The Past, Present, and Future of Electricity on Shabbat

## Classic Positions

**חזון איש אורח חיים נ:ט**

יש בזה משום תיקון מנא כיון שמעמידו על תכונתו לזרום את זרם החשמל בתמידות וקרוב הדבר דזה מלאכת בונה מה"ת כעושה כלי - דאפילו בכלים כהאי גוונא חשיב בונה

**תלמוד בבלי מסכת ביצה דף כג עמוד א ) בית יצחק השמטות ל"א(**

רבה ורב יוסף דאמרי תרוייהו: סחופי כסא אשיראי ביומא טבא - אסור. מאי טעמא - משום דקמוליד ריחא. - ומאי שנא ממוללו ומריח בו, וקוטמו ומריח בו? - התם - ריחא מיהא איתא, ואוסופי הוא דקא מוסיף ריחא. הכא - אולודי הוא דקמוליד ריחא.

**שו"ת מנחת שלמה חלק א סימן ט**

נתבאר לפי זה דלענ"ד נראה דבכה"ג דלא עשה כלל שום הדלקה או כיבוי כי אם מחבר רק את הטלפון עם הזרם אין לאסור בשבת ויו"ט לא משום מכה בפטיש ולא משום מוליד. (אך חושבני שהמון העם אינו יודע כלל להבחין בכך ויכול לטעות ע"י זה לומר שמותר גם להדליק ולכבות את החשמל בשבת, ולכן אף לדידן אין להתיר דבר זה כי אם במקום צורך גדול, וכעי"ז מצינן בשאילת יעבץ הנ"ל דאע"ג שסובר דעריכת שעון בשבת דומה לפתיחת וסגירת מנעול דשרי, אפי"ה כתב שלמעשה נכון להחמיר מפני שנראה בעיני הבריות כתיקון כלי וכ"ש כאן.)...אך מה אעשה שכבר הורה זקן והוא הגאון מוהר"י שמעלקיש ז"ל בשו"ת בית יצחק יו"ד ח"ב סי' ל"א בהשמטות על דבר הטלפון אם מותר לדבר בו בשבת, ובתוך דבריו כתב שם: "דכמו בסחופא כסא אשיראי אמרינן בביצה כ"ג דאסור משום דמוליד ריחא ה"ה דאסור לעשות עלעקטרושע פארבינדונג בשבת"

## Recent Positions

**Rabbi Nachum Rabinowitz/Rabinovitch,** [**http://bit.ly/2jV4eHm**](http://bit.ly/2jV4eHm)

It is self-evident that if a person performs one of the 39 melachot using electricity, such as grinding with an electric grinder and the like, the one who uses it is liable biblically. However, some use electricity for goals which are neither, nor resemble, melachot…. The use of electricity, even where the electric currents are closed, when no actions defined as melacha are performed, is definitely not forbidden biblically, but there is room to forbid rabbinically because of “weekday activity. (עובדין דחול)” In the past, when electricity was beginning to spread, the great authorities saw a danger for keeping Shabbat, because electricity could be used to do all the 39 melachot… However, in our days, electricity has been applied to different usages that are fully automated, without human hands at all…Now the question is: How much can we ascribe these actions to human beings when they are fully automated?

I already wrote in *Siach Nachum* (25) that there must be a limit to when we can ascribe action to people when they are fully automated. However, it is clear that the limit must be when the person acting is separated from the system he is acting on – i.e. where he cannot be considered part of the system. Additionally, the action must be noticeable to the senses… Only then can you forbid, even rabbinically. However, if a person doesn’t touch the electrical system at all, and does no specific act to initiate the system, and it happens totally by itself – how can one even think that it is forbidden, especially when none of the 39 *melachot* are being done? This is even if you appreciate and benefit from it.

**Rabbi Yaakov Ariel, *Shut B’Ohalah Shel Torah* 5:23**

It seems to me that the opinion of the Gaon Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach zt”l is the accepted law according to most authorities in our generation. Namely, that using an electric appliance involves a **rabbinic**prohibition, unless the appliance performs a biblical *melachah,* such as milking, shaving, lighting a fire, and the like. However, the opinion of the Chazon Ish is that using an electric appliance is forbidden **biblically.** According to him, there are two prohibitions – the very closing of the electric circuit that enables the current to flow through the wires is **building,** and using the appliance as a result of this is **fixing a vessel** which is biblically prohibited, either because of building or delivering the final hammer blow…

The Gaon Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach disagreed with him... If I am allowed to presume to grasp the depths of his great opinion, he was worried, quite correctly, that if these appliances would be permitted, the Shabbat would, G-d forbid, become a weekday. He understood, with the breadth of his knowledge, the knowledge of Torah, that the Torah would presumably not agree to permit use of electric appliances. Therefore, it seems to me that even those who disagree with Chazon Ish, [holding] that there is only a rabbinic prohibition in using certain electric appliances, they mean this only with a single, **incidental** use. However, it is possible that using many electric appliances on Shabbat would involve a **biblical** prohibition, based on what the Ramban wrote in his commentary to the Torah (Vayikra 23:24)…

This is specifically true for our generation. As technology has developed and moved forward, and even during the week most people do not toil and work with their bodies, but rather they press buttons,, listen and talk and receive decisions, and all is done with virtually no work, but with psychological stress… How lucky we are, how good is our portion, and how great is this gift that the Holy One Blessed be He gave us, the One who gives his nation of Israel Shabbat and holidays for holiness and rest, for Torah and joy. And therefore, it seems to me that even the authorities who hold that electric appliances are only forbidden rabbinically, we should not be lenient regarding their use unless there is great need and with other reasons [to be lenient], and with responsible and deliberate decision making, so that we shall not, G-d forbid, breach the floodgates of the holiness of Shabbat, which is the foundation of all of Israel’s Torah.

**R. Asher Weiss, Shut Minchat Asher 1:30**

[Regarding LED lights]: I received your pamphlet, and I don’t agree with a single word you wrote. In my opinion, there is a great mistake and the conclusion is severe and will, G-d forbid, lead to the masses stumbling in a biblical prohibition. You went on at length with the notion that there exists no technical Biblical or Rabbinic prohibition with regards to turning on LED lights, but merely a problem of עובדין דחול. You pointed to the Ahronim who say that the only problem with electric appliances and circuits are a) Molid (Beit Yitzchk 31) and b) Boneh (Chazon Ish 50:9), and with these lights, [neither of these problems exist…

It’s been more than 100 years since we’ve started to harness the power of electricity for light and industry, and the Gedolei Yisrael discussed the prohibition on Shabbat. And the truth is that we can find weaknesses in all the arguments that have come before, as R. Shlomo Zalman Auerbach did. However, anyone who wants to be lenient in practice has removed himself from the community. It is as if a voice came from heaven and says that there is a biblical prohibition involved…I think that closing an electric circuit is striking the final hammer blow, *makeh bipatish,* biblically. [This is based on the Yerushalmi which says that] R. Yochanan and Reish Lakish investigated all the *melachot* and ‘established that this act is significant, it fixes and creates, and therefore it is a *melacha*. Afterwards, they looked to see which of the 39 melachot it was… and it seems that the same is true regarding closing electric circuits… there is no doubt that there is no greater act of creation than to activate electrc appliances… and so too for LED lights.

I hope you accept my words in the spirit of open rebuke and hidden love. I am worried about you that you are wandering into distance places which are very dangerous. You should not mess with that which has been agreed upon, lest you destroy the foundations of the great edifice.

**Minchat Asher 1:31**

You asked me about doors that are closed using the power of a magnet, and the way to open them is to punch in a code in an electric system. You report that two rabbis permitted this…It seems that we are not talking about a lock and key, but the closing of an electric circuit…every electric connection constitutes a possible Biblical violation.

**Minchat Asher 1:32**

It is very common that a person activates electric systems without intention, which causes changes that don’t have result in any over or useful outcomes…In these cases, I think there is not a trace of melacha because they are not in the category of melechet machshevet.

**Shevet ha-Levi 9:69**

However, when a person does nothing, but is just walking normally, not adding any actions for *melacha,* even if he causes a light to be lit or the like, it is obvious that as long as he doesn’t actually intend to walk and turn on the light and the like, that we don’t attach his normal walking to the result, and there is not act of *melacha.*