

Example of readings to prepare students for KahooTorah Bowl

Topic: Shevut

Safeguarding the Sabbath

Centuries ago rabbinic thinkers created protective legislation against unintentional breaking of a Sabbath law. They based their legislation on Leviticus 18:30: “You shall safeguard that which I have given into your charge.” The method they used was known as “erecting a fence about the Law” (in Hebrew, *seeiyag la-Torah*). A prohibition of this kind is called a *gezerah* (rabbinical decree) or, with special reference to the Sabbath laws, a *shevut*. (This word will be defined in more detail shortly.) The rabbis thus restrained people through enactment of *gezerot* from doing on the Sabbath an act that, although not itself a *melacha*, could easily lead to doing one.

Concept of *Melacha* and Work on the Sabbath 89

Climbing a tree is an example of a *gezerah*. Although in and of itself not a prohibited act, it could cause the breaking of a twig or tearing of a leaf, which is an actual *melacha*.

The rabbis also decreed that one may not ask a non-Jew to do on the Sabbath anything that one may not do himself. Additionally, Jews are not allowed to benefit from a *melacha* done for them by a non-Jew, even unasked. Since the rabbis enacted this measure as an additional protection for the Sabbath, they were able to make certain exceptions, such as cases of illness or emergency, lighting a fire in cold weather, and relieving an animal in pain.

It was further forbidden to engage a non-Jew before the Sabbath to carry out work on the Sabbath unless the following conditions are met: the non-Jew must work as an independent contractor, for a fixed sum; the work must be done on the premises of the non-Jew; and the non-Jew must not be bound to carry out the work on the Sabbath.

Shevut

The term *shevut* denotes an occupation forbidden by traditional Jewish law on Sabbath and festivals on the ground that it conflicts with the spirit of the Sabbath rest. We are told that by the command “You shall rest,” (Exodus 23:12) the Torah implies that one must refrain also from doing things that are not actual work. Such activities are many, some forbidden because of their resemblance to prohibited kinds of work, other as a preventative measure, “lest they should lead to the doing of work that is prohibited under the penalty of stoning.” (*Yad Shabbat* 21:1) *Shevut* prohibitions typically include boating, swimming, sports, and other activities that interfere with the spiritual character of the rest.

There are *shevut* decrees that apply to many different areas - each one is based upon rabbinic decree.

Since the Sages themselves instituted these prohibitions as protective measures to prevent violation of Torah law, they could also be lenient in certain cases. This is possible only with regard to rabbinic decrees, but not with regard to prohibitions that stem from Torah law; as the Sages expressed it: They said [it is prohibited] and they said [it is permitted in particular circumstances]. For example, in cases of significant need, such as for the honor of guests or to facilitate Torah study, the Sages permitted several actions that would otherwise have been prohibited due to *muktzeh*. Such leniencies also exist with regard to other *shevut* restrictions, such as caring for animals on Shabbat. Although there are restrictions due to several relevant rabbinic decrees and concerns, since these are not Torah prohibitions, the Sages were lenient when necessary in order to prevent significant monetary loss or to prevent animals from experiencing pain.