

Rav Kook Torah



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Technology and Shabbat

Summary: The Torah specifically prohibits lighting fire on Shabbat, emphasizing that our progress in science and technology is also part of creation.

Do not ignite fire in any of your dwellings on Shabbat. (Sh'mot 35:3)

The Torah forbids 39 different categories of activity on Shabbat. Yet only one – lighting fire – is explicitly stated in the Torah. Why?

And why does the Torah qualify the prohibition of lighting fire with the phrase, "in any of your dwellings"? Is it not forbidden to start a fire in any location?

Guidelines for Technology

The control and use of fire is unique to humanity. It is the basis for our advances in science and innovations in technology. Even now, fuel sources for burning, coal and oil, are what power modern societies. In short, fire is a metaphor for our power and control over nature, the fruit of our God-given intelligence.

What is the central message of Shabbat? When we refrain from working on the seventh day, we acknowledge that God is the Creator of the world.

One might think that only the pristine natural world is truly the work of God. Human technology, on the other hand, is artificial and perhaps alien to the true purpose of the universe. Therefore, the Torah specifically prohibits lighting fire on Shabbat, emphasizing that our progress in science and technology is also part of creation. Everything is included in the ultimate design of the universe. Our advances and inventions contribute towards the goal of creation in accordance with God's sublime wisdom.

Along with the recognition that all of our accomplishments are in essence the work of God, we must also be aware that we have tremendous power to change and improve the world. This change will be for a blessing if we are wise enough to utilize our technology within the guidelines of integrity and holiness.

Fire in the Mikdash

This caveat leads to the second question we asked: why does the Torah limit the prohibition of lighting fire on Shabbat to "your dwellings"? The Talmud (Shabbat 20a) explains that lighting fire is only forbidden in

private dwellings, but in the Mikdash, it is permitted to burn offerings on Shabbat (and light the Menorah). Why should fire be permitted in the Beit HaMikdash?

The Beit HaMikdash was a focal point of prophecy and Divine revelation. It was the ultimate source of enlightenment, for both the individual and the nation. The fire used in the Mikdash is a metaphor for our mission to improve the world through advances in science and technology. We need to internalize the message that it is up to us to develop and advance the world, until the entire universe is renewed with a new heart and soul, with understanding and harmony. Permitting the technological innovation of fire in the Mikdash on Shabbat indicates that God wants us to utilize our intellectual gifts to innovate and improve, in a fashion similar to God's own creative acts.

We need to be constantly aware of our extraordinary potential when we follow the path that our Maker designated for us. At this spiritual level, we should not think that we are incapable of accomplishing new things. As the Talmud declares, "If they desire, the righteous can create worlds" (Sanhedrin 65b). When humanity attains ethical perfection, justice will then guide all of our actions, and scientific advances and inventions will draw their inspiration

from the source of Divine morality, the Beit HaMikdash.

Gold from the Land of Israel, pp. 164-165.

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