

In Hilchos Shabbos

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Measuring on Shabbos

A summary of the weekly Wednesday night shiur by Rabbi Shmuel Stein at the Miami Beach Community Kollel / To receive a copy send an email to InHilchosShabbos@gmail.com

Introduction: The Prohibition of *Uvadin d'Chol* – Weekday Activities

Chazal instituted the prohibition of *Uvadin d'chol* (performing weekday activities) on Shabbos. Performing activities whose nature is mundane and routine on Shabbos damages its spiritual character and is considered a *zilzul Shabbos* (degrading the honor of Shabbos).¹ An act of *Uvadin d'chol* is considered a breach in the sanctity of Shabbos, which can lead to Shabbos desecration.² The Chazon Ish³ writes regarding the prohibition of *Uvadin d'chol*, “Chazal were charged with the task of creating fences in areas (of Shabbos) that have been breached. This [prohibition of *Uvadin d'chol*] is therefore more severe than any specific prohibition, because it serves as a safeguard for the entire Jewish people, and for all generations.”

The Prohibition against Measuring on Shabbos

Chazal instituted a prohibition against measuring on Shabbos. As the *Shulchan Aruch*⁴ writes, “One may not measure or weigh on Shabbos.” The *Mishna Berura*⁵ explains that Chazal forbade measuring on Shabbos because of the prohibition of *Uvadin d'chol*, as is considered a “weekday activity” and is a *zilzul Shabbos*. Accordingly:

- One may not use a measuring cup or spoon to measure ingredients on Shabbos.⁶
- One may not use a scale to weigh himself or a tape measure to see how tall he is on Shabbos.⁷
- One may not hang a thermometer either inside or outside on Shabbos to “measure” the temperature.⁸ However, merely *looking* at a thermometer is permitted, because an *act* of measuring is not being performed.
- One may not use a tape measure to measure a room on Shabbos.⁹

In all of these examples an act of measuring is performed, and the prohibition of measuring on Shabbos is violated.

Leniencies Regarding Measuring on Shabbos

There are a number of leniencies that apply to the prohibition against measuring on Shabbos, which in many circumstances permit measuring on Shabbos.

1) Measuring for a *mitzva* need

The *Shulchan Aruch*¹⁰ writes that one may measure on Shabbos in order to fulfill a *mitzva* need. The *Shulchan Aruch haRav*¹¹ explains that when measuring is done for a *mitzva* need we cannot consider it a mundane and weekday activity, and therefore the prohibition of *Uvadin d'chol* does not apply.¹² For example:

- One may measure the size of a piece of matza or *maror* on the night of the Pesach Seder in order to determine whether it is the required size or volume.¹³
- One may measure the capacity of a *Kiddush* cup to determine whether it holds the proper volume of wine.¹⁴

- When walking to a distant area on Shabbos, one may measure two thousand *amos* in order to ensure that he does not walk out of the *techum Shabbos*.¹⁵

Since these measurements are performed in order to properly perform a *mitzva*, they are not considered *Uvadin d'chol*. However, one should rely on this leniency only when it is necessary. For example, the *Mishna Berura*¹⁶ writes that one may count two thousand *amos* only if he needs to walk for a Shabbos need. Similarly, one should try to measure his matza, *maror*, and *Kiddush* cup before Shabbos.¹⁷

2) Measuring for a sick person

The *Shulchan Aruch*¹⁸ rules that it is permitted to measure on Shabbos if it is necessary for healing someone who is ill. Since taking care of one's health is also a *mitzva*, measuring for this purpose is not considered a weekday activity and is therefore not considered *Uvadin d'chol*.¹⁹ One does not need to be severely ill in order to permit measuring on Shabbos. Any act of measuring that is performed in order to ensure one's health is considered a *mitzva* and is permitted.²⁰ For example:

- One may measure the correct dosage of medicine for someone who is ill.²¹
- One may measure the blood pressure of someone who is ill on Shabbos (so long as there is no *melacha* involved).²²
- One may measure food or drink in order to feed someone who must eat on Yom Kippur.²³

Using a thermometer

One may use a thermometer to “measure” his temperature on Shabbos; since the measuring is done to take care of one's health it is considered a *mitzva* need and is not *Uvadin d'chol*.²⁴

When using a thermometer on Shabbos there are a number of points to keep in mind:

1. Only a mechanical thermometer may be used on Shabbos; a digital thermometer may not be used (unless there is a life-threatening situation).²⁵
2. One may shake down the thermometer before using it. Although shaking the thermometer makes it usable and complete, it is not prohibited under the prohibition of *Makeh b'patish* (the final hammer blow) because it is the normal *mode of use* of the thermometer.²⁶ [After using the thermometer one may not clean it or shake it down, as this doing so involves the prohibition of *hachana* (preparing for after Shabbos).²⁷]
3. It is permitted to dip the thermometer into petroleum jelly or alcohol.²⁸ However, after dipping the thermometer into petroleum jelly one may not smooth it onto the thermometer, as this would violate the *melacha* of *Memare'ach* (smoothing).²⁹
4. It is questionable whether one may use a plastic thermometer that changes colors when pressed against one's forehead, as this may

1 *Shulchan Aruch haRav* 306:18 2 Chazon Ish, O.C. 52:6 3 Chazon Ish *ibid.* 4 *Shulchan Aruch* 306:7 5 *Mishna Berura* 306:34, based on *Tsafos, Shabbos* 126b 6 *Shemiras Shabbos k'Hilchasa* 11:31 7 *Ibid.*, 29:39 8 Rav Doniel Neustadt, *The Daily Halacha Discussion* (Jerusalem: Feldheim Publishers, 2007), p. 290 9 *Ibid.* See *Shemiras Shabbos k'Hilchasa* 29:35 regarding measuring a room by counting the tiles on the floor 10 306:7 11 *Shulchan Aruch haRav* 306:18; *Mishna Berura* 306:35. The *Mishna Berura* in 306:34 seems to explain this *halacha* in a different way: since the prohibition of *Uvadin d'chol* is not a particularly severe rabbinic prohibition, Chazal waived it in order to perform a *mitzva*. The *Kaf haChaim* (306:63) writes that although it is generally permitted to measure on Shabbos for a *mitzva* need, there is one exception – weighing on Shabbos. This is prohibited even for a *mitzva* need, as it is a more stringent form of measuring (see *Shemiras Shabbos k'Hilchasa* 29:40, note 103). However, *Shemiras Shabbos k'Hilchasa* (*ibid.*) permits weighing on Shabbos for a *mitzva* need. 12 *Shemiras Shabbos k'Hilchasa* 29:40 13 *Ibid.* 14 *Shulchan Aruch* 397:2; *Mishna Berura* 397:5; *Shemiras Shabbos k'Hilchasa* 29:40 15 *Shulchan Aruch* *ibid.* 16 397:5 17 *Shemiras Shabbos k'Hilchasa* 29:40, who deduces this *halacha* from *Kaf haChaim* 618:37 and *Mishna Berura* 618:21 18 306:7 19 *Mishna Berura* 306:36 20 *Tehilla l'David* 338:6. See *Igros Moshe*, O.C. 1:128 21 *Shemiras Shabbos k'Hilchasa* 29:41; *The 39 Melochos*, p. 980 22 *Shemiras Shabbos k'Hilchasa* 28:35, *The 39 Melochos* *ibid.* 23 See *Shemiras Shabbos k'Hilchasa* 29:41 24 *Ibid.*; *Orchos Shabbos* 20:166 25 *Orchos Shabbos* 20:166; Rabbi Simcha Bunim Cohen, *Children in Halacha* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1993), p. 107 26 *Tzitz Eliezer* 11:38; *Children in Halacha* *ibid.* 27 See *Children in Halacha* *ibid.* This is similar to the ruling of Rav Moshe Feinstein (*Igros Moshe*, O.C. 1:112) where he writes that washing a toothbrush on Shabbos after using it involves the prohibition of *Hachana*. 28 *Children in Halacha* *ibid.* (*Orchos Shabbos* 20:168) 29 See *Orchos Shabbos* 20:167

violate the *melacha* of *Tzove'ia* (dyeing). When possible such a thermometer should not be used on Shabbos, although if no other thermometer is available such a thermometer may be used.³⁰ Using thermometers that cause letters or numbers to appear are more questionable, as doing so may involve the *melacha* of *Koseiv* (writing) and should preferably not be used on Shabbos.³¹

Measuring for a child

The Rema³² rules that a child has the status of an ill person, since generally the needs of a child are comparable to the needs of a sick person. Therefore, it is permitted to measure in order to facilitate the needs of a child on Shabbos as any act done is viewed as a *mitzva* need.³³

Some *poskim*³⁴ rule that a child retains the status of a “sick person” only until he reaches the age of two or three. Others say nine years old,³⁵ while still others³⁶ consider a child to have the status of a “sick person” up to even twelve or thirteen years old.

Accordingly:

- After feeding an infant, if there is a need to know the child's weight one may use a mechanical scale to weigh the child.³⁷
- One may measure formula when preparing a bottle for an infant.³⁸
- One may measure the correct amount of baby cereal necessary for feeding a young child.³⁹

However, as with measuring for a *mitzva* need, if it is adequate to estimate the measurements necessary for the child it is preferable to do so, since approximate measuring is not included in the prohibition of measuring (see below).⁴⁰

3) Approximate measuring

The Rema⁴¹ writes that the prohibition of measuring applies only if one is careful to take an exact measurement. Taking an approximate measurement was not included in this prohibition. Therefore, as long as one adds or takes away a little bit from the measurement, it is permitted. For example:

- When preparing food on Shabbos one may use a measuring spoon to measure different ingredients so long as he is not exact in his measuring and adds or takes away a little bit.⁴²

4) Measuring food on Yom Tov

The *Shulchan Aruch*⁴³ rules that when cooking food on Yom Tov one may measure the spices before adding them. Since adding the wrong amounts of spices can ruin the food, they may be measured before being added. This leniency applies only to Yom Tov, not to Shabbos.⁴⁴ Just as many *melachos* are permitted on Yom Tov when necessary for cooking under the leniency of *ochel nefesh* (food preparation), it is also permitted to measure on Yom Tov in order to aid in one's cooking.⁴⁵

*Mishna Berura*⁴⁶ adds the following to this ruling: In a situation where estimating the measurement of the ingredient will not ruin the food (in other words, an exact measurement is not very important), one may not measure it on Yom Tov.⁴⁷ For example:

- If one were to bake a cake or challa on Yom Tov, he may not measure an exact measurement of flour but rather must estimate the measurement of flour necessary, since an exact measurement is not needed.⁴⁸
- If someone generally estimates the amount of salt and spices to add when making egg salad, he may not measure an exact measurement of these ingredients on Yom Tov. Since the measurements of these spices are generally only estimated, measuring them on Yom Tov is prohibited.⁴⁹

- If one generally does not use a thermometer when cooking meat to make sure that it is properly cooked, he may not use it on Yom Tov. However, if someone generally uses a thermometer when cooking meat he may use a mechanical thermometer on Yom Tov as well.⁵⁰

5) Counting on Shabbos

The prohibition against measuring on Shabbos does not extend to counting. Counting is not considered to be a form of measuring and is therefore permitted on Shabbos.⁵¹ For example:

- One may count how many plates are stacked in a pile or how many apples are left in the refrigerator.
- When jumping rope, a child may count how many times she has jumped over the rope.
- One may count how many steps it takes to walk to his home.
- One may count the number of steps there are up to his apartment.
- A child may play with a Skip-it (a ball that is affixed to a string, which in turn is attached to the child's ankle and spun around while he or she skips over the string), even though the mechanical counter automatically counts the number of times the child skipped over the ball.

Since in these examples one is merely counting, it is not considered a form of measuring and is permitted on Shabbos. However, in a situation where counting is being used *as method of measuring*, it should be avoided.⁵² For example;

- One should not count the tiles in a room in order to measure boundaries for a game.⁵³
- One should not count how many stories there are in a building in an attempt to measure the height of the building.⁵⁴

Measuring Time

When *Chazal* prohibited measuring on Shabbos they included measuring food, objects, and even one's weight or height. The *poskim* discuss whether the prohibition against measuring extend to time. For example, when playing a board game is it permitted to use a mechanical stopwatch or hourglass to measure how much time has elapsed?

The Maharil (1365–1427)⁵⁵ writes that this question was posed to the *Gadol haDor* of his time, and he ruled that although there is no proof that measuring time is included in this rabbinic prohibition, we nevertheless cannot permit it. The Maharil continues: “After the *Gadol haDor* did not permit measuring time, how can one come afterward and allow it?” The *Shulchan Aruch*⁵⁶ cites the Maharil, and the Rema concludes⁵⁷ that the custom is to be stringent and prohibit measuring time on Shabbos. Accordingly, many *poskim*⁵⁸ rule that one may not use a sand timer or stopwatch when playing a board game on Shabbos.⁵⁹ (Note: *Poskim*⁶⁰ point out that there is an additional issue regarding board games that normally involve writing [e.g., Boggle, Scrabble], as playing these games may lead to inadvertently writing on Shabbos.)

This prohibition against measuring time on Shabbos does not apply to merely looking at a watch or clock to see what time it is, because the prohibition consists only of performing an *act* of measuring on Shabbos. Since the watch is already running from before Shabbos, merely *looking* at it is not considered an act that measures time, and is therefore permitted.⁶¹

The intention of this summary is to discuss common practical *shaylos*. One should consult a Rav concerning *p'sak halacha*.

30 *The 39 Melochos*, pp. 743–744; Rabbi Simcha Bunim Cohen (*Children in Halacha*) 31 *Orchos Shabbos* 20:166. See *The 39 Melochos*, p. 744, where he writes that if the outlines of the numbers are always visible using the thermometer may not involve the *melacha* of *Koseiv*. In any event, such a thermometer should not be used if another one is available.
32 328:17 33 *Shemiras Shabbos k'Hilchasa* 11:30, note 126 34 *Chazon Ish*, O.C. 59:3 35 *Minchas Yitzchak* 1:78, 9:35 36 *Ohr leTzion* 2:36:4 37 *Shemiras Shabbos k'Hilchasa* 37:5 38 Rabbi Simcha Bunim Cohen (*Children in Halacha*, p. 107) 39 *The 39 Melochos*, p. 980 40 *Shemiras Shabbos k'Hilchasa* 11:30, 37:5 41 323:1 42 *Shemiras Shabbos k'Hilchasa* 29:36 43 *Shulchan Aruch* 504:4 44 The *Shulchan Aruch* mentions this leniency regarding the *halachos* of Yom Tov but does not mention it in regard to measuring on Shabbos. Although some *poskim* (*Shemiras Shabbos k'Hilchasa* 29, note 107, cited in *Orchos Shabbos* 22, note 184; Rav Doniel Neustadt, *The Daily Halachah Discussion*) extend this leniency to Shabbos as well, the *Megillas Sefer* (82:1) questions this. Perhaps measuring for food preparation is permitted only on Yom Tov, when many other *melachos*, such as cooking, are permitted for food preparation; but on Shabbos, where *melachos* are prohibited even for food preparation, measuring for food preparation would be prohibited as well. Indeed, the *Pri Megadim* (*siman* 323, *Mishbetzos Zahav*, end of 3) rules explicitly that this leniency applies only to measuring on Yom Tov and does not extend to measuring on Shabbos. Rabbi Simcha Bunim Cohen (*The Laws of Yom Tov* [Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1997], p. 162) also writes that this leniency applies only to Yom Tov, not Shabbos.
45 *Megillas Sefer* 82:1 46 *Mishna Berura* 504:21, based on *Shulchan Aruch* 506:1 (*Shemiras Shabbos k'Hilchasa* 11:31) 47 The *Aruch HaShulchan* (504:7) gives the following parameters for this *halacha*: “If even on a weekday one does not measure such food, it is forbidden to measure it on Yom Tov as well. However, if one does measure such food on a weekday, it is permissible to measure on Yom Tov.” 48 *Mishna Berura* *ibid.* 49 *Ibid.*, 504:22 50 Rav Yitzchak Reichman, based on the *Aruch HaShulchan* 504:7, cited in note 47. 51 See *Shemiras Shabbos k'Hilchasa* 29:35, note 94, where it seems that the only issue of counting on Shabbos is when it is done to know the *measurement* of an object, but merely counting to know a *number* is permitted. 52 *Shemiras Shabbos k'Hilchasa* 29:35, note 94