

What Happens If I Push This Button? – Part 1

In previous essays, we have examined various aspects of using electrical or electronic devices for *Cholim* on Shabbos.¹ Regarding the use of electrical devices that produce only temporary effects without lasting change (e.g., illumination of an indicator light) on Shabbos, R' Shlomo Zalman Auerbach *zt"l* held that even the *Chazon Ish* would agree that no *Melacha* is violated in such cases. However, the *Talmidim* of the *Chazon Ish* maintained that where the result is significant, using these devices may constitute a *Melacha*. Regardless, all agree that such devices are preferable to those that produce continued effects on Shabbos.

In the following paragraphs, we will examine several practical applications of this discussion.

Nurse-call buttons and intercoms

In *Shemiras Shabbos Kehilchasa* (32:23), R' Neuwirth *zt"l* cites R' Shlomo Zalman as ruling that a *Choleh she'Eino Bo Sakana* may use a nurse call button on Shabbos:

A Choleh who is confined to bed, whether in a hospital or at home, and needs assistance and has no other way to call for help may use a non-electric call button to summon assistance even if he is not in life-threatening danger. However, he may not use the electric call button at his bedside unless it is clear that no light will illuminate as a result of pressing it, and he requires immediate assistance for his medical needs. Where possible, he should press the bell indirectly, such as by using his elbow.

In footnote 66, he adds:

Since it is only an Issur d'Rabbanan according to the majority of the Poskim. I heard R' Shlomo Zalman say that he thought that an electric call button is permissible even according to the Chazon Ish since one needs to press it the entire time [so that it will continue to issue sound].

There are two *Chiddushim* implicit in the above:

1. Most Poskim do not consider this to be any more than an *Issur d'Rabbanan*.
2. Even the *Chazon Ish* would agree that the use of an electric call button is not an *Issur d'Oraisa* since *Melech Boneh* is only violated when something permanent is created. If the sound is only generated when the call button is pressed, but immediately stops when one's finger is removed from the button, it cannot be *Boneh*.

¹ See <https://medicalhalacha.org/category/shabbat/>

It follows that an older-style intercom would also be permitted since it only issues a sound or transmits the speaker's voice when its button is depressed.

Others disagree with R' Shlomo Zalman's assertion, as evident in the *Sefer Orchos Rabbeinu*. They hold that the *Chazon Ish* held that *Meleches Boneh* is violated any time that an electrical circuit is completed. This is why the *Chazon Ish* forbade speaking to a person with hearing aids on Shabbos, even though the electric signals created are only momentary. Though the results are temporary, it is still prohibited.

Regardless, R' Shlomo Zalman's ruling only applies to call buttons like doorbells or intercoms. Modern call buttons ring and/or illuminate an indicator until the call is answered and manually turned off. Since the results of pressing the button are not temporary, R' Shlomo Zalman's leniency would not apply.

Hospital beds

May one adjust the position of a hospital bed on Shabbos using the electronic controls? Given that the motor ceases to operate as soon as the person's finger is removed from the button, perhaps it should also be included in R' Shlomo Zalman's lenient ruling.

On the other hand, perhaps the results of the act should be considered, namely, the altered position of the bed. Since this is a permanent result, it cannot be compared to the temporary ringing brought about by a call button.

However, one could also argue that the altered bed position is purely mechanical – only the motor is relevant to the *Melacha*. Since the motor switches off when the adjustment is complete, the result of pressing the button is temporary.

Thermometers, blood pressure meters, and pulse oximeters

Thermometers, non-invasive blood pressure monitors, and pulse oximeters revert to their original state immediately after use. They should therefore be subject to R' Shlomo Zalman's leniency. This would apply only to simple models that do not have memory and do not store the readings; otherwise, the result of their use is permanent (and would constitute *Koseiv*).² One should employ a *Shinui* when using these devices on Shabbos. It is obviously preferable to use a mercury thermometer, where possible.

In hospitals, it is crucial to take and record these readings. Overall, doing so is considered a matter of *Pikuach Nefesh*; thus, the use of all the devices above is broadly permitted. They should not be delayed by *Shinuyim* or searching for devices that cause less *Chillul Shabbos*.

To be continued...

² One could argue that stored memory is inconsequential and these devices could also be permitted.