In Hilchos Shabbos

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

A summary of the weekly Wednesday night shiur by Rabbi Shmuel Stein at the Miami Beach Community Kollal / To receive a copy send an email to InHilchosShabbos@gmail.com

Practical Modern-Day Controversies

Reading Newspapers

The Prohibition of Shtarei Hedyotos

The rabbinical prohibition of Shtarei hedyotos is generally translated as reading business-type material. In order to properly understand the prohibition of Shtarei hedyotos it is important to notice that it developed in two stages.

The first stage – Shtarei hedyotos (reading business-related documents)

The Shulchan Aruch writes that it is forbidden to read any business-related documents (e.g., a bank statement, a stock market newsletter). The Mishna Berura explains that reading business-related documents on Shabbos is included in the prohibition of Mintza cheifzecha – involving oneself in business-related pursuits. When one reads a business document he becomes involved in pursuing business-related matters, and therefore doing so is prohibited under Mintza cheifzecha. Accordingly, Chazal prohibited reading any business document on Shabbos (even if one does not read it aloud) under the prohibition known as Shtarei hedyotos. For example:

1. One may not read a newspaper (e.g., the Wall Street Journal) as it is considered Shtarei hedyotos which may not be read on Shabbos.
2. One may not look over a credit card statement.
3. One may not look over an electric or water bill.
4. One may not look at the classified section of a newspaper in order to find an apartment for rent.
5. One may not look at an advertisement in a newspaper, bulletin board or dvei torah leaflet.
6. One may not read a catalog that sells merchandise.
7. One may not read a store’s business hours.
8. One may not read a “For Sale” sign.

All these examples are prohibited because they involve reading business-related documents and fall under the prohibition of Shtarei hedyotos.

The second stage – the prohibition against reading any type of literature

Chazal realized that in order to ensure compliance with the prohibition of Shtarei hedyotos, they would prohibit reading other literature on Shabbos as well. If it were permissible to read all other types of literature on Shabbos, people might inadvertently begin reading business-related documents. Therefore, Chazal instituted the second stage of this prohibition, the prohibition against reading any literature that could lead to reading business documents.20 The Shulchan Aruch gives a number of examples of literature that are included in this second prohibition:

1. One may not read novels on Shabbos.
2. One may not read a letter on Shabbos.
3. One may not read history books on Shabbos.

The Shulchan Aruch prohibits reading these forms of literature because even though they are not actually business related, they may lead to reading business-related documents as well.

What Is Not Included in the Prohibition of Shtarei Hedyotos

Although as we have learned, Chazal included practically all forms of literature in the prohibition of Shtarei hedyotos, there are a number of exceptions which permit reading certain forms of literature on Shabbos.

1. Torah learning

Chazal did not include any form of Torah learning in the prohibition of Shtarei hedyotos.21 Since Torah literature is not similar to business documents, Chazal were not concerned that people would confuse Torah-related material with business-related material.22 Therefore, one may learn all Torah subjects on Shabbos, such as Chumash, Gemara, or any other Torah topic. In fact, the Gemara23 writes, “Shabbos and Yom Tov were given for one reason – so that Jewish people can toll in the words of the Torah.”

The Mishna Berura adds that any literature that can bring one to a higher level of yiras shamayim (fear of heaven) or better character traits may be read on Shabbos. For example, the Mishna Berura states that although the Shulchan Aruch rules that one may not read history books on Shabbos, one is permitted to read the books of Josephus, since they can bring a person to a higher level of yiras shamayim. Similarly:

1. One may read biographies of Torah figures on Shabbos, since reading stories about them can bring one to a higher level of yiras shamayim.
2. One may read a Jewish novel or story book that serves to strengthen character traits.
3. [Books about the Holocaust or other tragic stories which sadden a person should not be read on Shabbos as they detract from one’s oneg Shabbos.]
4. One may read articles on how to educate children in the ways of the Torah.
5. One may read to a child a storybook that will teach good character traits.

Studying Torah subjects for an upcoming test

One may study for a Gemara or Chumash test that he will be taking during the upcoming week.24 Preparing for the test does not violate the prohibition of Hachana (preparing for after Shabbos), since the Torah learns that one does on Shabbos benefits and enhances his Shabbos as well.25 However, one should not verbally express that the purpose of his Torah learning is to prepare for after Shabbos.26 We will discuss studying secular subjects on Shabbos in order to prepare for an upcoming test below.

2. Secular wisdom: science, math, medicine, etc.

As we discussed, Chazal prohibited reading any type of literature on Shabbos, as reading it may lead to a person’s reading business documents on Shabbos. There are, however, differing opinions regarding reading literature of secular wisdom (e.g., science, math, medicine, etc.) on Shabbos, since perhaps secular wisdom is so dissimilar to business documents that reading it on Shabbos will not lead to reading business documents on Shabbos. The Shulchan Aruch cites two opinions regarding this. The first opinion rules that even literature of secular wisdom is included in the prohibition of Shtarei hedyotos and may not be read on Shabbos. The Shulchan Aruch (and Sephardim who follow the ruling of the Shulchan Aruch) rule in accordance with this opinion.

The second opinion rules that secular wisdom is not included in the prohibition of Shtarei hedyotos, since literature of secular wisdom is not easily confused with business documents. The Mishna Berura rules that [Ashkenazim] are lenient and follow this opinion, and therefore may read literature of secular wisdom on Shabbos. This would include books, for example, about geography or astronomy.

The Mishna Berura adds, however, that it is appropriate for a yerei shamayim (someone with fear of Heaven) to refrain from reading this type of literature on Shabbos, since many passim follow the ruling of the Shulchan Aruch and prohibit it.

History books

The Shulchan Aruch writes that reading (secular) history books is prohibited on Shabbos according to all opinions. Acquiring knowledge of history cannot be considered a secular activity.

I 1 Brought in Rashi Bereshis 2:2 2 See sefer Shabbos Malkis pg. 95 3 In the introduction to sefer on Shabbos 4 Yerushalmi End of meshechta Berachos (in the name of Rav Shimon bar Yochai 5 Simon 605 (brought in the Chai Adam 68:20) 6 Shabbos 10:37 note 84 7 Shulchan Aruch 307:13 [Gemara Shabbos 116b and 149a 8 1:307.51. He also writes that it is prohibited as reading these materials may lead someone to inadvertently erase words on Shabbos. 9 Which is based on the words of the prophet Yeshayahu (Yeshayahu 58:13): “And you shall honor [the Shabbos] by refraining from pursuing your weekday occupations” (Shulchan Aruch 307:13). 10 Shulchan Aruch 307:13. 11 See 39 Meluchos pg.981. 12 See 30 Meshulash ibid. 13 It may be permissible to read the classified section of a newspaper to find employment. Since one’s livelihood may be considered a ‘far meshulash’ it may override the prohibition of Shtarei hedyotos (see Rav Doviel Yehuda Neustadt, The Daily Halacha Discussion pg. 209; and sefer ayal meshulshah, Shabbos pg. 198). One should consult a rav on this issue. 14 It may be permissible to read the classified section of a newspaper to find employment. Since one’s livelihood may be considered a ‘far meshulash’ it may override the prohibition of Shtarei hedyotos (see Rav Doviel Yehuda Neustadt, The Daily Halacha Discussion pg. 209; and sefer ayal meshulshah, Shabbos pg. 198). One should consult a rav on this issue. 15 See 39 Meluchos pg.981. 16 See 30 Meshulash ibid pg. 27. 17 Practical & Relevant Hilchos Shabbos (Reviewed by Rabbi Shmulik Felder) pg. 19. 18 ibid. 19 See Melchos 307:52 20 ibid. 21 307:13.16 21 Shulchan Aruch 307:17 22 See 30 Meshulash ibid pg. 52. 23 See 30 Meshulash ibid pg. 52. 24 See 30 Meshulash ibid pg. 52. 25 Rav Yisrael Beisky (Shulchan Aruch: pg. 89, Ayil Meshulash 307:5-5, Rav Doviel Yehuda Neustadt, The Daily Halacha ibid. 26 See 39 Meluchos pg.981. 27 See 30 Meshulash ibid pg. 52. 28 See 30 Meshulash ibid pg. 52. 29 See Shabbos Halaic halachot秦 30 See 30 Meshulash ibid pg. 52. 31 See Sefer 2904 where he writes that one may not explicitly state that he is taking a nap on Shabbos in order to be rested for after Shabbos (see 39 Meluchos pg. 123 note 520). Although the nap is also a Shabbos need, one may not explicitly state that he is doing so for after Shabbos since doing so is a degradation to Shabbos (Orchos Shabbos 22: note 294). 32 307:17 33 Since when the Shulchan Aruch cites two opinions, the first one as a stav (nameless), and the second as a yisurin (“there are those that say”), he generally follows the first opinion (Ohr Tzaddik). 34 307:65 35 Rav Doviel Yehuda Neustadt, The Daily Halacha ibid. According to some opinions, one may also read a cookbook on Shabbos, since acquiring the knowledge of how to cook can be considered a form of wisdom. See The Shabbos Home pg.63 36 307:16 [The Shabbos Home 1, pg.57] 37 307:16
News
Reading general news, politics, stories of popular interest, etc., should technically fall under the prohibition of Shabos. However, this prohibition does not apply nowadays, since most vital information is transmitted through newspapers. Accordingly, the Mishna Berura writes that one should not rebuke someone who reads newspapers and magazines on Shabbos, as there are poskim to rely on. Furthermore, as the Mishna Berura explains: “Unlike the newspapers in the times of the Mishna Berura which had the advertisements printed at the end of the paper, newspapers nowadays have advertisements on every page, making it almost impossible to read the advertisements. Therefore, even if one was learning Torah or a gemara on Shabbos has poskim to rely on, they must be careful not to read the advertisements on Shabbos.

Deeper Meaning of a “Day of Rest”
As we all know, Shabbos is referred to as “a day of rest.” Although on a simple level this may be understood that Shabbos is a day to unwind and recharge our batteries, there is a deeper meaning to the concept of a “day of rest.”

According to Rav Yisroel Belsky, Shulchan Ha’Levi pg. 90. Sefer Chayyim Chaim Shem Tov, 156 pgs. 38 If someone is studying for an exam that is relevant for his livelihood (e.g., someone studying in law school) it may be considered a d’var mitzva which may override the prohibition and according to all opinions it is permissible, studying for a test in a secular subject violates the prohibition of Hachina, since the purpose of one’s studying is to prepare for the upcoming week. Although we mentioned that studying for a test on a Torah subject is permissible, studying for a test in a secular subject may be prohibited. Very often, when one studies for a test in a secular subject, this studying is to do well on the test and not to become more knowledgeable or retain information about these subjects. Therefore, studying for this type of test can be viewed as solely preparing for the upcoming week. By contrast, studying for a test on a Torah subject is permitted on Shabbos because one also becomes more knowledgeable in Torah as well as fulfills the mitzvah of learning Torah.

In any case, when it comes to studying for a secular test on Shabbos, a Rav should be consulted.

Reading for enjoyment: The leniency of the Magen Avraham
Based on what we have discussed it would seem to be prohibited to read a newspaper, magazine or novel on Shabbos. These cannot be considered Torah subjects or secular wisdom and is prohibited under the prohibition of Shabarei hedyotos. Indeed, the majority of poskim prohibit reading such literature on Shabbos. Yet, some poskim allow reading such literature on Shabbos based on a controversial leniency given by the Magen Avraham. The Magen Avraham rules that the prohibition of Shabarei hedyotos does not apply when one is reading literature for the sake of enjoyment; it applies only if someone is reading a document for purposes other than enjoyment.

According to the Magen Avraham, reading history books is prohibited only if one reads them in order to gain a greater knowledge of history. However, if someone reads a history book because he enjoys it, he may read it on Shabbos.

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As we mentioned, this leniency of the Magen Avraham is highly controversial. The Mishna Berura and most other poskim do not agree with it; they rule that the prohibition of Shabarei hedyotos is effective even when one enjoys the material he is reading. Nevertheless, someone who relies on the leniency of the Magen Avraham and reads literature that he enjoys reading cannot be rebuked, since he has whom to rely on.42

Reading Newspapers on Shabbos
Above we stated that reading newspapers on Shabbos is a controversial issue which is even discussed in the Mishna Berura. Based on what we have learned in this chapter, we can better understand the issues with regard to reading a newspaper on Shabbos. The validity of reading a newspaper on Shabbos really depends on which section of the paper one is reading.

Business news, classifieds, advertisements
Sections that discuss or promote finances or shopping needs may not be read on Shabbos. These sections are considered business documents and are included in the prohibition of Shabarei hedyotos. These sections are included in the first stage of the prohibition of Shabarei hedyotos and may never be read on Shabbos (even if one enjoys reading them).

Divrei Torah or yiras Shomayim
Any section in a newspaper that discusses any type of divrei Torah (e.g., halacha, hashkafa, mussar) may be read on Shabbos. Similarly, any story or article that strengthens one’s yiras Shomayim may be read on Shabbos.

Reading general news, politics, stories of popular interest, etc., should technically fall under the prohibition of Shabarei hedyotos. However, this prohibition does not apply nowadays, since most vital information is transmitted through newspapers. Additionally, the Mishna Berura writes that many poskim permit reading newspapers, since one may inadvertently read business sections in the newspaper.

Reading Advertisements. As we mentioned above, reading advertisements is prohibited according to all opinions even one reads them for enjoyment. Accordingly, the Mishna Berura writes that there is another reason to prohibit reading newspapers and magazines on Shabbos: Since reading a newspaper or magazine very often leads to reading advertisements and since Rav Nissim Karelitz and other poskim conclude that “one should not rebuke someone who reads newspapers and magazines on Shabbos as there are poskim to rely on.” Certainly, women and children who are not obligated in Shabbos (p’sak halachah) who if they do read these magazines will sit idly and ultimately lead to more serious issues should not be rebuked. But a yereh shomayim should not be lenient for himself on this issue.”43

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