

In Hilchos Shabbos

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Now learn the issues & the opinions

Timers 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

Using timers on Shabbos was discussed at length by Reb Moshe Feinstein and other poskim. In this chapter we will discuss the following issues:

- 1) Using timers to activate lights or appliances on Shabbos
- 2) Using timers to activate appliances which make noise
- 3) Using timers to cook or bake on Shabbos
- 4) Adjusting timers on Shabbos

Using timers on Shabbos

To begin the discussion on the topic of timers on Shabbos it is worthwhile to review the topic of *Shvisas Keilim*, which is a dispute in the Mishna between Bais Shamai and Bais Hillel:

Shvisas Keilim

The Mishna¹ discusses whether it is prohibited to allow one's vessels to perform *melacha* on Shabbos. Bais Shamai rules that one may not allow his vessels to perform a *melacha* on Shabbos. He bases this on the verse² which states "Everything which I have told you [regarding Shabbos] you shall do," which comes to include even one's vessels resting from *melacha* on Shabbos.³ However, Bais Hillel rules that it is permitted to allow one's vessels to perform *melacha* on Shabbos. For example,

- According to Bais Shamai one may not set a trap before Shabbos to catch animals on Shabbos, as allowing one's trap to perform the *melacha* of trapping on Shabbos is forbidden. However, Bais Hillel permits this, so long as the trap is set up before Shabbos there is no prohibition for one's vessels to perform a *melacha* on Shabbos.⁴
- According to Bais Shamai one may not place a garment into a vat filled with dye on *erev Shabbos* since it is forbidden to allow his vessel to perform the *melacha* of dying on Shabbos. However, Bais Hillel permits this since he holds that it is entirely permitted for one's vessels to perform *melacha* on Shabbos.⁵

How do we rule?

The Shulchan Aruch⁶ rules in accordance with Bais Hillel and thus it is permitted for someone to allow his vessels to perform *melacha* on Shabbos.⁷

Using timers to activate lights or appliances on Shabbos

Based on this ruling it would seem permissible to use a timer on Shabbos, as it is permissible for one's vessels to perform *melacha* on Shabbos.⁸ For example, it should be permissible to:

- Set a timer to activate a light on Shabbos.
- Set an alarm clock to go off on Shabbos.

However, there are several issues which the *poskim* address with setting a timer for Shabbos. We will discuss the following issues:

- 1) *Zilzul Shabbos*: a disgrace of Shabbos
- 2) Appliances which make noise on Shabbos
- 3) Setting a timer to cook on Shabbos

Zilzul Shabbos: a disgrace of Shabbos

Rav Moshe Feinstein⁹ wrote the following *teshuvah* regarding the use of timers on Shabbos:

It would seem obvious to me that it is prohibited to use a timer on Shabbos, because everyone understands that they create a disgrace to Shabbos. With these timers, one can technically perform all melachos on Shabbos. A factory, for example, can be fully operational on Shabbos through the use of a timer. There would be no greater disgrace to Shabbos. [Using a timer to perform a melacha is a disgrace to Shabbos as one shows that he indeed wishes to perform a melacha on Shabbos and has found a way to "bypass" and circumvent the laws of Shabbos.¹⁰] It is clear to me that if such timers were around in the times of the Mishna, the great Rabbanim of the time would have prohibited them just as they prohibited asking a non-Jew to perform melacha on Shabbos for the same reason.¹¹

Nevertheless, the majority of *poskim* permit the use of timers on Shabbos as they do not consider the use of timers to be a *Zilzul Shabbos*, as the *Shmiras Shabbos k'hilchaso*¹² rules¹³: "It is permissible to set a timer before Shabbos to turn off or turn on an appliance on Shabbos."

Using a timer to turn on a light

Regarding the use of timers to turn on and off a light on Shabbos, even Reb Moshe agrees that it is permitted as he writes:

Regarding the use of timers to turn one's lights off and on, there may be a reason to be lenient and allow them to be activated on Shabbos. Since we find that the Rema¹⁴ writes that 'many had the practice to allow a non-Jew to turn on and off a light [lantern] on Shabbos (based on a lenient opinion).'¹⁵ Thus, since there are those who are lenient, it has become somewhat common for lights to be turned on and off on Shabbos. Thus, lights became something which is an exception, and thus [using a timer to activate a light is no longer viewed as a loophole to bypass the laws of Shabbos but is simply the normal way of operating such an appliance¹⁵] and is no longer considered a disgrace of Shabbos. However, using a timer to activate all other appliances remains forbidden as it is a disgrace to Shabbos.

Activating Appliances Which make Noise

Even the *poskim* who generally permit the use of timers on Shabbos agree that one may not use a timer to activate an appliance which creates a lot of noise. This is based on the ruling of the Rema¹⁶ which states that it is prohibited to allow one's water mill to operate (and grind wheat) on Shabbos, even if it was set up before Shabbos.¹⁷ The Mishna Berurah¹⁸ explains that since the water mill makes a lot of noise and creates a commotion it is considered a *Zilzul Shabbos*.¹⁹ Thus, one may not use a timer to activate an appliance which creates a lot of noise even if it was set up before Shabbos.²⁰ For example,

- One may not allow a radio,²¹ stereo,²² etc. to play on Shabbos.
- One may not allow a dishwasher²³ or robot vacuum cleaner²⁴ to operate in his home on Shabbos.
- Rav Moshe Feinstein²⁵ ruled that one may not allow a dryer to run in his home on Shabbos because it makes noise when it is running.

Meaning, even if these appliances are left running before Shabbos or are activated through a timer it is still prohibited because they create a *Zilzul Shabbos*. This prohibition applies on Yom Tov as well.²⁶

Alarm Clocks

The Rema²⁷ writes that although it is prohibited to operate appliances which make noise "it is nevertheless permitted to allow a grandfather clock to run on Shabbos even though it chimes [every quarter of an hour] to announce the time, because everyone knows that it is set before Shabbos." Since it is well known that a grandfather clock is set before Shabbos it does not create a *Zilzul Shabbos*.²⁸

Still, Reb Moshe Feinstein²⁹ ruled that one may not set an alarm clock to ring on Shabbos since it creates a loud noise and is a *Zilzul Shabbos*. An alarm clock is set only once and is commonly set the night before and it is not recognizable that it was set before Shabbos.³⁰ Thus, it cannot be compared to the grandfather clock which continuously chimes every quarter of an hour, and it is evident that it was set before Shabbos.

Nevertheless, other *poskim*³¹ permit the use of an alarm clock on Shabbos since it has become common practice to use an alarm clock on Shabbos and it is well understood that it was set before Shabbos.³² Furthermore, others³³ argue that since nowadays alarm clocks are set twenty-four hours in advance (and even for weeks in advance), even Reb Moshe would agree that it is permissible to set an alarm clock to ring on Shabbos as it is well known that alarm clocks are set beforehand.

Still, it is preferable to use an alarm clock which will not make a loud noise and will not be heard outdoors.³⁴

Setting a timer to cook on Shabbos

Using a timer to cook on Shabbos adds an additional issue, as we will discuss. For example, the question arises whether one can set up a coffee machine before Shabbos and use the timer to activate the machine to cook the coffee on Shabbos. Certainly, if the machine makes a loud noise, it would be prohibited to be used on Shabbos as this would be a *Zilzul Shabbos*.³⁵ But there is another potential issue even if the machine does not make a lot of noise: The Chazon Ish³⁶ ruled that using a timer to cook on Shabbos involves the Rabbinical prohibition of *Shehiya*, as we will discuss.

The Rabbinical Prohibition of *Shehiya*

Although it is permissible *mid'Oraisa* to place a pot of uncooked food on a fire before Shabbos begins, *Chazal* prohibited doing so,³⁷ as they were concerned that one would eventually raise the flame on Shabbos itself in order to expedite the cooking of the food.³⁸ For example, if one were to notice that the pot of food left on the fire before Shabbos did not cook as quickly as he expected, he may inadvertently raise the intensity of the flame so that the food will be ready in time for his meal, violating the *melacha* of *Mav'eir*.³⁹ For example:

- One may not place uncooked cholent in a crockpot before Shabbos begins and allow it to cook over Shabbos.
- One may not place an unbaked kugel in the oven before Shabbos begins for it to bake on Shabbos.

Therefore, the Chazon Ish argued that one may not allow a timer to activate a machine which will cook food on Shabbos which has not yet been cooked as it falls under the prohibition of *Shehiya*.⁴⁰ Just as it is prohibited to place food on the fire *before Shabbos* and allow it to cook on Shabbos, it is likewise prohibited to use a timer to allow food *to begin cooking* on Shabbos. Since in both cases the food is cooked on Shabbos, there is a concern that one may alter the cooking process on Shabbos.⁴¹ Accordingly, one may not use a timer to activate:

- A coffee machine on Shabbos to cook ground coffee beans.
- A hot water urn or electric kettle which will cook water on Shabbos.

- A crockpot or hotplate which will *cook* food on Shabbos.⁴²

This discussion pertains only to placing the food on the hotplate *before Shabbos*. Placing food on a hotplate *on Shabbos* before the timer turns on the hotplate is considered an act of *Bishul mid'Oraisa* since he is placing the food on Shabbos on the area where the food will get cooked.⁴³

Adjusting a Timer on Shabbos

There are two types of timers available: a digital timer and a mechanical timer. When it comes to digital timers it is obvious that they may not be adjusted on Shabbos as this would require pressing the electronic buttons (and the timer is also *Muktza*).⁴⁴ The *poskim* do discuss however whether it is permissible to adjust a mechanical timer on Shabbos by removing or adjusting the plastic pin.

Opinion #1: It is always prohibited to adjust a timer

Rav Moshe Feinstein⁴⁵ ruled that it is prohibited to adjust the pins at all on Shabbos since they are considered *Muktza* and may not be moved on Shabbos.

Opinion #2: One may adjust a timer to continue the state it is in

However, Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach⁴⁶ argued that the pins are not considered *Muktza* and may be moved on Shabbos, however, one may only adjust the timer in a preventive way which merely continues the state that appliance is already in. For example, if a hotplate is on, one may remove the pin to allow the hotplate to continue to stay on; if the hotplate is off, one may remove the pin to allow the hotplate to continue to remain off. However, one may not put in a pin on Shabbos which will cause a change in the appliance to occur earlier. For example, one may not put in a pin on Shabbos so that the hotplate will turn on or turn off sooner than it was originally set for as this would be considered as if one turned on or turned off the appliance.

One should consult a Rav if a need arises and should not rely on the lenient opinions unless there is a pressing need.⁴⁷

¹ Shabbos 17b

² Shemos 23:13

³ Gemara, Shabbos 18a

⁴ Mishna, *ibid*

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ 252:1

⁷ However, the Bach (246:2) writes that "Although the halacha certainly follow that *Shvisas Keilim* is permitted, any *yarei shamayim* will be stringent on himself as the *Rokeiach* rules that it is prohibited."

⁸ However, there were *poskim* who prohibited the use of timers based on the following argument: We only find that Bais Hillel permitted an act which *began* on *erev Shabbos*, for example, when the garment was placed into the vat before Shabbos it already began the dying process and only continued on Shabbos. However, when a timer is set before Shabbos the *melacha* occurs entirely on Shabbos and is thus prohibited (Machaneh Chaim 3:22; Minchas Shamos O.C. 8).

⁹ 4:60

¹⁰ Kovetz Halachos, Shabbos vol. 1, p. 110

¹¹ Additionally, he writes, that using a timer may categorically be included in the Rabbinical prohibition of *Amira l'Akum* as it includes any *melacha* which is performed by the command of the Jew and thus should certainly also include a *melacha* which occurs through the action of a Jew.

¹² 13:26

¹³ Based on the ruling of several *poskim*: Maharam Shick O.C. 157; Shoel u'Meishiv; 1:5; The Chazon Ish 38:2; Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach (Meorei Aish, 4) Yabia Omer 3:17.

¹⁴ 276:2

¹⁵ Kovetz Halachos, Shabbos vol. 1, p. 110

¹⁶ 252:5

¹⁷ The Rema (*ibid*) writes that in a situation where one can stand to take a financial loss he may be lenient and all the mill to operate on Shabbos.

¹⁸ 252:48

¹⁹ In truth there are really two reasons given for this prohibition 1) *Zilzul Shabbos* (Rashi Shabbos 18b d"h *she'yitchanu*) 2) *Maras Ayin*, as people will suspect that a *melacha* is being performed on Shabbos (Sefer HaTeruma, 222). See note 28.

²⁰ **How loud must the noise be?**

Rav Moshe Feinstein writes that "only if the noise is loud enough that it can be heard outside the room is it prohibited, certainly if it can be heard outdoors, but if the noise can be heard only inside the room it is permitted." The Rema (252:5) that writes that 'it is permissible to allow a grandfather clock to chime on Shabbos because it is known that it was set before Shabbos,' thus we learn that if not for the leniency of the Rema the prohibition would apply to even appliances which are not heard outside but are heard to another room in the house (Kovetz Halachos, Shabbos vol. 1, p. 113, n. 5)

²¹ The Aura of Shabbos p. 76

²² *ibid*

²³ *ibid*

²⁴ *ibid* p. 77

²⁵ Rav Yisroel Pinchas Bodner (*Muktza*) p. 250 note 40, citing the ruling of Reb Moshe Feinstein, *Igros Moshe* O.C. Vol. 5:23:38

²⁶ Debretziner Rav (Ohr HaShabbos 4, p. 19)

²⁷ 252:5

²⁸ Kovetz Halachos p. 115, note 8 where he explains that although there seem to be two separate reasons given as to why it is prohibited to allow the mill to operate on Shabbos (see note 19), it is really one reason: *Since* there is a slight suspicion that the mill is operating on Shabbos it creates a *Zilzul Shabbos*. Thus, is it is well known that the grandfather clock is set before Shabbos there is no longer a slight suspicion and no longer is there a *Zilzul Shabbos*.

²⁹ *Igros Moshe* 4:70

³⁰ Kovetz Halachos p. 117, n. 12; see *Nishmas Shabbos* 6:363

³¹ Maharshag I, Y.D. 7; See Kovetz Halachos p. 117; Shevet Halevi 1:47

³² The dispute between these *poskim* may hinge on how to understand the leniency of the Rema which permits the chiming of a grandfather clock. Reb Moshe understands that this leniency applies specifically to an appliance which is commonly set one time for many days and thus does not apply to an alarm clock which is set again each day. The other *poskim* understand the leniency of the Rema as follows: any appliance which has become the common practice to be set before Shabbos and activated on Shabbos no longer has a concern as an onlooker will surely assume that it was set before Shabbos; thus, it is permitted to use an alarm clock since it is commonly set for Shabbos (see *Nishmas Shabbos* 6:396; but see also *Nishmas Shabbos* 6:366).

Nishmas Shabbos (6:396) brings a proof from the fact that it is permissible to set a timer to turn on the lights on Shabbos even though it is a type of appliance that is not set for many days in advance and the light is seen by others. Obviously, proves the *Nishmas Shabbos*, that something which is accepted to be commonly activated on Shabbos is permitted. However, Kovetz Halachos (Shabbos, vol. 1, p. 115, n.8) explains that the reason why it is permissible to activate a light on Shabbos is because *Chazal* only included appliances which are noticed because they "are heard" and create a *Zilzul Shabbos*, they did not include appliances which are noticed because they "are seen," such as lights which turn on.

³³ Rav Yisroel Belsky, *Shulchan HaLevi* p. 98,99

³⁴ *Nishmas Shabbos* 6:363. When using an alarm clock to wake up for davening there is certainly no concern, as the Rema rules that this prohibition is waived when there is a financial loss, and so too when the noise is needed to perform a mitzva (*Toras Shabbos*, 252).

³⁵ Furthermore, according to Reb Moshe Feinstein this may be included in all other timers which are considered a *Zilzul Shabbos* even if they do not make noise since one is "bypassing" the halachos of Shabbos. However, it is possible to argue that since many coffee makers are designed with a timer it can be considered the common way of using the machine and would not be viewed as "bypassing" the halachos of Shabbos (see Kovetz Halachos p. 110).

³⁶ O.C. 37:21

³⁷ *Gemarah Shabbos* 36a, *Shulchan Aruch* 253:1

³⁸ *Shulchan Aruch* 253:1 *Mishna Berura* 253:12

³⁹ See Volume One, Chapter Twelve

⁴⁰ See also *Yerushas Pelieta* 1:16

⁴¹ *Az Nidbaru* (2:17) understands the Chazon Ish to prohibit this under the prohibition of *Nissinah l'chatchilla*, which applies even if the food has already reached *Machol ben d'Rusai* or if the flame was *Garuf v'katum*. However, *Shmiras Shabbos k'hilchaso* (1:23) understands that the Chazon ish was referring to the prohibition of *Shehiya*, which would be permitted if the food already reached *Machol ben d'Rusai* or if the flame was *Garuf v'katum*. See

⁴² *Ohr haShabbos* 9, p. 132

⁴³ *Har Tzvi* (O.C. 1:136); *Ohr l'Tzion* (2:30:18); *Shmiras Shabbos k'hilchaso* (1:23) who hold that it would be prohibited *mid'Oraisa*; see however *Chazon Ish* 38:3.

⁴⁴ *Orchos Shabbos* 29:9

⁴⁵ O.C. 4:91:5; Y.D. 3:47:4

⁴⁶ *Minchas Shlomo* 1:11:8; *Shmiras Shabbos k'hilchaso* 13:25

⁴⁷ *Orchos Shabbos* 29:9