

Bicycle Riding on Shabbat

Is bicycle riding on Shabbat permitted?

The question of bicycle riding on Shabbat has been discussed by a number of important modern authorities. The overwhelming consensus is that it is forbidden. (See *Responsa Rabbi Esriel Hildesheimer*, vol. 1, no. 49, p. 47; Rabbi Gedalia Felder, *Yesodei Yeshurun, Laws of the Sabbath*, pp. 385–7.)

The most current and concise treatment of this question is given by Rabbi Eliezer Waldenberg of Jerusalem (*Responsa Tzitz Eliezer*, vol. 7, 30:1; Second ed., Jerusalem, 1985, pp. 145b–146b).

Isaiah (58:13) prophesies that “If you refrain from trampling the Sabbath ...from pursuing your affairs...and if you honor (the Sabbath) and go not your ways, nor look to your affairs...then you can seek the favor of the Lord”. This admonition was viewed by the rabbis in two ways. First, to honor the Sabbath each Jew must withdraw from performing weekday activities and not simply cease to work. A Jew’s way of walking and even talking on Shabbat should be different from that of other days (*Shabbat* 113a). In order to concretize this idea the rabbis developed the category of *muktzeh*, that is, a prohibition against handling or moving any object which, for a variety of reasons, was not intended for use during Shabbat. The rabbis reasoned that if a Jew’s conversation which involves no effort ought to be different on Shabbat, then certainly what and where things are moved, which does require effort, ought to be different. Thus, for example, objects which have no utility on Shabbat are considered *muktzeh* (excluded) and may not be moved on the Sabbath at all. Second, activities which are not strictly *melakhah* (that is, work proscribed by the Torah) may nonetheless be prohibited because they are not in the spirit of Shabbat or because doing them may lead to acts that do violate the law (see Maimonides, *Laws of the Sabbath* 21:1). The rabbis apply the term *shevut* (abstention) to these kinds of activities.

A bicycle is considered an object of prohibited usage since it may be used for travel beyond the limits permitted on Shabbat (*tehum Shabbat*—2000 cubits from the edge of town or city; see *Betzah* 36b and *Hagigah* 15a). Moreover, even using it within an *eruv* is prohibited because one could very easily ride it right outside the limits of the *eruv*.

Moreover, riding a bicycle involves the type of weekday activity which is incompatible with the spirit of Shabbat and about which the rabbis were so rightfully concerned (See *Shabbat* 150a–b; also note that according to the Talmud Yerushalmi, *'uvdin dehol* is the source of most of the Rabbinic prohibitions regarding Shabbat; see also Albeck, *Mishayot*, Introduction to Tractate Shabbat, vol. 2, p. 11, and notes on *Betzah* 5:2, p. 484).

Rabbi Waldenberg goes on to emphasize the everpresent possibility that the bicycle rider will have to make some necessary repairs that are forbidden on Shabbat (see *Betzah* 36b).

Therefore, Rabbi Waldenberg writes that a bicycle is *muktzeh*, and riding it or moving it in any way (unless the space it occupies is needed or to prevent it from being damaged) is a violation of Shabbat.

The authorities who deal with this subject express no concern about the generation of heat and sparks, no doubt because it is a totally unintended effect, extraneous to the purpose of riding a bicycle and, therefore, of no legal consequence (see *Betzah* 23b; Maimonides, *Laws of the Sabbath* 1:5–6; Shulhan Arukh, *Orah Hayyim* 337:1).

Tricycles, however, which may be considered like the simple devices discussed by the medieval Tosafists (*Betzah* 23b, s.v. *agalah*) that were used for training toddlers to walk, are permissible when used inside the house or within the *eruv* (Rabbi Y.Y. Neuwirth, *Shemirat Shabbat ke-Hilkhatah*, Jerusalem, 1975, 15:13, p. 102).

The one later authority who theoretically permits bicycle riding within the *eruv* (*Kaf haHayyim* 404:8 in the name of Ben Ish Hai), especially to perform a mitzvah, nonetheless admits that the custom in Eretz Yisrael forbids it. This custom continues to be maintained by Jews throughout the world.

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