

Shabbat Parashat Vayak'heil-P'kudei/Shabbat HaHodesh
Shabbat Light

The topic of the use of electricity on Shabbat is a questions students often want to discuss with me. Students asked, “How do we know if using electricity on Shabbat is forbidden if there was no electricity in the time of the Torah?” and “Why is electricity considered to be like fire? Fire is fire and electricity is electricity.” These two questions go right to the heart of the relationship between Torah law and rabbinic law, a subject which is timely given the clarity of one of the commandments given in this week’s *parasha*.

In the first *aliyah* of the Torah reading this Shabbat, one will find the following verse:

“*Lo t'va'aru eish b'khol moshvotekhem b'yom haShabbat.*”

“You must not kindle fire anywhere in your settlements on the Sabbath day.”

The kindling of fire for light, heat, cooking, power, and any other purpose on Shabbat is strictly forbidden by this Torah verse. We must recall in the ages before the invention of electricity, fire was the means by which people did their “work.” With the invention of electricity, all of this changed forever and the Rabbis were confronted with the challenge of deciding how to respond to this new invention (as is the case in every generation with the invention of new scientific and technological phenomena). There were many issues discussed, including whether using electricity involved creating or destroying (particularly important when examining an electrical circuit). In the end, two major factors (and some more minor ones) compelled the majority of Rabbis to decide that the use of electricity is prohibited on Shabbat. First, the functions of electricity and fire very closely, if not exactly, mirror each other. In the same way as fire was used for heating, cooking, light, and power in ages past, electricity is now used for the same purposes. Second, even if electricity was considered to be permitted, it would not be in the spirit of the observance of Shabbat to use electricity or electrically powered devices. Therefore, the majority of Rabbis consider the use of electricity to be forbidden on Shabbat.

So what does this law mean for each of us? In halakhically observant (be it Orthodox, Conservative, or traditional *Sepharadi*) homes and communities, the prohibition against the use of electricity means that lights, televisions, computers, video games, telephones, electric ovens, or microwaves are not used on Shabbat. The Shabbat candles and lights that are on throughout Shabbat or are on timers are used for light. Other than that, we are given a needed rest from the technological bombardment that characterizes life in the twenty-first century. Instead, we focus on spending time in rest and relaxation with family, friends, and community. For those of us who do not celebrate Shabbat in an equally observant way, the laws regarding fire and Shabbat are a challenge to take-on all at once. However, to begin with the lighting of the Shabbat candles, marking not only the onset of Shabbat, but also serving as a symbol and reminder of the laws regarding electricity and fire, is an excellent start. Gather together around the Shabbat table and light the candles together as a family. Let that act serve as motivation to, perhaps, refrain from watching television or using the computer for Friday night – as a start. The joy of Shabbat cannot be fully appreciated if it is in competition with the images on TV or the sounds of a stereo. To try to take on Shabbat observance all at once would be foolhardy, but not to attempt a gradual approach to observing Shabbat in small ways would be a squandered opportunity. Take your first steps this Shabbat with Shabbat fire and light.

Shabbat Shalom!