

In Hilchos Shabbos

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Why We Don't Use Electricity 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

Electrical appliances and light bulbs were unknown to the *Shulchan Aruch* and earlier *poskim*. Consequently, Klal Yisrael never received a ruling or guidance from them regarding the use of electrical appliances on Shabbos. During the past 150 years, with the invention and development of electricity, the *poskim* have dealt extensively with its use on Shabbos.

Although all *poskim* agree that using electricity on Shabbos is strictly forbidden, they debate under which *melacha* or prohibition the use of electricity falls. In the following paragraphs we will discuss the different opinions regarding the use of electricity on Shabbos, and how these opinions relate to different types of electrical appliances. Additionally, we will discuss whether one may use an electric light bulb to perform the *mitzvos* of *hadlakas neiros* (candle lighting) and *havdala*.

There are two categories of electrical appliances:

- Those that contain heating elements
- Those that do not contain heating elements

Appliances with Heating Elements — The *Melacha* of *Mav'eir*

Using an appliance or device that turns on or off a heating element when used (e.g., an electric stove) involves a serious Shabbos prohibition. The consensus of the prominent *poskim* of the previous generation¹ is that using this type of electrical appliance on Shabbos is forbidden *mid'Oraisa* under the *melacha* of *Mav'eir* (kindling). Rav Chaim Ozer Grodzinsky² writes, "The ruling to prohibit [the use of incandescent light bulbs on Shabbos] has spread throughout all of Klal Yisrael...as doing so violates the *melacha d'Oraisa* of *Mav'eir*." The Debretziner Rav³ writes regarding the use of incandescent light bulbs on Shabbos, "It is not even a question [that it is prohibited], it is a clear *halacha* that is accepted by all the *Rabbanim* of the earlier generation." Accordingly:

- Turning on an electric stove is prohibited *mid'Oraisa*.⁴
- Turning on an electric toaster is prohibited *mid'Oraisa*.⁵
- Turning on an incandescent light bulb is prohibited *mid'Oraisa*.⁶

In order to understand why turning on a heating element or incandescent light bulb violates the *melacha d'Oraisa* of *Mav'eir*, let us quickly review the basics of this *melacha*.

Definition of *Mav'eir*

The *melacha* of *Mav'eir* can be defined as igniting or lighting a fire.⁷ During the construction of the *Mishkan* it was necessary to kindle a fire in order to perform certain activities such as in baking the twelve loaves of *lechem hapanim* ("showbread").⁸ Therefore kindling or igniting a fire on Shabbos is prohibited *mid'Oraisa*. For example:

- Striking a match on Shabbos is prohibited under the *melacha* of *Mav'eir*.⁹
- Turning on a gas stove or oven on Shabbos is prohibited under the *melacha* of *Mav'eir*, since doing so ignites a flame.¹⁰
- Driving a car on Shabbos is prohibited *mid'Oraisa*, since starting the engine and stepping on the accelerator ignites fire inside the engine's cylinders.

When the accelerator of a car is pressed, gas is pumped into the engine where it is ignited, violating the *melacha* of *Mav'eir*.¹¹

Causing a metal to become red-hot

The Rambam¹² writes that causing a metal to become red-hot violates the *melacha d'Oraisa* of *Mav'eir*. When a metal becomes so hot that it begins to glow it is equivalent to creating a fire, since the red-hot metal is halachically considered a flame.

The *poskim*¹³ rule that turning on an incandescent light bulb on Shabbos violates the *melacha mid'Oraisa* of *Mav'eir* because when a light bulb is turned on, the filament inside of it becomes red-hot and begins to glow (lighting up the room).¹⁴ Similarly, turning on an electric oven, hotplate,¹⁵ or crockpot¹⁶ violates the *melacha* of *Mav'eir*. Since the electric coil inside these appliances becomes red-hot, it is halachically considered a flame and is therefore prohibited *mid'Oraisa* under the *melacha* of *Mav'eir*.

Fluorescent light bulbs

Fluorescent light bulbs produce light differently from incandescent light bulbs. Unlike an incandescent light bulb, which produces light by heating a metal filament until it glows, a fluorescent light bulb produces light by causing gases inside the bulb to become electrically charged. Nevertheless, using a fluorescent light bulb on Shabbos still violates the *melacha d'Oraisa* of *Mav'eir* because these light bulbs also consist of metal filaments which turn red-hot.

In order to charge the gases in the fluorescent light bulb, two metal filaments are positioned at the ends of the bulb. When these filaments become red-hot, the gases inside the fluorescent light bulb become electrically charged, producing light. Therefore, turning on a fluorescent light bulb is equivalent to igniting a flame because it causes the metal filaments to become red-hot, which violates the *melacha* of *Mav'eir*.¹⁷

LED Lights

LED lights do not contain filaments that become red-hot, and therefore turning one on does not violate the *melacha d'Oraisa* of *Mav'eir*.¹⁸ However, turning on an LED light is subject to the same prohibitions that apply to all other forms of electricity, which we will soon discuss.

Using an Electric Light Bulb to Perform a *Mitzva*

Hadlakas neiros (candle lighting)

We have established that turning on incandescent and fluorescent light bulbs is halachically equivalent to lighting a flame. Accordingly, many *poskim*¹⁹ rule that one may fulfill the *mitzva* of *hadlakas neiros* on *erev Shabbos* by turning on an incandescent light bulb.

Other *poskim*²⁰ disagree with this ruling, and recommend that one not use an electric light bulb to fulfill the *mitzva* of *hadlakas neiros*. Although all agree that a light bulb is halachically considered a fire, these *poskim* rule that there are other

1 *Bais Yitzchak* 1:120 *M'harshag* 2:202 *Machazeh Avraham* 31 *Achiezer* 3:60 *Chazon Ish* 50:9 *Rav Isser Zalman Meltzer* (*haskama* to *sefer Chelkas Yaakov*, see *Minchas Sholomo* 1,12,1) 2 *Achiezer* 3:60 3 *Be'er Moshe* Vol. 6 [Kuntis on electricity] beginning of *siman* 23] 4 *Nishmas Shabbos* 6: Electricity 1, See *The Aura of Shabbos* pg. 153 5 *Nishmas Shabbos* 6: Electricity 1 6 *Nishmas Shabbos* 6: Electricity 1, See *The Shabbos Home* Vol. 2 pg. 474 7 *Mishnah Shabbos* 73a 8 See *Rashi Shabbos* 73a (*d'h mechabeh u'maveir*) where he writes that kindling a fire was used for cooking the dyes necessary for dying the wool in the *Mishkan*. However according to others the kindling was necessary to bake the *lechem ha'Panim* (see introduction to *sefer Iglei Tal*) 9 *The Shabbos Home* 2 pg. 473 10 39 *Melachos* pg. 1197 11 *The Shabbos Home* 2 pg. 475, *Nishmas Shabbos* 6: Electricity 27. Regarding entering a car or bus that even without the Jewish passenger will be driving on Shabbos: A similar question is discussed in the *poskim* regarding riding a train on Shabbos. The *poskim* give a number of reasons as to why riding a train is prohibited on Shabbos, one reason is that each person that enters the train causes the train to use more electricity (*Su't* Mahari Asad O.C. 58, *Shoel U'Meishiv* Vol. 5 (Divrei Shoel V'yoshev da'as 3) [See *Su't* Bais Yitzchak, *mafteichos* Y.D. Vol. 2:31, *Chasam Sofer* 6: end of 97, *Su't* Dvar Yehoshua 5: O.C. 7]). The author of the *Shoel U'Ma'ishiv* concludes that "G-d forbid that one should ride a train on Shabbos, for if we permit this the entire concept of Shabbos will be forgotten. Once transportation is permitted on Shabbos it will lead to business being open on Shabbos as well, which will then lead to permitting all of the *melachos* of Shabbos." The *Chelkas Yakov* (137:3,4) writes "that since this ruling has become accepted in all sections of *Klal Yisrael*, that it is prohibited to ride a train on Shabbos, it may even be prohibited *m'doraysa* as a *neder* (vow)." See also *Su't* *Kinyan Torah* (4:38) that riding a train on Shabbos is prohibited under *Uvdin d'chol*, a weekday activity and is a degradation of the holiness of Shabbos which can lead to great breaches in Shabbos. In *sefer Shaarim Hamitzuyim b'halacha* (74:4) he compares riding on a bus on Shabbos to riding a train which is prohibited as each passenger causes more gas to be used. [See *Nishmas Shabbos* 6: Electricity 28, and 5:32 where he deals with this comparison at length.] Rav Shlomo Miller adds (cited in *Nishmas Shabbos* 6: Electricity 28) that based on the ruling of the *Shulchan Aruch* (522,2 and *Mishnah Berura* in *Shaar Hatzion* 301: 73) that riding a bus is prohibited under *Uvdin d'chol* and is a degradation of the holiness of Shabbos which can lead to great breaches in Shabbos observance. Certainly it is prohibited to cause the non-Jewish driver to stop in order to enter or exit the bus as this is prohibited under *Amira l'Akum* (*Nishmas Shabbos* 6: Electricity 28) 12 *Rambam* *Shabbos* 12:1 13 See footnote 1. Turning off an incandescent light bulb is not considered *Kibui* (extinguishing) *m'doraysa*, but is nevertheless prohibited *m'drabanan* (*Nishmas Shabbos* 6: Electricity 6). Firstly, since turning off the light bulb only removes the light it is considered a *melacha sheino treicha l'gufo* which according to the majority of *poskim* is only rabbinically prohibited. Furthermore, even the *Rambam* who rules that a *melacha sheino treicha l'gufo* is prohibited *m'doraysa* will agree that turning off a light bulb is only rabbinically prohibited because we cannot consider causing a metal that is red-hot to cool off to be an act of "extinguishing" since there is no genuine fire that is being extinguished. (*Nishmas Shabbos* 6: Electricity *ibid*) Regarding whether increasing the light of a light bulb that can be dimmed or made brighter involves an *issur d'Oraisa*, see *Nishmas Shabbos* 6: Electricity 4. 14 This holds true even if the incandescent light bulb is powered by a battery (e.g., a flashlight), since the metal inside the flashlight gets red-hot the *melacha* of *Mav'eir* is violated (*Nishmas Shabbos* 6: Electricity 5) 15 *Nishmas Shabbos* 6: Electricity 1. If a heating element does not turn red-hot the *melacha d'Oraisa* of *Mav'eir* is not violated (*Nishmas Shabbos* 6: Electricity 2,3). Nevertheless, although in some instances the heating elements inside a crockpot or hotplate does not seem to turn red-hot it is still possible that deep inside the element it does become red-hot and is still prohibited *m'doraysa* (*Nishmas Shabbos* 6: Electricity 1). Therefore, before concluding that the use of such appliances is prohibited only *m'drabanan* one must look into the issue carefully. 16 See *Nishmas Shabbos* 6: Electricity 1. 17 *Nishmas Shabbos* 6: Electricity 7, *Sefer Ha'Chashmal L'ohr Halacha* 3:7 [See *Shabbos Home* 2 pg. 474]. Turning off a fluorescent light bulb is prohibited *m'drabanan* (*Nishmas Shabbos* 6: Electricity 8), see note 13 above. 18 *Nishmas Shabbos* 6: Electricity 9, *sefer Ha'Chashmal L'ohr Halacha*, *ibid* 19 *Bais Yitzchak* 1,120 2, 31 *Machazeh Avraham* 41 *Rav Henkin*, *Eidus Yisroel* pg. 122 *Tzitz Eliezer* 1:20:11

issues involved with using an electric bulb for *hadlakas neiros*. One of the issues they raise is that in order to properly fulfill the *mitzvah* of *hadlakas neiros* one must perform an act of *kindling a fire*. Merely opening a switch and allowing the electric current to flow into the light bulb cannot constitute an act of *hadlaka* (kindling). In the *beracha* of *hadlakas neiros* we say, “To kindle the Shabbos candle,” and therefore merely turning on a switch and allowing the electric current to flow into the light bulb cannot be employed to fulfill one’s obligation of *hadlakas neiros*.²¹

With regard to someone who is in a place where candles cannot be lit (e.g., a hospital), Rav Moshe Feinstein²² ruled that an incandescent bulb should be turned on for the sake of *hadlakas neiros*, but without reciting a *beracha*.

Havdala

Rav Chaim Ozer Grodzinsky would specifically use an incandescent light bulb when reciting *havdala*.²³ Since the red-hot filament inside the light bulb is halachically considered a fire, it would be meet the requirements necessary for reciting *havdala*. Rav Chaim Ozer would do this in order to remind people that a light bulb has the halachic status of fire and to impress upon them the severity of using one on Shabbos.

Some *poskim*²⁴ maintain that it is preferable not to use an electric light bulb for *havdala*. Although all agree that a light bulb is halachically considered a fire, they have another issue with regard to using an electric bulb for *havdala*. In order to understand the opinion of these *poskim* let us quickly review why we recite a *beracha* over a fire during *havdala* on *motza’ei Shabbos*.

The Gemara²⁵ states that on the first *motza’ei Shabbos* of Creation, haKadosh baruch Hu gave Adam haRishon the intelligence to understand how to create fire. Adam took two stones, rubbed them together, and created a flame. Therefore, when reciting *havdala* on *motza’ei Shabbos*, we recite the *beracha* of *borei me’orei ha’eish* (“Who creates the illumination of fire”) in order to express gratitude to Hashem for the creation of fire.

The *Shulchan Aruch*²⁶ rules that while reciting *borei me’orei ha’eish*, the flame of the candle must be both visible and uncovered. The flame we use on *motza’ei Shabbos* represents the original flame that Adam haRishon created, and since that original flame was exposed and uncovered, the flame we use on *motza’ei Shabbos* must be as well. The *Mishna Berura*²⁷ adds that even if the flame is covered with a glass covering, it should not be used for *havdala*. Since in that case the flame is not completely exposed, it would not be similar enough to the flame that Adam haRishon created.

Consequently, the reasoning of the *poskim* who rule that preferably one should not recite *havdala* using an electric light bulb is that since the heating element is covered by the glass bulb, it is not truly exposed and therefore dissimilar to the flame Adam haRishon created.²⁸

All *poskim*²⁹ agree that one may not use a colored or fluorescent light bulb for *havdala*. Since the heating element is not at all visible, it does not resemble the flame that Adam haRishon created.

To summarize

The consensus of the *poskim* is that using electrical appliances that contain a heating element is prohibited *mid’Oraisa* under the *melacha* of *Mav’eir* (kindling). This is because the electric coil or filament inside the appliance becomes red-hot and therefore is halachically considered a flame. Accordingly, many *poskim* permit the use of a light bulb to fulfill the *mitzvos* of candle lighting and *havdala*. Nevertheless, many *poskim* do not permit *l’chatchila* using a light bulb in order to fulfill the *mitzvos* of candle lighting and *havdala*. Although all agree that a light bulb is halachically considered a fire, these *poskim* oppose using a light bulb to fulfill these *mitzvos* due to other factors.

Using Electrical Appliances on Shabbos that Do Not Contain Heating Elements

Many electrical appliances do not contain heating elements. Since using these appliances does not cause a heating element to become red-hot, the *melacha* of

Mav’eir does not apply. For example, fans, air conditioners, microphones, and telephones do not activate any lights or coils that become red-hot when turned on, and therefore their use cannot violate the *melacha* of *Mav’eir* since no halachic flame is ignited.

Although it is undoubtedly and unanimously accepted by all the *poskim* that using any form of electricity on Shabbos is strictly forbidden,³⁰ it is heavily debated among the *poskim* with regard to which *melacha* or prohibition is violated when a current of electricity is created. There are really two major opinions, the opinion of the Chazon Ish and the opinion of Rav Yitzchok Shmelkis.

The opinion of the Chazon Ish: electricity on Shabbos is prohibited *mid’Oraisa*

The Chazon Ish³¹ rules that using any form of electricity on Shabbos is prohibited *mid’Oraisa* under the *melacha* of *Boneh* (building).

The *melacha* of *Boneh* is one of the thirty-nine *melachos* of Shabbos.³² The Rambam gives an example of this *melacha*:³³ “One who takes different items and connects one to another in order to form one entity violates the *melacha* of *Boneh*.” If through attaching the smaller parts together one creates a new entity that has a new function, it is considered an act of building and violates the *melacha* of *Boneh*. The Chazon Ish holds that turning on an appliance violates the *melacha* of *Boneh*, as it connects an electrical current together with the electrical mechanisms in order to create a functioning machine.³⁴

Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach³⁵ disagrees with the opinion of the Chazon Ish, and holds that using electricity cannot violate the *melacha* of *Boneh* because the connection one makes between the different pieces inside the appliance is only temporary and is part of its normal usage. Therefore, we cannot consider using an electrical appliance an “act of building.” Rather, it is merely an “act of usage,” which does not violate the *melacha* of *Boneh*. See below for more on his opinion.

The opinion of Rav Yitzchok Shmelkis: electricity is prohibited on Shabbos *mid’Rabbanan*

Rav Yitzchok Shmelkis was one of the leading *poskim* of last generation. He ruled³⁶ that using electricity on Shabbos (when it does not contain a heating element) is prohibited only *mid’Rabbanan*. According to Rav Shmelkis and other *poskim* who held as he did, there are two prohibitions involved in using electricity on Shabbos:

a. Molid – creating a new entity. Any act that resembles an “act of creation” is prohibited *mid’Rabbanan* under the prohibition of *Molid* (creating a new entity). For example, the Gemara³⁷ writes that it is prohibited to infuse a scent into a garment on Shabbos, as this is a creative change in the garment. Likewise, argues Rav Yitzchok Shmelkis, creating an electric current resembles an act of creation and is therefore prohibited on Shabbos under the prohibition of *Molid*.³⁸

b. Safeguarding Shabbos transgression. Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach³⁹ adds that we may not use electricity on Shabbos because it can easily lead to Shabbos transgression. If it were permitted to use electrical appliances that do not contain a heating element on Shabbos, one might inadvertently come to use appliances that do contain a heating element (which according to all opinions is prohibited *mid’Oraisa*). Since many people do not realize the difference between an appliance that contains a heating element and an appliance that does not, they may come to mistakenly use appliances that are prohibited on Shabbos.

To summarize

The consensus of the *poskim* is that using electrical appliances on Shabbos that contain a heating element is prohibited *mid’Oraisa* under the *melacha* of *Mav’eir* (kindling). However, the *poskim* debate whether using an appliance that has no heating element but rather creates an electrical current is prohibited *mid’Oraisa* or *mid’Rabbanan*. In most practical situations this debate is purely academic, since the *poskim* unanimously agree that the use of any form of electricity on Shabbos is strictly forbidden.⁴⁰ However, in certain situations where mitigating halachic factors are present, this dispute may have practical ramifications. In such situations a Rav must be consulted.

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

²⁰ See Su’t Har Tzvi (Vol. 2:114:2) from Rugitchuvah Ga’on Yerushas Pletta, siman 7. See Sha’arim Hamituyanim B’halacha where he lists many *poskim* who do not permit using electric lights (75:7) [Although all of these *poskim* agree that one may not use electric light bulbs to fulfill the *mitzvah* of *halokas neiros*, the reasons that they give differ, as they each gives a different reasoning as to why using an electric light would not be permitted.] ²¹ Rav Moshe Feinstein said “that pressing a button and merely allowing the electricity of the electric company to enter is not an act of “*hadlokah*” (kindling)” (Conversation with Rav Simcha Bunim Cohen). ²² Quoted in *The Radiance of Shabbos* pg. 12. Since allowing the electricity to flow is not an act of kindling, one may not recite a *beracha* of “to kindle”. ²³ Quoted in Be’er Moshe Vol. 6 [Kuntis on electricity] siman 66. Other *poskim* permit this as well: *Rugethavah Ga’on* (quoted in Su’t Har Tzvi Vol. 2:114:2); *Machazeh Avraham* Vol. 1:41 based on Ba’i Yitzchak; Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach (Me’orei Aish quoted in Sha’arim ha’mitzuyanim b’halacha 96:6); Rav Henkin (sefer Gevuros Elyahu O.C. 98:5) ²⁴ Ohr L’Tzion 2:22:5; *Chut Shani* 4:86:2. ²⁵ Pesachim 54a (see *Mishnah Berura* 298:1) ²⁶ *Shulchan Aruch* 298:15

²⁷ See *Biur halacha* 298:15 d’h oh b’soch. However, the *poskim* that permit using a light bulb for *Havdala* follow the other opinions who argue on the *Biur Halacha* (Magen Avraham 298:20; *Aruch HaShulchan* 298:18) that permit using a flame that is enclosed in a transparent glass). However, even the *Mishna Berura* agrees (298:37) that b’dieved if one did use a flame that is covered by glass for *havdala* he fulfills his obligation. ²⁸ Rav Nissim Karelitz (*Chut Shani* ibid) explains that Rav Chaim Ozer was lenient and relied on other *poskim* solely for the purpose of stressing to people the severity of using electric light bulbs on Shabbos. Others argue (cited Nishmas Shabbos 2:592) that a light bulb is different than the case discussed in the *Mishna Berura* since the normal way that a light bulb is used is while in its glass cover. ²⁹ Rav Chaim Ozer and Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach (quoted in Sha’arim ha’mitzuyanim b’halacha 96:6); Rav Henkin (sefer Gevuros Elyahu O.C. 98:5); *The Radiance of Shabbos* pg. 137 ³⁰ As Rav Yisroel Belsky writes (*Shulchan ha’Levi* pg. 71), “All of the *poskim* unanimously agree that the use of any form of electricity on Shabbos is strictly prohibited”. ³¹ 50:9; See also the letters written to Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach from the Chazon Ish which clarify his opinion (*Minchas Shlomo*, siman 11) ³² *Mishnah Shabbos* 73a ³³ *Shabbos* 7:6 (see *Shulchan ha’Levi* pg. 71) ³⁴ The Chazon Ish (ibid) also writes that turning on a machine or appliance may also involve the *melacha* d’Oraysa of *Makeh b’Patish* (Final Hammer Blow) since without electricity running through it the machine is not functional, turning on the electricity in a sense completes that machine, violating the *melacha* d’Oraysa of *Makeh b’Patish*. This ruling of the Chazon Ish applies to battery operated appliances as well (Nishmas Shabbos 6: Electricity 17). Regarding whether turning off the electricity from a machine is prohibited under the *melacha* d’Oraysa of *Sosair* (or only prohibited *mid’Rabbanan*) see Nishmas Shabbos 6: Electricity 19

³⁵ In Rav Shlomo Zalman’s first letter to the Chazon Ish he writes, “Since people open and close (electrical appliances) for a short amount of time...how do we consider it prohibited under *Boneh* [k’tukah]?” ³⁶ Ba’i Yitzchok (mafteich at end of sefer Vol 1:31) ³⁷ Beitzta 23a ³⁸ Based on this reasoning it is also prohibited to use electricity on Yom Tov, as *Molid* is prohibited on Yom Tov. (Nishmas Shabbos 6: Electricity 12) ³⁹ *Minchas Shlomo* siman 9 pg. 74 ⁴⁰ See *Shulchan ha’Levi* pg. 71