

# In Hilchos Shabbos

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Now learn the issues & the opinions

## Reading Newspapers

### The Prohibition of Shtarei Hedyotos

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](mailto:InHilchosShabbos@gmail.com)

After a long week of work, many look forward to Shabbos as a well-needed break. Shabbos is referred to as "a day of rest," as *Chazal* teach us that "together with the coming of Shabbos comes rest." On a simple level, Shabbos is a day to unwind and recharge our batteries.<sup>2</sup> Many people enjoy reading a book, magazine or newspaper on Shabbos as a form of *oneg Shabbos*, but in truth reading them on Shabbos is a debated issue, as reading them may involve the rabbinical prohibition of *Shtarei Hedyotos* (the rabbinical prohibition against reading certain literature on Shabbos). In the following paragraphs we will discuss this rabbinical prohibition and which literature is included in it.

#### The prohibition of *Shtarei hedyotos*: A neglected halacha

To many people the *halachos* of *Shtarei hedyotos* are somewhat unknown and may even seem foreign. The *sefer ayal meshulash*<sup>3</sup> writes that "this is a topic which the general public are extremely unclear and lax about." Even people who are generally knowledgeable and careful with the *halachos* of Shabbos very often neglect these *halachos*. The Gemara<sup>4</sup> states "If you see people neglecting the Torah, stand up and grab hold of it, and you will merit to receive the reward of all those who neglected it." The *sefer Chasidim*<sup>5</sup> writes "If one sees a mitzva which is people neglect and do not search after, one should search after it because it is like a *meis mitzva* (a deceased person that has no relatives to take care of his burial needs). The mitzva persecutes in front of Hashem and says 'I must be an inferior mitzva if everyone has forgotten about me.'" The *sefer ayal meshulash*<sup>6</sup> writes that in the same way we can consider the *halachos* of *Shtarei hedyotos* to be a *meis mitzva*, as its *halachos* are generally neglected by the masses. Someone who strengthens himself and is careful with these *halachos* will merit to receive the reward of all those who neglect it.

#### The Prohibition against Reading Certain Literature on Shabbos

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*<sup>7</sup> writes that it is forbidden to read any business-related documents (e.g., a bank statement, a stock market newsletter). The *Mishna Berura*<sup>8</sup> explains that reading business related documents on Shabbos is included in the prohibition of *Mimtzo cheftzecha* – involving oneself in business-related pursuits.<sup>9</sup> When one reads a business document he becomes involved in pursuing business-related matters, and therefore doing so is prohibited under *Mimtzo cheftzecha*. Accordingly, *Chazal* prohibited reading any business document on Shabbos (even if one does not read it aloud<sup>10</sup>) under the prohibition known as *Shtarei hedyotos*. For example:

- One may not read a business newspaper (e.g., the Wall Street Journal) as it is considered *Shtarei hedyotos* which may not be read on Shabbos.<sup>11</sup>
- One may not look over a credit card statement.<sup>12</sup>
- One may not look over an electric or water bill.<sup>13</sup>
- One may not look at the classified section of a newspaper in order to find an apartment for rent.<sup>14</sup>
- One may not look at an advertisement in a newspaper, bulletin board or *dvrei torah* leaflet.<sup>15</sup>
- One may not read a catalog that sells merchandise.<sup>16</sup>
- One may not read a store's business hours.<sup>17</sup>
- One may not read a "For Sale" sign.<sup>18</sup>

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 need to 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.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, *Chazal* instituted the second stage of this prohibition, the prohibition against reading any literature that could lead to reading business documents.<sup>20</sup> The *Shulchan Aruch*<sup>21</sup> gives a number of examples of literature that are included in this second prohibition:

- One may not read novels on Shabbos.

- One may not read a letter on Shabbos.
- 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 mentioned, *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*.<sup>22</sup> Since Torah literature is not similar to business documents, *Chazal* were not concerned that people would confuse Torah-related material with business-related material.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, one may learn all Torah subjects on Shabbos, such as *Chumash*, Gemara, or any other Torah topic. In fact, the Gemara<sup>24</sup> writes, "Shabbos and Yom Tov were given for one reason – so that Jewish people can toil in the words of the Torah."

The *Mishna Berura*<sup>25</sup> 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:

- One may read biographies of Torah leaders, since reading stories about them can bring one to a higher level of *yiras shamayim*.<sup>26</sup>
- One may read a Jewish novel or story book that serves to strengthen character traits.<sup>27</sup> [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*.<sup>28</sup>]
- One may read articles on how to educate children in the ways of the Torah.
- 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.<sup>29</sup> Preparing for the test does not violate the prohibition of *Hachana* (preparing for after Shabbos), since the Torah learning one does on Shabbos benefits and enhances his Shabbos as well.<sup>30</sup> However, one should not verbally express that the purpose of his Torah learning is to prepare for after Shabbos.<sup>31</sup> 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*<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>33</sup>

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*<sup>34</sup> 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.<sup>35</sup>

The *Mishna Berura*<sup>36</sup> adds, however, that it is appropriate for a *yereh Shamayim* (someone with fear of Heaven) to refrain from reading this type of literature on Shabbos, since many *poskim* follow the ruling of the *Shulchan Aruch* and prohibit it.

#### History books

The *Shulchan Aruch*<sup>37</sup> writes that reading (secular) history books is prohibited on Shabbos according to all opinions. Acquiring knowledge of history cannot be considered a secular

1 Brought in *Rashi Bereishis* 2:2 2 See *sefer Shabbos Malkisa* pg. 95 3 In the introduction to *sefer on Shtarei hedyotos* 4 Yerushalmi End of mesechta Berachos (in the name of Rav Shimon bar Yochai) 5 Siman 105 (brought in the Chai Adam 68:20) 6 *Shtarei hedyotos* pg. 37 note 84 7 *Shulchan Aruch* 307:13 [Gemara *Shabbos* 116b and 149a] 8 307:51. 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 (Yeshaya perek 58:13): "And you shall honor [the Shabbos] by refraining from pursuing your weekday occupations." (*Shulchan Aruch* 306:1) 10 *Shulchan Aruch* 307:13 11 *Sefer* 39 Melochos pg.981 12 *Sefer ayal meshulash Shtarei hedyotos* pg. 27 13 *Sefer ayal meshulash* ibid 14 It may be permissible to read the classified section of a newspaper to find employment. Since one's livelihood may be considered a *d'var mitzva* it may override the prohibition of *Shtarei hedyotos* (see Rav Doniel Yehuda Neustadt, The Daily Halacha Discussion pg. 209; and *sefer ayal meshulash, Shtarei hedyotos* pg. 198). One should consult a rav on this issue. 15 *Sefer ayal meshulash* ibid pg. 196 16 *Sefer ayal meshulash* ibid pg. 27 17 Practical & Relevant Hilchos Shabbos (Reviewed by Rabbi Shmuel Felder) pg. 191 18 *ibid* 19 See *Mishna Berura* 307:52 20 *ibid* 21 307:13,16 22 *Shulchan Aruch* 307:17 23 *Sefer ayal meshulash, Shtarei hedyotos* pg. 102 24 *Yerushalmi Shabbos* 15:3 25 307:58 26 Rav Doniel Yehuda Neustadt, The Daily Halacha Discussion pg. 209 27 Rav Yisroel Belsky [*Shulchan Ha'Levi* pg. 89, *Ayal Meshulash Shtarei hedyotos* 5:4-5, Rav Doniel Yehuda Neustadt, The Daily Halacha ibid 28 *Mishna Berura* 307:3, see *Sefer ayal meshulash, Shtarei hedyotos* pg. 80, Rav Doniel Yehuda Neustadt, The Daily Halacha ibid 29 *Shmiras Shabbos K'hilchaso* 28:92 30 *ibid* note 221 31 See *Mishna Berura* 290:4 where he writes that one may not explicitly states that he is taking a nap on Shabbos in order to be rested for after Shabbos (see 39 Melochos pg. 123 note 502). 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 *stam* (nameless), and the second as a *yeis omrim* ("there are those that say"), he generally follows the first opinion (*Ohr l'Tzion*). 34 307:65 35 Rav Doniel 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* 1 pg.63 36 307:16 [*The Shabbos Home* 1, pg.57] 37 307:16

“wisdom,” and can therefore be confused with business-related documents. Accordingly, reading history books on Shabbos is included in the prohibition of *Shtarei hedyotos*, and thus may not be read on Shabbos.

### Studying for a test

Aside from the prohibition of *Shtarei hedyotos* that may be involved in studying for a secular test (i.e., according to the Shulchan Aruch all secular subjects are included in the prohibition of *Shtarei hedyotos*, and according to all opinions history is included in the prohibition), the prohibition of *Hachana* may also be involved.<sup>38</sup> Rav Shlomo Zalman Aurbach<sup>39</sup> was uncertain as to whether studying in preparation for a test in a secular subject violates the prohibition of *Hachana*, 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, the entire benefit of his 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 *mitzva* 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 *Shtarei 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*<sup>40</sup> rules that the prohibition of *Shtarei 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 pleasure. For example:

- 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.<sup>41</sup>
- According to the *Magen Avraham*, someone who enjoys reading a novel may do so on Shabbos. Since he enjoys reading the book, the prohibition of *Shtarei hedyotos* does not apply. Even so, the *Shulchan Aruch*<sup>42</sup> writes that “it is forbidden to read inappropriate literature that arouses one’s *yetzer hara* (evil inclination), and one may not even read such material during the week.”<sup>43</sup>

As we mentioned, this leniency of the *Magen Avraham* is highly controversial. The *Mishna Berura*<sup>44</sup> and most other *poskim*<sup>45</sup> do not agree with it; they rule that the prohibition of *Shtarei 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.<sup>46</sup>

### Does the leniency of the Magen Avraham apply to actual business documents?

As we discussed above, the prohibition of *Shtarei hedyotos* developed in two stages, the first stage prohibited reading business documents and the second stage prohibited reading all documents which may lead to reading business documents. Although the *Magen Avraham* permits reading for enjoyment literature that is included in the second stage of the prohibition (e.g., history books and novels), he did intend to permit reading business documents even when read for enjoyment.<sup>47</sup> For example,

- One may not read a business magazine even if he enjoys reading it.
- One may not read advertisements in a newspaper even for enjoyment.<sup>48</sup>

### Reading Newspapers on Shabbos

Above we stated that reading newspapers on Shabbos is a controversial issue which is even discussed in the *Mishna Berura*.<sup>49</sup> Based on what we have learned in this chapter, we can better understand the issues with regard to reading a newspaper on Shabbos.

The permissibility 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 *Shtarei hedyotos*. These sections are included in the first stage of the prohibition of *Shtarei hedyotos* and may never be read on Shabbos (even if one enjoys reading them).

#### Divrei Torah or yiras Shamayim

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

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

<sup>38</sup> 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 of *Shtarei hedyotos* (see Rav Doniel Yehuda Neustadt, *The Daily Halacha Discussion* pg. 209 and *sefer ayal meshulash, Shtarei hedyotos*, chapter 8) <sup>39</sup> brought in *Shmiras Shabbos K’hilchoso* 28 note 220 <sup>40</sup> 301:4 (Brought in *Sha’ar Hatzion* 301:7) <sup>41</sup> See Orchos Shabbos 22, note 218 where he writes that according to the *Magen Avraham* the ruling of the *Shulchan Aruch* that prohibits reading history books must be referring to someone who is reading the book for reasons other than enjoyment. <sup>42</sup> 307:16 <sup>43</sup> The Debretziner Rav writes (*Beer Moshe* 6:660 “such literature is lowly and degrading, full of heretical views and immorality of the lowest degree. Reading such literature should cause one’s hair to stand on end, and accordingly, it is prohibited during the week, and certainly, how much more so, is it prohibited to read this literature on Shabbos.” <sup>44</sup> See *Biur Halacha* 301:2 *d’h kol and Sha’ar ha’zion* 301:7 <sup>45</sup> *Chemed Moshe, Mamar Mordechai* (brought in *Sha’ar Ha’zion* *ibid*), see also *Beer Moshe* *ibid* <sup>46</sup> *Sefer ayal meshulash Shtarei hedyotos* pg. 123 note 145 <sup>47</sup> *sefer ayal meshulash, Shtarei hedyotos* pg. 123, note 141 and pg. 198 <sup>48</sup> See *Mishna Berura* who cites the *Yavetz* (teshuva 162) who, although he technically permits reading a newspaper for enjoyment, prohibits it as it may lead someone to read the advertisements in the newspaper. However, some *poskim* reading a catalog if one’s sole intention is for enjoyment but has no intention of purchasing a product (see *sefer Tiltlei Shabbos* (Rav Yisroel Pinchas Bodner) pg. 12 in back of *sefer* from Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, and *Practical & Relevant Hilchos Shabbos* (Reviewed by Rabbi Shmuel Felder) pg. 190). However, this leniency does not apply, because in most instances, although one may enjoy reading the advertisements, there is also a strong possibility that this will actually lead to his purchasing the products that are being advertised. (Rav Yisroel Belsky, *Shulchan Ha’Levi* pg. 90) <sup>49</sup> 307:63. The *Mishna Berura* brings the leniency of the *Shvus Yaakov* regarding reading newspapers, based on the fact that because one must read the newspaper in order to know about imminent wars, they may be read on Shabbos. However, many *poskim* rule [*Beer Moshe*, 6:66] that this leniency does not apply nowadays, since most vital information is not transmitted through newspapers. Additionally, the *Mishna Berura* writes that many *poskim* prohibit reading newspapers, since one may inadvertently read business sections in the paper. <sup>50</sup> Reading material that will cause a person to feel sad may never be read on Shabbos. (*Ketzos Hashulchan* 107 *badei* 43 *Shmiras Shabbos K’hilchoso* 29:50, *Mishna Berura* 307:3) <sup>51</sup> See *Beer Moshe* 6:66 <sup>52</sup> 290:7 <sup>53</sup> *Yerushalmi Shabbos* 15:3 <sup>54</sup> *Tur O.C.* 290 <sup>55</sup> *Shabbos Malkisa* pgs. 94-95 <sup>56</sup> *Shulchan Ha’Levi* pg.90 <sup>57</sup> 40:4-5 <sup>58</sup> *Teshuvos V’hanhagos* 2:466