Practical Modern-Day Controversies

In Hilchos Shabbos

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Peeling Fruits and Vegetables

The halachos of Borer

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

In this chapter we will discuss the *melacha* of *Borer*, separating a mixture. The *Mishna Berura*[1] writes, "In our days, due to our many sins, many people stumble and violate the *melacha* of *Borer*." This unfortunate fact may be due to what the Chafetz Chaim, author of the *Mishna Berura*,[2] writes in his introduction to the *halachos* of Shabbos: "In order to keep Shabbos properly, it is integral that one have a good understanding of its *halachos*. Good intentions alone are not sufficient to ensure that one will keep all the *halachos* of Shabbos. If someone mistakenly assumes that a certain activity is permitted, even the best of intentions will not prevent him from violating a Shabbos prohibition. For example, it is very common for people to violate the *melacha* of *Borer* simply because they are unaware of its *halachos*." The *Mishna Berura* concludes, "We must realize the importance of knowing and understanding the *halachos* of Shabbos because being aware of them can enable us to perform many activities in a permitted manner."

In the following paragraphs we will discuss the *halachos* of peeling fruits and vegetables on Shabbos, including the controversy over using a peeler on Shabbos. In order to understand these issues, it is important to review the basic *halachos* of *Borer*.

The *Melacha* of *Borer* (Separating)

Borer is one of the thirty-nine *melachos* of Shabbos. The *melacha* of *Borer* was performed during the production of the *lechem hapanim* (the "showbread") in the Mishkan.[3] Stalks of wheat were harvested and then threshed, which produced a mixture of wheat kernels and pebbles that remained on the threshing floor. The pebbles were then separated and removed from the mixture so that the wheat grains could be made into bread.[4] Removing the pebbles from the mixture of wheat kernels was an act of *Borer*, since doing so separated the unwanted pebbles from the grains of wheat. Accordingly, any act done on Shabbos that separates a mixture is prohibited under the *melacha* of *Borer*. For example:

- One may not remove a spoiled grape from a cluster of grapes.[5]
- One may not remove unwanted raisins from a bowl of nuts.[6]
- One may not remove a broken matza from a box of complete *matzos* (*sheleimim*).[7] (However, merely removing one matza at a time in order to search for a complete one does not violate the *melacha* of *Borer*. Moving aside an object in order to gain access to a desired object is not considered an act of separation, since one's intention is not to improve the mixture, but only to gain access to the desired item.[8] See notes for further elaboration of this principle.)
- After a meal, one may not separate a mixture of different types of leftover cold cuts in order to store them away in their own containers in the refrigerator.[9]
- One may not remove unwanted raisins from a slice of challa.

In these examples, an unwanted item is separated from a mixture, and therefore the *melacha* of *Borer* is transgressed.

Borer with non-food items

The *melacha* of *Borer* applies to non-food items as well, and it is therefore prohibited to separate such a mixture. For example,

- One may not remove a dirty piece of silverware from a pile of clean ones.[10]
- One may not separate a spoon from a pile of forks.[11] One may not remove a teaspoon from a pile of tablespoons.[12] One may not remove a *milchig* (dairy) spoon from a pile of *fleishig* (meat) spoons.[13]
- One may not remove a broken chess piece from a pile of unbroken ones.[14]

Nevertheless, in most instances there is a permitted way to separate a mixture so long as certain conditions are met, as we will now discuss.

The Permitted Way to Separate a Mixture: The Three Conditions

The *Mishna Berura*[15] writes that a mixture may be separated on Shabbos so long as the following three conditions must be met:

1. ***Ochel mitoch p'soles*: separating the good from bad.** The good (i.e., the desired) item must be separated from the bad (i.e., the unwanted) item.
2. ***Miyad*: separating for immediate use.** The separating must be done immediately before using the selected item.
3. ***Bayad*: separating by hand.** The separating must be done by hand, not with a utensil.

For example, if one wants to eat from a bowl of mixed nuts, he may separate the mixture by selecting only

a) the types of nuts that *he desires*
b) those for immediate consumption
c) with his hands.

The *Mishna Berura* explains[16] the significance of these three conditions as follows: When these three conditions are met we cannot consider the selecting as a sophisticated act of *separating* (*Borer*), but rather as a normal act of *eating* (*derech achila*). However, if any of these three conditions are not met, the selecting that is done is considered an act of separating, and violates the *melacha d'Oraisa* of *Borer*. Accordingly,

- One may select a clean fork from a pile of dirty ones in order to use it immediately. Since the *desired* fork is being selected for *immediate use* and is selected *by hand*, all three conditions are fulfilled. We therefore do not consider the selecting to be an act of *Borer* but a normal act of usage, and thus it is permitted.
- One may select a *fleishig* fork from a pile of *milchig* ones immediately before eating a *fleishig* meal. Since the *desired* item is selected for *immediate use* it is not considered an act of *Borer* and is permitted.

Borer Regarding Fruits and Vegetables

There are numerous questions of Borer that arise when eating fruits and vegetables on Shabbos. In the following paragraphs we will discuss these questions, and the correct way to avoid any issues of *Borer* when eating fruits and vegetables on Shabbos.

Peeling fruits and vegetables

The Rema[17] discusses peeling fruits and vegetables on Shabbos. He rules, "It is permitted to peel a garlic or an onion on Shabbos as long as it is done for immediate use." The *Biur Halacha*[18] questions this ruling, as it seems to contradict some of the basic rules of *Borer* that we have discussed. As we mentioned, removing the unwanted item from a mixture constitutes an act of separating and violates the *melacha* of *Borer*, so how does the Rema permit peeling a vegetable if the unwanted peel is removed from the vegetable?

The *Biur Halacha* explains the Rema's ruling with an important principle in the *halachos* of *Borer*: Since it is impossible to get to the fruit without first removing the peels, and this is the normal manner of eating garlic and onions, in this instance removing the bad from the good would also be considered *derech achila* – an act of eating, and not an act of separating. Therefore, says the *Biur Halacha*, the Rema rules that one may remove the peel of a fruit or vegetable so long as peeling it is the way of eating it and it is done for immediate use.

This principle holds true in many other situations as well. For example;

- One may peel a banana, orange, avocado, cooked potato or carrot, or shell a peanut.[19]
- It is permitted to peel a hard-boiled egg.[20] One may also remove the tiny pieces of shell that remain after the egg is peeled by rinsing them under running water, since it is impossible to eat the egg without first removing them.[21]
- One may remove the outer layer of lettuce leaves that are spoiled in order to use the inner leaves of the stalk.[22] [One may not, however, wash the lettuce with soap and water in order to remove bugs, because this will kill the living bugs that are on the lettuce, thereby violating the *melacha* of *Shocheit*.[23]]
- One may rinse a fruit or vegetable under running water in order to remove dirt and pesticides.[24] However, one may not remove the dirt by soaking the fruit in water, as soaking is not considered *derech achila* but is viewed as an act of *Borer*.[25]

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1 In his introduction to *siman* 319 **2** Introduction to vol. 3, *d"h ach* **3** Mishna *Shabbos* 73a **4** See Rashi, *Shabbos* 75b, *d"h harei hu oreg* **5** *Shemiras Shabbos keHilchasa* 3:23 **6** *The 39 Melochos*, p. 381 **7** *Shemiras Shabbos keHilchasa* 3:30: *The 39 Melochos*, p. 397. However, other *poskim* rule that removing the broken *matzos* is not considered an act of *Borer* because the fact that they are not fit for the *mitzva* of *lechem mishna* does not deem them "bad"; they are just as edible as the whole ones. Therefore, we do not view the pile of *matzos* as a mixture of good and bad, and therefore separating them is not considered an act of *Borer* (Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv and other *poskim*, cited in *Sefer Eil Meshulash* 3, note 14) **8** *Shemiras Shabbos keHilchasa* 3:30, *The 39 Melochos*, p. 397. The *melacha* of *Borer* is violated only when one *removes* an unwanted item from a mixture. If the unwanted object is merely pushed to the side in order to gain access to the desired object it does not constitute an act of *Borer*. There are a number of applications of this idea: If someone wishes to remove a bottle of water from the back of a refrigerator he may push aside the other bottles and containers that are blocking the bottle of water. If one's shoes are underneath a pile of clothing he may push aside the clothing in order to reach the pair of shoes. One may push aside unwanted clothing hanging in a closet in order to find the clothing he desires. Since in these examples the unwanted item is not removed from the mixture but merely moved out of the way to gain access to the desired object, it is permitted. See *Shemiras Shabbos keHilchasa* 3:45, 75, *The 39 Melochos*, p. 406. **9** *The 39 Melochos*, p. 414 **10** Ibid., p. 397 **11** Ibid., p. 395 **12** Ibid. **13** Ibid. **14** Ibid. **15** Introduction to *siman* 319 **16** Ibid. **17** 321:19 **18** Ibid., *d"h liklof. Poskim* question whether peeling a fruit is considered an act of *Borer*. Why can't we permit peeling a fruit or vegetable based on the following argument: Generally, when a fruit or vegetable is peeled, some of the fruit is also removed together with the peel, and therefore the mixture (i.e., the fruit and the peel) is never really separated from each other. Rav Chaim Na'e (*Ketzos haShulchan* 125, p. 49, in *Badei haShulchan*) answers as follows: Since it is practically impossible to remove the peel without also removing at least a small amount of the fruit, we consider that small amount of fruit to be a "part of the peel." Therefore, even though some of the fruit is removed along with the peel, this is considered as if only "the peel" has been separated from the rest of the fruit. **19** *Shemiras Shabbos keHilchasa* 3:35 (see *Mishna Berura* 321:84). It is also permitted to use a nutcracker to shell nuts (*Iglei Tal, Borer* 10). A nutcracker is not considered a vessel designed for separating because it is not intended for *separating* the shells from the nut but merely to crack the nut open. **20** *Shemiras Shabbos keHilchasa* 3:35 **21** *Eil Meshulash* 12:20

- One may open and remove a candy wrapper (even when it is stuck to the candy), in order to eat the candy.[26]
- One may remove the plastic wrapper from a role of salami or kishka.[27]
- One may cut a cantaloupe in half and scoop out the cluster of seeds in the center, since it is impossible to eat the melon without first removing the cluster of seeds.[28] (Later we will discuss whether it is permitted to remove individual seeds that remain stuck to the cantaloupe after the cluster of seeds is removed.)

In these examples, one may remove the unwanted item. Since there is no other method to access the food or desired item, removing the unwanted item is considered *derech achila* – an act of eating, and not an act of sorting. However, as the Rema writes,[29] the other conditions of *Borer* must still be fulfilled, and therefore these unwanted items may be removed only immediately prior to being used, and only "by hand" (we will later discuss using a knife or peeler to remove the peel of a fruit or vegetable). For example:

- A woman may not peel eggs for the Shabbos morning *seuda* before she leaves for *shul* in the morning. Rather, the eggs may be peeled only immediately prior to the meal.[30]
- One may remove the unwanted outer layer of a stalk of lettuce only immediately before the meal.[31]

Defining "for immediately use" when preparing for a meal

The *poskim* discuss what is considered "immediate use" when preparing food for a meal. Rav Moshe Feinstein[32] rules that one may perform acts of *Borer* prior to the meal during the entire duration of time needed to prepare the meal. To illustrate, someone preparing a small meal that needs twenty minutes of preparation may perform acts of *Borer* during those twenty minutes, as it is considered "immediately before the meal" (as long as the other two conditions which are necessary to permit acts of *Borer* are also fulfilled). By contrast, for a larger meal that needs an hour of preparation, the entire hour prior to the meal is considered "for immediate use."[33]

Situations in which the item is only partially blocked

Based on the ruling of the Rema which permits peeling fruits on Shabbos, it is clear that removing something that *completely* blocks the fruit is considered *derech achila*. The *poskim* now discuss situations where the unwanted item blocks the fruit only *partially*, but still makes it difficult to eat in a normal manner. For example, the *poskim* discuss whether removing the pit of a plum may possibly compare with removing the peel of a fruit. Since it is very difficult to eat the plum in a regular manner without first removing the pit, doing so is considered *derech achila*, an act of eating, so long as it is done in order to eat the plum immediately. Although the pit does not totally block the rest of the plum from being eaten, as one can technically hold on to the pit and pull off the fruit (thereby selecting the desired item), since the normal manner of eating a plum is to first remove the (undesired) pit and then eat the rest of the fruit, perhaps doing so is still considered an act of eating and not an act of selecting.[34]

The *Mishna Berura*[35] rules leniently on this issue and writes that it is indeed permitted to remove the pit of the plum, as this can still be considered an act of eating (as long as the other two conditions which are necessary to permit acts of *Borer* are also fulfilled).

However, the Chazon Ish[36] did not agree with the *Mishna Berura*'s leniency. He ruled that since the pit does not totally block the fruit, and it is feasible to remove the fruit by holding on to the pit and pulling off the fruit, we cannot consider removing the pit to be an act of eating but rather an act of separating, which violates the *melacha* of *Borer*.[37]

There are many practical examples that can be compared to removing a pit and therefore would be affected by this dispute between the *Mishna Berura* and the Chazon Ish:

Removing bones from a piece of fish. Unwanted bones do not totally block the fish from being eaten, but make it very difficult to eat the fish without first removing the bones. Therefore, based on the ruling of the *Mishna Berura* there may be room to be lenient and permit the removal of the bones for immediate consumption of the fish.[38] Nevertheless, the *poskim*[39] write that in order to avoid any questions of *Borer* one should attempt to remove the bones in one of two ways:

a. By removing them together with some of the fish. Since the bone is removed together with some fish the mixture of fish and bones are never separated from each other and therefore does not constitute an act of *Borer*.

b. By removing the bones from one's mouth. One may put the piece of fish in his mouth together with the bones, and then remove the bones from there. All opinions agree that removing the bones from one's mouth is considered *derech achila* and is permitted.

Many have the *minhag* to eat gefilte fish which has no bones in order to avoid any questions of *Borer*.[40]

Removing individual seeds from a cantaloupe or watermelon. After cutting a cantaloupe in half and removing the cluster of the seeds, normally some individual seeds still remain stuck to the melon. These unwanted seeds do not totally block the melon from being eaten, but make it very difficult to eat. Similarly, the individual seeds embedded in a watermelon do not totally block the melon from being eaten but make it very difficult to eat. Therefore, based on the ruling of the *Mishna Berura* there may be room to be lenient and permit the removal of the seeds for immediate consumption of the melon.[41] Nevertheless, the *poskim*[42] write that one should try to remove the seeds in the following manner: First one should attempt to shake the seeds out of the melon; this is permitted because any seeds that are not embedded in the fruit are not considered to be part of the mixture. Afterward, one may remove the remaining seeds by either removing them together with some of the fruit or by putting the melon together with the seeds into his mouth, removing the seeds from there.

Removing labels from a fruit or challa. Although a label that is stuck onto a fruit or challa does not totally block the food from being eaten, eating the food without first removing the label is very difficult. Therefore, there may be room to be lenient based on the ruling of the *Mishna Berura*, permitting the removal of the label from the food for immediate use.[43] Nevertheless, some *poskim*[44] write that one should try to remove the label together with some of the fruit or challa. Since the label is removed together with some of the challa they are never *separated* from each other and therefore does not constitute an act of *Borer*. (It is preferable that the label be removed from the challa only after it is used for *lechem mishna* so that the challa remains whole for *lechem mishna*.[45])

Using a knife or peeler to remove a peel

Based on what we have discussed it would seemingly be prohibited to use a knife or peeler to peel a fruit or vegetable. Since an act of *Borer* is permitted only when it is done with one's hand and not with an instrument or utensil, using a knife or peeler to peel a fruit would seem questionable. Nevertheless, Rav Moshe Feinstein[46] rules that one may use a knife to peel a fruit or vegetable. He explains that with regard to the *halachos* of *Borer*, a knife is not considered a "utensil" but rather an extension of one's hand. Using a knife to perform an act of *Borer* can be compared to using a fork or spoon to select a piece of food from a platter, which is permitted. It is prohibited to use a utensil only if it is more instrumental in accomplishing the act of *Borer* than one's hand. Using a fork or a spoon is not considered an act of *Borer* because they are used only in order to avoid getting one's hands dirty, not to accomplish a more sophisticated act of separation. Therefore, spoons and forks cannot be considered specialized utensils used for an act of *Borer*. Likewise, Rav Moshe continues, a knife may be used to peel a fruit on Shabbos because it too cannot be considered a specialized instrument used for an act of *Borer*. A knife is used only to help in cutting the fruit, and may therefore be used to peel a fruit so long as it is done immediately before eating the fruit.

Using a peeler to peel fruits and vegetables. Some *poskim*[47] permit using a peeler to peel fruits or vegetables on Shabbos. They argue that a peeler is viewed as merely an advanced knife. The same way it is permitted to use a knife to peel a fruit or vegetable because it doesn't aid the *Borer* process, the same would be true regarding a peeler.

However, many *poskim*[48] disagree, arguing that a peeler is indeed considered an instrument designed to perform an act of *Borer*. According to their opinion, we cannot consider a peeler to be an extension one's hand but rather an instrument used to accomplish an act of *Borer*, which is always prohibited to be used on Shabbos. Therefore, these *poskim* do not permit the use of a peeler on Shabbos.

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

22 *Shemiras Shabbos keHilchasa* 3:40. However, if one finds a spoiled leaf between the *inner leaves*, he may not remove the bad leaf but may only select the good leaves, immediately before using them (ibid.). **23** Ibid. If a *large* bug is found on a leaf it may be removed on Shabbos. Since the bug is recognizable and distinct it is not considered "mixed" with the piece of lettuce, and therefore removing it is not considered an act of *Borer*. (Nevertheless, it is preferable to remove the bug together with a piece of lettuce in order to avoid any questions of *muktze*.) If a *small* bug is found on a piece of lettuce the bug is considered mixed with the piece of lettuce, and therefore removing it violates the prohibition of *Borer*. One must therefore remove the bug together with some of the lettuce. Since the bug remains attached to some of the lettuce, the mixture (i.e., the bug and the lettuce) has not been separated. **24** *Igros Moshe, O.C.* 1:125 (*Shemiras Shabbos keHilchasa* 3:22). Rav Moshe adds an additional reason why rinsing a fruit is permitted: Washing the fruit under running water is viewed as an "act of rinsing" and not as an act of *Borer*. This can be comparable to rinsing food remnants off dishes, which is not considered an act of *Borer*. **25** *Shulchan Aruch* 319:5 and *Mishna Berura* 319:29; see also *Igros Moshe* ibid. **26** *Shemiras Shabbos keHilchasa* 3:43. See also *Eil Meshulash* 12:14) **27** See *Igros Moshe*, *O.C.* 4:74, *borer* 8 **28** *Shemiras Shabbos keHilchasa* 3:37; *Orchos Shabbos* 3:99; *The Shabbos Kitchen*, p. 113 **29** 321:19 **30** *Orchos Shabbos* 3:91 **31** *The Shabbos Kitchen*, p. 103 **32** *Igros Moshe*, *O.C.* 4:74, *borer* 13; *Orchos Shabbos* 3:50, note 51, from Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv. The *poskim* show that this is the opinion of the *Mishna Berura* as well (*Sha'ar haTzion* 611:9) **33** Rabbi Simcha Bunim Cohen, *The Shabbos Home* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications), vol. 1, p. 100, note 43 **34** Based on the explanation given in *Eil Meshulash* 13, note 21 **35** 321:84; *Sha'ar haTzion* 99 **36** End of *siman* 54 **37** See *Eil Meshulash* 13, note 23 **38** *Biur Halacha* 319:4, *d"h mitoch ochel* **39** *Igros Moshe*, *O.C.* 4:74, *borer* 7; *Shemiras Shabbos keHilchasa* 3:12–14 **40** *Shemiras Shabbos keHilchasa* 3:15; *Kitzur Hilchos Shabbos* 12:14 **41** *Shemiras Shabbos keHilchasa* 3:17, note 34 **42** *Igros Moshe*, *O.C.* 4:74, *borer* 7; *Shemiras Shabbos keHilchasa* ibid. **43** *Shemiras Shabbos keHilchasa* 3:35. One must be careful not to tear any letters when removing the label (ibid.) **44** *Orchos Shabbos* 3:67 **45** *Shemiras Shabbos Hilchasa* 3:35 **46** *Igros Moshe*, *O.C.* 1:124 **47** Rabbi Shmuel Feurst, citing Rav Moshe Feinstein and Rav Ya'akov Kamenetzky. This ruling would seem to follow the same logic that Rav Moshe argues to permit using a knife to peel a fruit. Just as a knife may be used "because it does not separate the peel from the fruit more effectively than one's hands," so can the same argument be made for using a peeler **48** *Iglei Tal* 6; *Machazeh Eliyahu* 51:3; *Shemiras Shabbos keHilchasa* 3:35; *Orchos Shabbos* 3:87; *The Shabbos Kitchen*, p. 111. See also *Nishmas Shabbos* 4:116 (2), where he cites many *poskim* who prohibit using a peeler on Shabbos. In truth, the dispute regarding using a peeler on Shabbos really revolves around why it is permitted to use a knife to peel fruits on Shabbos. We discussed that Rav Moshe Feinstein holds using a knife is permitted because "it does not separate the peel more effectively than one's hands," and based on this reasoning using a peeler would be permitted as well (see previous note). However, *poskim* who prohibit using a peeler on Shabbos give a different explanation as to why it is permitted to use a knife to peel a fruit on Shabbos. They explain (*Machazeh Eliyahu* 51:1) that since it is impossible to peel a fruit without using some sort of instrument (such as a knife), in this case using an instrument would be considered *derech achila* (a normal way of eating) and not an act of *Borer*. This reasoning can be applied only to a type of instrument that is typically used at the time of eating the fruit, such as a knife. It cannot be applied to using a peeler, which is generally not used at the actual time of eating but beforehand, at the time when the food is being prepared. Accordingly, using a peeler cannot be considered *derech achila* but an act of *Borer*, which is prohibited on Shabbos (*Machazeh Eliyahu* 51:3). Regarding whether peeling a fruit whose peel most people consider to be edible (e.g., an apple) is considered an act of *Borer*, the *Mishna Berura* (321:84) cites the *Magen Avraham*, who considers it to be an act of *Borer*. Rav Moshe Feinstein sides with this opinion (see *Igros Moshe*, *O.C.* 4:74, *borer* 8). However, in the *Sha'ar haTzion* 321:97, the *Mishna Berura* cites the opinion of the *Pri Megadim*, who rules that removing such a peel is not considered *Borer* at all for the following reason: Since for most people the peel is edible, it attains the same entity as the fruit, and therefore removing it is as if one removes a piece of fruit from the fruit. [*Shemiras Shabbos keHilchasa* (3:35) sides with this opinion] (See *Eil Meshulash* 12:21)