

SHE'AILOS U'TESHUVOS

by Rabbi Doniel Neustadt

QUESTION: On Shabbos [or Yom Tov], is it permitted to discuss purchases, e.g., to ask someone where he bought a particular item such as a suit or a painting?

DISCUSSION: If the questioner is interested in buying a similar item, then it is forbidden for him to ask the question and it is forbidden to answer him. If, however, the question is being asked as part of a theoretical discussion with no intent to act upon the topic being discussed, it is permitted. The same halachah applies if the questioner wants to know how much that particular item cost. If the question is being asked because he is contemplating buying a similar item, it is forbidden to talk about that on Shabbos. If, however, he has no interest in buying such an item but is just asking out of curiosity, it is permitted.(1)

Please note that while this type of conversation is not halachically forbidden on Shabbos, it is still considered "idle talk." Shulchan Aruch expressly urges us to minimize idle talk on Shabbos.(2)

QUESTION: Before Shabbos [or Yom Tov] a hostess may prepare a menu, a guest list or a seating plan in order to remember which foods to serve, how to seat the guests, etc. Is it permitted to use such lists on Shabbos?

DISCUSSION: In general, it is Rabbinically forbidden to read all kinds of documents or lists on Shabbos. Initially, the basic prohibition included only business-related documents such as contracts and invoices; informal household "documents" such as a guest list or a menu were permitted. Eventually, though, Chazal determined that people were blurring the distinction between business and non-business documents and allowing themselves to read business documents on Shabbos. Chazal were forced, therefore, to expand the original edict and prohibit the reading of non-business-related "documents" as well.(3) In addition, Chazal were aware that last-minute changes are often made in menus or guest lists, and they were concerned that one might inadvertently erase or alter the list as he reviews it on Shabbos. Thus they banned reading all types of lists and menus on Shabbos. It follows, therefore, that hostesses should not rely on these type of lists on Shabbos [and Yom Tov].(4)

Still, if a woman feels that serving family or guests on Shabbos without such lists will cause her anxiety or distress, she may prepare and read a menu or a guest list,(5) but only in the following manner:

1. Ask another household member, e.g., her husband or daughter, to read the menu or list to her.(6)
Alternatively, another household member should read the menu or guest list along with her.(7)
2. She should not read the list aloud or even mouth the words; she should merely scan it with her eyes.(8)

QUESTION: Is it halachically permitted to read newspapers like the Yated on Shabbos [and Yom Tov]?

DISCUSSION: It depends which section of the paper one wishes to read:

3. Business and classified advertisements, business news which bears on the reader's finances or shopping needs or plans, consumer columns, gardening and housekeeping advice, recipes and cooking instructions - are all strictly forbidden to be read on Shabbos.(9)
4. Stories of personal or public tragedies, death notices or eulogies that could bring a person to tears, holocaust stories that sadden a person and detract from his oneg Shabbos - may not be read on Shabbos.(10)
5. Divrei Torah - including all articles pertaining to Torah learning, essays on the weekly Parashah, Halachah, Mussar, Hashkafah, stories and pictures of gedolei Yisrael, stories of chizuk ha-Torah, middos tovos and yira'as shamayim - all of these are permitted to be read on Shabbos, provided that one makes a conscious effort not to read the forbidden parts of the newspaper.(11)
6. General news - including news, politics or stories of general interest, and advertisement or business news that have no bearing on the finances or shopping needs or plans of the reader, are a subject of dispute among the poskim. We find three basic opinions:
 1. Many hold that reading this type of material is included in the Rabbinical edict against reading non-business documents and is forbidden to be read.(12)
 2. Others hold that if one enjoys reading these type of articles then it is permitted to do so. These poskim maintain that the Rabbinical edict against reading non-business documents does not include enjoyable reading material.(13) Mishnah Berurah, however, does not support this position.(14)
 3. Some poskim hold that while it may be permitted to read certain parts of the newspaper, reading a newspaper should be strongly discouraged since it is extremely difficult to avoid the advertisements or other parts of the paper which are forbidden to be read.(15) But other poskim, however, permit the reading of a newspaper as long as one makes a conscious effort to avoid the forbidden sections.(16) The following is a free translation of guidelines given by Harav N. Karelitz(17) on this subject: "While a ben Torah and his family should avoid reading a newspaper on Shabbos altogether, we do not object to those who are lenient and read the permissible parts of the newspaper. This is especially true with regard to women, children and those who do not engage in the study of Torah [who require a kosher alternative so that they will not come to engage in idle or

forbidden talk or worse]; we definitely should not object to their reading the permissible parts of the newspaper." One should consult his halachic authority for guidance as to how he should conduct himself in this matter.

QUESTION: Is it permitted to read secular books on Shabbos [and Yom Tov]?

DISCUSSION: It depends on the type of book one wishes to read:(18)

7. Biographies of gedolei Yisrael or Orthodox community leaders, Jewish story books that serve to strengthen one's yira'as shamayim, emunas chachamim or middos tovos are permitted, including works of fiction (novels and mysteries) which are authored by G-d fearing Jews and are written for these purposes.
8. Books [or encyclopedias] on science, math, medicine, geography, astronomy and architecture are permitted,(19) except if one is reading them for the sake of his business or profession,(20) or only because he needs to study for a test. (21)
9. Cookbooks should be avoided.(22)
10. Secular books which do not contain halachically objectionable material, but were not written by G-d fearing Jews for the purpose of strengthening one's yira'as shamayim, emunas chachamim or middos tovos, should not be read on Shabbos. (23) We do not, however, object to women, children or those who are not engaged in the study of Torah reading books of this nature on Shabbos.(24) Books about personal or public tragedies, or holocaust stories that sadden a person and detract from his oneg Shabbos - may not be read on Shabbos.(25) Any written work that may have a bearing on the reader's finances is forbidden to be read on Shabbos.

FOOTNOTES:

1 Mishnah Berurah 307:27, quoting Rambam.

2 O.C. 307:1.

3 Mishnah Berurah 307:52.

4 Mishnah Berurah 307:47.

5 There are several grounds for leniency in this case: 1) A Shabbos meal can be considered a seudas mitzvah, in which case the edict against reading household documents is suspended. 2) Avoiding a stressful situation is considered tzarchei ha-guf, in which case the edict against reading household documents is also suspended.

6 Since we are only concerned that the person in charge of the meals - in this case, the hostess - may alter or erase the menu or list.

- 7 When two or more people read the list together, the likelihood that both will forget that it is Shabbos is virtually nil; based on O.C. 275:2. See Shulchan Shelomo 307:16.
- 8 Based on Mishnah Berurah 307:54; see Shulchan Shelomo, addendum to vol. 1, pg. 66.
- 9 Mishnah Berurah 307:63.
- 10 Mishnah Berurah 307:3; Ketzos ha-Shulchan 107:43.
- 11 See Avnei Yashfei 1:76-3, quoting Harav S.Z. Auerbach; Az Nidberu 9:7.
- 12 Many poskim, based on O.C. 307:16. See Minchas Shabbos 90:22.
- 13 See Magen Avraham 301:4 and Peri Megadim; Ya'avatz 1:162; Kalkeles Shabbos 33; Tehillah l'David 301:1; Da'as Torah 307:15.
- 14 Sha'ar ha-Tziyun 301:7.
- 15 Mishnah Berurah 307:63.
- 16 See Da'as Torah 307:16, Shemiras Shabbos K'hilchasah 29:46. See also Igros Moshe O.C. 5:22-3 who writes that business newspapers should not be read.
- 17 Ayil Meshulash on Shitrei Hedyotos, pg. 79, 83 and 210, and in Menuchah Shleimah, 2.
- 18 Although this discussion follows the same basic principles quoted earlier concerning newspapers, there are several reasons why there is greater leniency regarding the reading of books than of newspapers: 1) Books do not contain advertisements or financial news; 2) The Rabbinic ban against reading non-business related items, which became necessary due to the confusion between different type of documents, may not apply to books since there is a clear distinction between unbound business documents and bound books; see Pischei She'arim on Sha'arei Efrayim 10:33.
- 19 Mishnah Berurah 307:65 and 308:164.
- 20 Shulchan Shelomo 307:25.
- 21 See Shemiras Shabbos K'hilchasah 28, note 206, where Harav S.Z. Auerbach remains undecided on this issue.
- 22 Harav M. Feinstein and Harav N. Karelitz quoted in Ayil Meshulash, pg. 41. Others are more lenient; see Shemiras Shabbos K'hilchasah 29, note 116 and Avnei Yashfei 1:76.
- 23 O.C. 307:16.
- 24 Ruling of Harav N. Karelitz (quoted in Ayil Meshulash on Shitrei Hedyotos, pg. 209, and in Menuchah Shleimah, 2).
- 25 Mishnah Berurah 307:3; Ketzos ha-Shulchan 107:43.

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