

May Public Microwave Ovens be Used for Heating Foods?

With the popularization of the microwave oven, snack bars and kitchenettes in schools and businesses have made them available for public use. Anyone can buy a sandwich or soup in a container and heat his or her lunch in a matter of minutes. Yet those who are concerned about *kashrut* must take a more cautious approach in using these ovens.

The microwave oven is not like other modes of cooking mentioned by the classical sources. The microwaves excite the food molecules causing them to move so rapidly as to produce heat. There is no flame and there is no external heat source; only the heat generated inside the food itself. According to Halakhah, heat from a source other than fire does not suffice to cause a transfer of the essence of the forbidden food stuff that may be on the walls of the oven or absorbed in the walls of the oven to the permitted foodstuff (See Maimonides, *Laws of Forbidden Foods* 9:6; Shulhan Arukh, *Yoreh De'ah* 87:6; also Y. Levi, "Esh baHalakhah", in *Yad Re'em*, Jerusalem, 1974). With microwaves there is, therefore, no cooking in the halakhic sense. Thus, the rules prohibiting the use of Gentile cooking utensils, prohibiting contact with non-kosher elements during cooking, and requiring purging before use of the same, do not apply (See *Avodah Zarah* 75b). There simply is no absorption or transfer by heat in a microwave oven.

Since there is no cooking per se in a microwave oven, it is placed in a category of far greater leniency than a regular oven in which, under certain circumstances, it is even permitted to cook forbidden and permitted foods or even dairy and meat foods provided that they do not mix with one another (Shulhan Arukh, *Yoreh De'ah* 108:1).

However, foods placed directly in a microwave oven can come in contact with actual forbidden foods or dairy and/or meat particles that have adhered to the

interior. Therefore, prior to heating a sandwich in a microwave oven, the observant user must make sure that the sandwich is double sealed in plastic wrap to insulate the kosher food from contact with other possible forbidden foodstuffs. Similarly, other foods sealed in an appropriate container can also be cooked or heated in the microwave. Kosher foods prepared in this way have been served to and eaten by many pious Jews who travel aboard airplanes without any objection. (See also *Hadarom*, vol. 15, Nisan 5722).

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