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, 'udin 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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