Electricity on Shabbat – Part 3 - Handout

# Orthodox Teshuvah

“This article surveys halacha’s reponse to one of the technological breakthroughs of the last 150 years: the invention of electricity. In particular, it explores halacha’s understanding of the use of electricity on Shabbat and Yom Tov with the rubric of prohibited work (*melacha*).”

# Incandescent lights

Incandescence: the emission of light caused by heating the filament.

## A – Turning On

## Babylonian Talmud – Shabbat Chapter 3, Mishnah 5

A kettle which was removed from the fire: one may not pour cold water into it so that it should warm up, but one may pour it [water] into or into a cup in order to temper it.

## Babylonian Talmud – Shabbat 41b

Rav said: They taught that it is permitted only to temper the water; but if it is to harden the metal, it is forbidden. Whereas Samuel ruled: Even if to harden it, it is still permitted. If the primary purpose is to harden it, can it be permitted?! Rather if stated, it was thus stated: Rav said: They taught this only where there is merely a sufficient quantity to temper it; but if there is enough to harden it, it is forbidden. Whereas Samuel maintained: Even if there is a sufficient quantity to harden it, it is permitted.

## Babylonian Talmud – Yevamot 6b

Granted, however, that it is according to the view of R. Yose, might it not be suggested that R. Yose said that ‘kindling a fire on the Sabbath is mentioned separately in order to indicate that it is a mere prohibition’ in the case only of ordinary burning; the burning by the Bet Din, however, is surely a case of boiling of the metal bar concerning which R. Sheshet said that there is no difference between the boiling of a metal bar and the boiling of dyes.

## Mishneh Torah – Shabbat – 12:1

A person who kindles even the smallest fire is liable, provided he needs the ash that it creates. However, should a person kindle a fire with a destructive intent, he is not liable, for he is causing ruin.

Similarly, a person who lights a candle or wood, whether to generate warmth or light, is liable.

A person who heats iron in order to strengthen it by submerging it in water is liable for [performing] a derivative [of the forbidden labor] of kindling.

## B – Raising the Intensity

## C – Turning Off

## D – Non-incandescent Lights

# Use of electricity if no heat or light is generated

## Turning On appliances

1. Creating something new (Molid)
2. Completing a circuit (Boneh)
3. Completing a product (Makeh b’patish)
4. Creation of Sparks (Kindling)
5. Increase in fuel consumption at Power Plant (Mavir)
6. Heating of a metal (transistor or wire) (Bishul or Mavir)
7. It’s OK but Jews don’t do that

## Turning Off appliances

1. Soter (destruction) – opposite of Boneh (building)
2. Sparks (Mavir)
3. Removal of heat (Mechabeh)

# Shabbat vs Yom Tov

## Exodus 12:16

And in the first day there shall be to you a holy convocation, and in the seventh day a holy convocation; no manner of work shall be done in them, *save that which every man must eat, that* only may be done by you.

# Specific Appliances

* Refrigerators
* Telephones
* Radio/TV
* Static Electricity
* Hotel Cards

# Timers

## Babylonian Talmud – Shabbat 18a

Our Rabbis taught: Water may be conducted into a garden on the eve of the Sabbath just before dark, and it may go on being filled the whole day; and a perfume brazier may be placed under garments which continue to absorb the perfume the whole day; and sulphur may be placed under [silver) vessels and they undergo the process of sulphuring the whole day; and an eye salve may be placed on the eye and a plaster on a wound and the process of healing continues all day. But wheat may not be placed in a water-mill unless it can be ground when it is still day. What is the reason? Rabbah answered, Because it makes a noise. Said R. Joseph to him, Let the Master say it is on account of the resting of utensils? For it was taught: ”Concerning all that I have said to you, you shall beware” (Exodus 23:13): this includes the resting of utensils! Rather, said R. Joseph, it is on account of the resting of utensils. Now that you say that according to Beth Hillel the resting of utensils is a Biblical precept, why are sulphur and a perfume brazier permitted? - Because it [the vessel in which they lie] performs no action. Why are wet bundles of flax permitted? — Because it [the oven in which they lie] performs no action and is motionless. But what of the trap for wild beasts, fowl and fish, which performs an action, Why are they permitted?-There too [it means] with a fish hook and a trap made with little joists, so that no action is performed.

Now, however, that R. Oshaia said in R. Assi's name, Which Tanna [maintains that] the resting of utensils is a Biblical precept? It is Beth Shammai: then according to Beth Shammai, whether it [the utensil] performs an action or not, it is forbidden, while in the opinion of Beth Hillel even if it performs an action it is permitted. And now that you say that according to Beth Shammai it is forbidden even if it performs no action, if so, why are a perfume brazier and sulphur permitted? -There it lies upon the earth.

## Mishneh Torah – Shabbat – 3:1

It is permissible to begin the performance of a forbidden labor on Friday, even though the labor is completed on its own accord on the Sabbath itself, for the prohibition against work applies only on the Sabbath itself. Moreover, when a task is carried out on its own accord on the Sabbath, we are permitted to derive benefit from what was completed on the Sabbath.

# Conclusion

“The use of electricity on Shabbat and Yom Tov is a relatively new and exceedingly complex area of Halacha. The variety of positions taken by decisors is broad and these differences are extremely relevant to the conduct of observant Jews. It is the near unanimous opinion that the use of incandescent lights on Shabbat is biblically prohibited. Beyond that, there is little agreement.”