

USING A REFRIGERATOR ON SHABBOS OR YOM TOV

by Rabbi Doniel Neustadt

Question: What must be done on Friday to prepare the refrigerator to be used on Shabbos or Yom Tov?

Discussion: Some refrigerators and freezers are equipped with a switch that automatically turns the fan off when the door is opened. This switch must be inactivated before Shabbos.

Some refrigerators have an ice and/or cold water dispenser. The ice dispenser goes into action when the lever is pressed. This switches on a motor that turns an auger in the ice storage bin. The auger forces the ice out the door into the awaiting cup. In the case of a water dispenser, pressing the lever triggers a switch that opens an electronic valve to let water into a "water chilling chamber" located in the refrigerator. The pressure of the incoming water pushes out the already chilled water in the chilling chamber. This chilled water flows out the door to the user. In either case, one is directly switching on an electric valve or motor by pressing back the lever, an action which is prohibited on Shabbos.¹

Automatic ice makers are common features on newer model refrigerators/freezers. It is clearly forbidden on Shabbos to activate the automatic ice maker mechanism that produces the ice. In addition, it is strongly recommended not to remove any ice from the ice bin on Shabbos, since doing so could possibly trigger the mechanism that produces the ice. This is certainly true for those models that have an infrared sensor that measures the volume of the ice bin. On some refrigerator models a digital readout may be illuminated to indicate the cabinet temperature and the setting, or an alarm is set to warn that the door has been left open for too long or that the temperature is rising too high. Some top of the line models may have a sensor that illuminates the refrigerator when someone comes in close proximity to it, sensing motion or even body heat. Obviously these enhancements would have to be disabled for Shabbos or Yom Tov use.

Many refrigerators have a light bulb that goes on when the door is opened. The bulb must be loosened or removed before Shabbos. Alternatively, one could stick a piece of strong adhesive tape over the control knob, which will prevent the light from being switched on when the door is opened. If the fan switch or bulb was not disconnected before Shabbos, one may not open the refrigerator on Shabbos even if all of his Shabbos food is stored inside. Although one does not intend to turn on the light or to switch off the fan, since these devices will necessarily be activated,² it is considered as if he expressly intended to do so (pesik reisha).³ Similarly, if the refrigerator was opened and it

was discovered that one had inadvertently turned the light on or the fan off, the refrigerator door may not be closed, since closing the door will shut the light or activate the fan.

Question: Are there any solutions for one who forgot to disconnect the light or switch before Shabbos?

Discussion: If there is a non-Jew available, one may ask the non-Jew to open and close the refrigerator for him. This is permitted because one may instruct a non-Jew to do an action which is only prohibited to the Jew because it is pesik reisha⁴. Preferably, the non-Jew should not be told that the light will turn on or off when he will open or close the refrigerator door.⁵

The non-Jew may not be instructed to remove the bulb from the refrigerator or to shut off the switch which regulates the fan. One may, however, hint to the non-Jew that if the bulb or switch is left in its present state, the Jew would not be able to open the refrigerator door for the rest of Shabbos.⁶ Under extenuating circumstances, when the main foods prepared for Shabbos are in the refrigerator and the non-Jew failed to follow the hint, some poskim permit instructing the non-Jew to deactivate the bulb or the switch.⁷

If a non-Jew is not available, then in the case of the automatic fan, there is nothing that can be done. In the case involving a light bulb, there are poskim who allow instructing a minor to unplug the refrigerator while the motor is not running.⁸ Another suggestion endorsed by some poskim is to ask a minor, who is unaware that the bulb will turn on when the door is opened, to open the door so that he can take out food for his own consumption. Once the door is opened, the rest of the food can be taken out as well.⁹

Question: Are there any restrictions on opening the door of the refrigerator on Shabbos to remove the food?

Discussion: There is a widespread and unresolved debate among many poskim regarding opening a refrigerator door on Shabbos. When the refrigerator door opens, warm air enters the cabinet, causing the refrigeration cycle to begin earlier than it would have had the door remained closed. Some poskim prohibit opening the refrigerator unless the compressor motor is already running,¹⁰ while others permit opening it at all times.¹¹ Some poskim recommend avoiding the problem by opening the door in an unusual manner (shinui), such as using one's elbow. As there is no clear-cut ruling or binding custom,¹² one should conduct himself according to the ruling of his rav.¹³

1. This paragraph and other technical information in this Discussion have been copied from Kashrus Kurrents (online).

2. This is forbidden even if one is uncertain whether or not he disconnected the switch or the bulb; Rav S.Z. Auerbach in Shemiras Shabbos K'hilchasah 10:15, note 45, and Shulchan Shelomo 316:6-2.
3. This is considered pesik reisha d'nichah lei, since had it not been Shabbos, one would definitely want the light bulb to go on; Minchas Shelomo 1:91.
4. Igros Moshe, O.C. 2:68, based on Mishnah Berurah 253:99; 259:21; 277:15; 337:10. There are minority opinions that are more stringent; see Sha'ar ha-Tziyun 253:104. See also Mishnah Berurah 253:51.
5. Rav S.Z. Auerbach, quoted in Shemiras Shabbos K'hilchasah 31:1, note 1; Shulchan Shelomo 253:31.
6. Shemiras Shabbos K'hilchasah 31:1.
7. Igros Moshe, O.C. 2:68.
8. Har Tzvi (Harari Basadeh) 1:151; Rav S.Z. Auerbach in Shemiras Shabbos K'hilchasah 10:14.
9. Rav S.Z. Auerbach in Shemiras Shabbos K'hilchasah 10:14, note 41. Rav Y.S. Elyashiv (Meor ha-Shabbos, vol. 4, pg. 223) does not agree with this leniency.
10. See Har Tzvi 1:151; Igros Moshe, O.C. 2:68; Chelkas Ya'akov 3:179; Minchas Yitzchak 2:16.
11. See Minchas Shelomo 1:10-1; Tzitz Eliezer 8:12, 12:92. Rav M. Feinstein is quoted (The Shabbos Kitchen, pg. 222) as ruling leniently on this issue.
12. Rav Y.Y. Weiss (Kol ha-Torah, vol. 42, pg. 14) rules that a child under bar mitzvah may be asked to open the refrigerator at all times even according to those who forbid an adult to do so. See Mishnas Rav Aharon, O.C. 4.
13. Our Discussion covers electric refrigerators that operate on a compressor system. The halachah is more stringent concerning gas-powered refrigerators, such as the ones found in recreational vehicles or trailers.

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