will discuss that in a future article on the *melacha* of *mocheik*, erasing.

Shabbos: The Source of Blessing

In the Friday night *davening*, we recite: “You sanctified the seventh day for Your Name’s sake... of all days You blessed it...” The source of these ideas is the *posuk* in the following paragraph: “*Hashem* blessed the seventh day and sanctified it” (*Bereishis* 2:3). In reference to this, *Chazal* state: “He blessed it with manna and sanctified it with manna” (*Bereishis Rabbah* 11:2).

This statement of *Chazal* needs to be understood. The *posuk* tells us that at the time of Creation, *Hashem* blessed and sanctified *Shabbos*. This is why it is expressed in the past tense, as it occurred in the past. Yet, *Chazal* tell us that this blessing and sanctification became evident later, when the *Bnei Yisroel* received the manna. According to *Chazal*’s interpretation, the *posuk* should have been written in future tense – *Hashem* will bless and sanctify. The reason it is in the past tense is because at the time of Creation when *Hashem* blessed *Shabbos*, blessing became integral to *Shabbos*. *Shabbos* became the source of all blessing. The fact that the manna was doubled in honor of *Shabbos* is just a manifestation of the *Shabbos* blessing (Rav Yitzchok Maltzan, *Siach Yitzchok*).

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