

In Hilchos Shabbos

You have heard the shaylos . . .
Now learn the issues & the opinions

Shabbos Elevators

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

One of the controversial issues in *hilchos Shabbos* is the use of Shabbos elevators. In America, a “Shabbos elevator” refers to an elevator set up to stop automatically on preselected floors without having to push any buttons on Shabbos. In this chapter we will discuss the potential halachic concerns involved in using Shabbos elevators on Shabbos and the different opinions on this issue.

Note: the intention of this chapter is to discuss the different opinions regarding Shabbos elevators. One must consult a *rav* for a final ruling on this sensitive issue.

There are three basic opinions amongst the *poskim*:

Opinion #1 - Rav Moshe Feinstein: Using a Shabbos elevator is prohibited as the one entering the elevator causes the motor to work harder.

Opinion #2 - Rav Levi Yitzchak Halperin: It is permissible to use an elevator to ascend, but it is prohibited to use it to descend.

Opinion #3 - Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach: It is permissible to use a Shabbos elevator on Shabbos.

Opinion #1- Rav Moshe Feinstein

Rav Moshe Feinstein ruled that using a Shabbos elevator on Shabbos is prohibited, because each passenger who enters the elevator causes additional electricity to be used, as we will discuss.

Adding electricity to an already existing current

As we discussed in Chapter Twelve, all *poskim* agree that the “use of electricity” on Shabbos is strictly forbidden. The *poskim* however discuss whether *adding* electricity to an already existing electric current is included in the prohibition of “using electricity” on Shabbos.¹ For example,

The poskim discuss using a microphone on Shabbos. All poskim agree that it is prohibited to speak into a microphone on Shabbos, yet they disagree about why it is prohibited. Rav Moshe Feinstein² and other poskim³ rule that talking into a microphone on Shabbos is included in the prohibition of “using electricity” on Shabbos. Although the microphone is turned on before Shabbos and the electric current is flowing, speaking into the microphone adds electricity to the existing current and is thus prohibited. On the other hand, Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach⁴ and other poskim⁵ rule that adding electricity to an existing electrical current is not included in the prohibition of “using electricity” on Shabbos, rather the prohibition to speak into a microphone on Shabbos is due to several other prohibitions.⁶

Accordingly, Rav Moshe Feinstein⁷ and others⁸ prohibit the use of Shabbos elevators, because although they operate automatically, when a passenger enters the elevator, he causes *additional* energy to be used as the motor now must work harder to lift his weight. On the other hand, Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach⁹ and the *poskim*¹⁰ who hold that causing additional electricity to be used is not prohibited on Shabbos, rule that using a Shabbos elevator on Shabbos cannot be prohibited due to this reason.¹¹

Opinion #2- Rav Levi Yitzchak Halperin

Rav Levi Yitzchok Halperin¹² who heads the *Yerushalayim Institute for Technology* and Halacha rules that it is permissible to use a Shabbos elevator only to ascend, but it is prohibited to use a “Shabbos elevator” to descend. Although this ruling may seem counterintuitive, the reasoning for this differentiation is as follows:

When a passenger enters an elevator, his body weight immediately begins to push down the elevator and directly assists the descent of the elevator. We thus view the passenger as directly responsible for any *melachos* which occur due to the descending elevator. For example, Rav Halperin¹³ writes, “Since the passenger is responsible for the descent of the elevator, he is responsible for illuminating the various lamps which are lit up on each floor due to the descending elevator. Similarly, the passenger is responsible for activating the door motor, the brakes and numerous other electrical circuits which occur at each floor due to the descending elevator.”¹⁴

This issue does not apply when ascending in the Shabbos elevator, because when a passenger ascends in the elevator it is not his bodyweight which causes the ascent but the motor of the elevator. It is thus the motor which is directly responsible for the movement of the elevator and not the passenger. Therefore, any *melacha* which occurs due to the ascending elevator is not attributed to the passenger as it is the act of the elevator.



[The fact that the body weight of the passenger causes the motor to work harder to ascend is also not an issue, for, as we discussed, these *poskim* rule that producing *additional* electricity on Shabbos is not prohibited.¹⁵ According to this opinion, in order to descend in a “Shabbos elevator” all of the lamps and electrical currents which are activated by the descending elevator must be disabled for Shabbos.¹⁶]

Opinion #3 - Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach

Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach¹⁷ rules that it is entirely permissible to use a “Shabbos elevator” on Shabbos - both to ascend and to descend. Ascending in the elevator is not an issue for as we mentioned, Rav Shlomo Zalman is of the opinion that creating additional electricity on Shabbos is permitted. Descending in the elevator according to Rav Shlomo Zalman is also permitted, because although the passenger assists in the descent of the elevator he cannot be viewed as responsible for the *melachos* which occur due to the descent, for a couple of reasons:

- 1) Since the passenger is *passively* standing in the elevator, we cannot view him as “pushing down” the elevator.
- 2) Since the elevator would have functioned exactly the same way even had the passenger not entered the elevator, we do consider the contribution of the passenger to be relevant or significant.

Therefore, we do not hold the passenger responsible for the *melachos* which occur due to the descent of the elevator and thus the lamps and other electrical circuits do not need to be disabled for Shabbos.¹⁸

Additional Issues Involved with “Shabbos Elevators”

There are a couple of additional concerns involved with using a “Shabbos elevator”:

1) The Automatic Closing doors

Elevators contain several safety features which protect passengers from getting injured from closing doors. These features consist of electronic photo-eyes and mechanical edges which cause the elevator door to automatically reopen when someone or something blocks it from closing. It is permissible to enter the “Shabbos elevator” while its doors are open.¹⁹ One need not be concerned that as he enters the elevator the doors will suddenly begin to close, causing them to reopen, this is because it is a *safek* (uncertainty) whether the doors will begin to close and is thus permitted based on the principle of *safek p’sik reisha*.²⁰ Once the doors begin to close, it is forbidden to enter the “Shabbos elevator,” as doing so causes the elevator doors to reopen, as the *Yalkut Yosef*²¹ writes “It is obvious that once the door of the elevator begins to close one may not enter the elevator, nor may he block the elevator with his hands or with his body, because doing so will cause the door to reopen.”²² Unfortunately, this form of *Chilul Shabbos* is all too common, and accordingly many *poskim*²³ are apprehensive to permit the use of “Shabbos elevators” due to this concern, arguing that it is inevitable that using these elevators will cause *Chilul Shabbos*, especially when large groups of people are entering the elevator at once. Rav Yisroel Belsky²⁴ writes that if a “Shabbos elevator” is used “there should be a sign which states that it is prohibited to enter the Shabbos elevator once the doors begin to close so that the public is warned about this issue. Some elevators have a feature which is installed that sounds a buzzer a few moments before the door begins to close and helps ensure that one will not mistakenly cause the doors to reopen. Once the buzzer has begun to sound one should not enter the Shabbos elevator.”²⁵

2) Uvdin d’Chol – A Weekday activity

Some *poskim*²⁶ rule that using a Shabbos elevator is weekday type activity which does not conform to the spirit of Shabbos and is viewed as a *Uvdin d’Chol*.²⁷ It is worthwhile to cite the ruling of the *Chelkas Yaakov*²⁸ on this subject:

“It has been accepted in Klal Yisroel that it is prohibited to ride on a train on Shabbos. [This is for two reasons: Firstly, because of the additional electricity which each passenger causes the train to use. Secondly, because of the atmosphere of *Uvdin d’Chol* which it creates.] What can be the difference between riding on a train where one rides an electrical car horizontally and is considered *Uvdin d’Chol*²⁹ and riding in a “Shabbos elevator” where one rides an electrical car vertically? In truth, this [strict approach] has become the adopted practice among those who fear the word of Hashem, both in America and abroad, not to use a “Shabbos elevator” on Shabbos.”

However, other *poskim*³⁰ do not consider the use of Shabbos elevators to be an *Uvdin d’Chol*, so long as it conforms to the other *halachos* of Shabbos. *Maliyos b’Shabbos*³¹ writes:



“Perhaps we can differentiate between riding a train on Shabbos [which is considered *Uvdin d’Chol*] and riding a “Shabbos elevator,” because the train runs on Shabbos as it normally does while the “Shabbos elevator” functions differently on Shabbos than it normally does as it stops on each floor and thus one can argue that is not considered a weekday activity.”³²

In conclusion

There is much controversy regarding using a “Shabbos elevator.” Some *poskim* prohibit the use of “Shabbos elevators” entirely, while others permit ascending in the elevator and others permit using them entirely. Still, even the lenient opinions recommend that “when possible, it is proper to refrain from using a Shabbos elevator.”³³ The *Shmiras Shabbos k’hilchaso*³⁴ writes, “there are righteous Jews who refrain from using Shabbos elevators as they do not wish to tamper with the holiness of Shabbos and fortunate is their lot.” Additionally, leading *poskim*³⁵ have recently penned the following letter:

“Because the mechanics of elevators are complex and are constantly changing, one may not rely on previous rulings which permit the use of ‘Shabbos elevators.’”

Accordingly, before relying on rulings about the use of Shabbos elevators which were given by word-of-mouth one must consult a *rav* as every elevator and situation may warrant a different ruling.

Asking a non-Jew to Call an Elevator

One of the rabbinical prohibitions which *Chazal* established is *Amira l’Akum* – asking a non-Jew to perform a *melacha* on Shabbos. There are two components that comprise this prohibition:

- 1) *Amira*: Asking a non-Jew to perform a *melacha*
 - 2) *Ha’anah*: Benefiting from the *melacha* that a non-Jew performed on behalf of a Jew.
- Violating either one of these components is prohibited and must be addressed when discussing asking a non-Jew to call an elevator on Shabbos.

1) *Amira*: Asking a non-Jew to perform a *melacha*

One may not ask a non-Jew to perform a *melacha* on Shabbos as doing so violates the prohibition of *Amira*.³⁶ For example,

- Asking a non-Jew to call an elevator is prohibited on Shabbos, as this violates the prohibition of *Amira*.
- The Chayei Adam³⁷ writes that one may not even hint to a non-Jew to perform a *melacha* as this is a form of asking; thus, one may not hint to the non-Jew to call the elevator, such as, by pointing to it.
- The Shulchan Aruch³⁸ writes that one may not ask a non-Jew before Shabbos to perform a *melacha* on Shabbos; thus, one may not ask a non-Jew before Shabbos that he call the elevator for him on Shabbos.

2) *Ha’anah*: Benefiting from the *melacha* of a non-Jew

The Shulchan Aruch³⁹ writes that even if a non-Jew performs a *melacha* for the sake of a Jew without being asked to do so, the Jew may not benefit from the *melacha* which was performed. For example,

- If a non-Jew notices his Jewish friend in the lobby of the building and calls the elevator for him, it is forbidden for the Jew to use the elevator since the non-Jew called it for his sake.⁴⁰

Riding in an elevator together with a non-Jew

If a non-Jew calls an elevator for himself the prohibition of *Amira l’Akum* does not apply, because the non-Jew was not asked to call the elevator thus the prohibition of *Amira* does not apply. The prohibition of *Ha’anah* also does not apply since the non-Jew did not perform the *melacha* for the sake of the Jew.⁴¹ Nevertheless Rav Moshe Feinstein⁴² writes that there are additional concerns involved which prohibits riding the elevator together with the non-Jew on Shabbos:

1. When the Jew rides the elevator along with the non-Jew, the body weight of the Jewish passenger causes the motor to work harder.⁴³
2. Riding together with a non-Jew in a regular elevator is *Maris Ayin* (a suspicious activity), as others who observe a religious person entering a “regular elevator” may suspect him of violating Shabbos.

Additionally, as we mentioned earlier, many *poskim* write that riding in an elevator on Shabbos is viewed as an *Uvdin d’Chol*, a weekday activity, and it would thus be prohibited to ride in the elevator with the non-Jew.

¹ See Nishmas Shabbos 6; Electricity 21

² *Igros Moshe* O.C. Vol. 3:55. However, Rav Moshe writes (O.C. 4:85) that because this prohibition of causing additional electricity is not clear, one may be lenient for a sick person or a time of great need. For example, Rav Moshe permits the use of hearing aids even though additional electricity is being used since it is a time of need. This may give room to permit the use of Shabbos elevators for elderly or sick people that it would otherwise be extremely difficult to walk up the stairs.

³ Rav Nissim Kareletz (Chut Shani end of volume Shabbos 1, Minchas Yitzchok 1:17)

⁴ *Shmiras Shabbos k’hilchaso* 34:28, also see *Minchas Shlomo siman* 9. Since there is no new current of electricity being created there is no Shabbos prohibition involved. The prohibition of *Maavir* (igniting) is not violated because an existing current already existed. The prohibition of *Boneh* (building) cannot apply since the circuit and is already complete. The prohibition of *Malad* (creating a new entity, such as electricity) also cannot be applied because *malad* only applies to a totally new creation, contrast to our case where one is only adding to the already existing electric current.

⁵ See Yabia Omer Vol. 1 end of *siman* 19 where he discusses the use of a microphone on Shabbos at length.

⁶ Firstly, speaking into a microphone violates the rabbinical prohibition of “*kli shir*,” using an instrument which is designed to make noise. Secondly, speaking into a microphone is a *Zilzul Shabbos*, similar to the ruling of the Rema (252:5) that it is prohibited to allow a grating machine to run on Shabbos, because the machine creates a lot of noise and is considered a *Zilzul Shabbos*. See *Igros Moshe* O.C. 3:55; *Teshuvos V’hanhagos* 1:216; *Orchos Shabbos* 26 note 32. See *Minchas Yitzchak* (3:38) where he lists seven reasons why using a microphone is prohibited on Shabbos.

⁷ *Igros Moshe* Vol.2:95; and in a *teshuvah* written to Rav Shapiro (Rav of Pittsburg)

⁸ *Chelkas Yaakov* 3:137; *Minchas Yitzchak* 3:60; *Chut Shani*, end of volume on Shabbos, 1

⁹ *Shmiras Shabbos k’hilchaso* 23:58, n. 154,156

¹⁰ *Ma’alos b’Shabbos*, 13 p. 169 [see Yabia Omer 5, *Miluyim* 27:4, 11:24]

¹¹ Although they rule that causing “additional electricity” is not an issue, there is another complex, but important issue which these *poskim* deal. Many elevators are equipped with weight mechanisms located under the car, which weighs each passenger that enters the elevator to detect whether the elevator is overloaded and to ensure proper control of acceleration and deceleration. Entering such a “Shabbos elevator” on Shabbos poses an obvious *halachic* problem on Shabbos as by doing so one activates the weight mechanism and just as it is prohibited to use an electric scale on Shabbos it is likewise prohibited to enter the elevator on Shabbos. Rav Halperin (*Ma’alos b’Shabbos*, 15, p. 183) considers activating the weight mechanism a *halachic* problem. To avoid this *halachic* issue his institute which provides a *halachic* certificate on many Shabbos elevators in Eretz Yisroel deactivates the weight mechanism when the Shabbos elevator is in use. Other *poskim* (in a conversation with Rav Heineman from the Star-k) rule that activating the weight mechanism is not an issue, because the weight mechanism in the elevator is constantly weighing whether or not a passenger is in the elevator car and when a passenger enters the elevator, he is not causing the weight mechanism to be activated. Furthermore, Rav Heineman rules that the rabbinical prohibition of “measuring” or weighing on Shabbos does not apply when entering the elevator because the prohibition against weighing on Shabbos is due to its association with business pursuits and when one enters the elevator, he does not realize that he is weighed and thus cannot be likened to the prohibition of weighing on Shabbos which is based on weighing for business use.

¹² Cited in *Shmiras Shabbos k’hilchaso* 23:58, n. 167

¹³ *Ma’alos b’Shabbos*, English section, p. 11

¹⁴ Rav Halperin (*ibid*, p. 20) adds that in many newer elevators there is an additional issue when descending an elevator as the descending elevator actually creates and generates electricity by turning the elevator into a mini powerplant. Thus, since the passenger is responsible for the descent of the elevator, he is also responsible for creating this electricity as well.

¹⁵ *Ma’alos b’Shabbos*, 13 p. 169

¹⁶ To avoid these issues and permit the use of a “Shabbos elevator” even to descend on Shabbos, the Institute of Technology and Halacha disables the lamps and other electrical circuits which normally occur due to the descending elevator would normally turn on. Furthermore, any electricity which is created by the descending elevator is redirected into transistors thus causing the newly generated electricity to dissipate. Therefore, an elevator bearing a *halachic* certificate from this institute does not have these *halachic* concerns.

¹⁷ Cited in *Shmiras Shabbos k’hilchaso* 23, n. 166

¹⁸ Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach adds another reason to be lenient based on the Gemara (Shabbos 92b-93b) which states that if two people perform a *melacha* together on Shabbos, if one of the people involved is stronger and could have performed the *melacha* alone, he alone is responsible for the *melacha* which occurs. Since the weaker person could not have performed the *melacha* by himself, his assistance is in fact unnecessary, and his actions have no significance. Similarly in our case, because the elevator is the “stronger one” and could operate the elevator alone, the body weight of the passenger is considered an unnecessary assistance, and thus the passenger is not at all held responsible. According to most *poskim* there is not even a rabbinical prohibition involved in such a situation (*Mishna Berura* 328:11).

¹⁹ *Shulchan Halevi* p. 78.

²⁰ *Ibid*. Although there is a *machlokes* between the *Taz* (O.C. 316:3) and Rav Akiva Eiger (Y.D. 87:7) regarding this issue the *minhag* is to be lenient on *issurei d’rabbanan* (such as using electricity).

²¹ *Shabbos* 5, p. 194

²² *Shulchan Halevi* p. 78

²³ In conversation with several *poskim*; see *Nishmas Shabbos* 6, Electricity 68

²⁴ *Shulchan Halevi*, *ibid*

²⁵ *Ibid*

²⁶ *Minchas Yitzchak* 3:60:8; *Sharim Mitzuyanim b’halacha* 74:5; Rav Shmuel Vosner (Kisvuni L’Doros p. 130); Rav Karelitz cited in *Orchos Shabbos* Vol. 3, p. 80 n. 50

²⁷ This is comparable to the *halacha* of the *Shulchan Aruch* (522:2) that prohibits being carried outdoors on a chair. However, this prohibition is permitted in a time of need such as an elderly person who cannot walk up the stairs (*Aruch HaShulchan* 522:2; see *Nishmas Shabbos*, 6 Electricity 68)

²⁸ 3:137

²⁹ See Volume Two, Chapter Twenty-Nine, Part 2 regarding riding scooters on Shabbos

³⁰ *Yabia Omer* 11, O.C. 23:4; Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach and Rav Elyashiv cited in *Orchos Shabbos* *ibid* p. 196

³² Additionally, one can argue that since the train rides in public it is considered a greater *Uvdin d’Chol*, as opposed to a “Shabbos elevator” which rides inside a building (*Nishmas Shabbos* 6, Electricity, 68). Furthermore, a train is used as a “mode of transportation” while a “Shabbos elevator” is used to get to his floor and is not a “mode of transportation”. (see Volume Two, Chapter Twenty-Nine, Part 2)

³³ *Yalkut Yosef*, *Shabbos* 5, p. 192

³⁴ 23, end of 58

³⁵ Rav Chaim Kanievsky and Rav Nissim Karelitz wrote: “Regarding ‘Shabbos elevators,’ as it is revealed that the technology of elevators is constantly changing. It has been clarified to us that the use of a “Shabbos elevator” involves *issurei d’Oraisa* both to ascend or to descend, one may not rely on an institute which gave a lenient ruling to permit the use of these elevators on Shabbos since this may involve a serious desecration of *Chilul Shabbos*.” Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv and Rav Shmuel Vosner attached their signature to this letter as well. (*Kosveini* l’Doros, p. 130)

³⁶ *Rambam*. See Volume Six for further elaboration on this topic

³⁷ 62:2; *Shmiras Shabbos k’hilchaso* 30:3

³⁸ 307:2

³⁹ *Shulchan Aruch* 276:1; see *Mishna Berura* 276:2 and *Shulchan Aruch* 325; see also 39 *Melochos* p. 65

⁴⁰ *Orchos Shabbos* 23:58 note 99

⁴¹ *Shulchan Aruch* 276:1:2

⁴² *Igros Moshe* O.C. 2:95. Additionally, according to some opinions mentioned earlier, when the elevator descends the Jewish passenger is assisting in the descent of the elevator and is responsible for the illuminations of the lights and other electric circuits.

⁴³ *Nishmas Shabbos* (6, Electric, 68) argues that perhaps this case is more lenient than the case of a “Shabbos elevator,” because when the Jew enters the regular elevator it is not programmed to operate on its own and thus all of the electricity which the elevator will now use is attributed to the non-Jew who pushes the button. This is unlike the case of a “Shabbos elevator” where the elevator is programmed to operate on its own and merely entering the elevator is the manner of how the elevator operates and thus the additional electricity which is used due to the extra body weight is attributed to the Jew.