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Digest
Mishna Berura
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סימן רע"ה סעיף א'

Halacha Highlight

Adjusting electric lights on Shabbos

Shulchan Aruch Siman 275 Seif 1

ואין קורין בספר לאור הנר

One may not read a sefer by the light of a lamp

Shulchan Aruch presents the Rabbinic injunction against reading or engaging in activities that require one to look carefully at what he is doing by the light of a lamp. Their concern was that one will tip the lamp to draw more fuel to the wick to produce a larger flame and in doing so violate the Biblical prohibition against kindling a flame. Even if the lamp is ten floors up or behind glass it is prohibited since Chazal did not draw distinctions between cases and as a general matter applied the injunction even when it is highly unlikely that one will adjust the lamp. If someone places the lamp behind glass and locks the glass with a key, there is a debate whether it is permitted. Mishnah Berurah (סק"ב) cites Elya Rabba who maintains that if one gave someone else the key it is permitted since it is no different than one who asks a friend to watch him to assure that he does not adjust the flame.

Poskim write that this injunction does not apply to electric lights. The reason is that the concern that one will adjust the flame does not apply to electric lights since their light is consistent and not subject to change. Furthermore, just like Chazal were never concerned that one would add more fuel so too there is no reason for concern that one will turn on additional lights. One may even read in front of a light that is controlled by a dimmer switch that could be adjusted. The reason is that turning up the light is comparable to adding more fuel to the lamp and as mentioned, Chazal did not institute this injunction out of concern that someone will add more fuel to the lamp. However, people do have to be mindful of the fact that habitually they may do things on Shabbos that they do during the week and one must take the necessary precautions to prevent inadvertent violations. For example, it is not uncommon for people to inadvertently press buttons on their watch on Shabbos which change the display (פסקי תשובות אות א').

Overview

Siman 275 Seif 1:

One may not remove lice from clothing or read from a sefer by the light of a lamp, even if one does not enunciate the words out of concern that one will tip the lamp. Even if the lamp is ten stories high and one cannot reach it since Chazal did not differentiate in their injunction. For this reason it is prohibited even if it is behind glass or in a hole in the wall. The same applies to a wax candle.

- One may not engage in any activity that requires one to look closely at what he is doing out of concern that he will tilt the lamp in order to draw the oil to the wick to produce a better flame. (M.B. 1)
- There is a dispute whether it is permitted if it is closed with a key and Elya Rabba maintains that it is permitted if one gives the key to someone else. (M.B. 2)
- The concern is that one will pinch off the top of the wick and will thereby extinguish the fire. (M.B. 3)
- Although there are authorities who are lenient regarding wax candles since one will not violate a Biblical prohibition, nevertheless, Magen Avrohom writes that if there is no pressing need one should be stringent. Elya Rabba cites authorities who maintain that the concern for tilting the lamp applies to wax candles as well but it appears to me that one need not be stringent concerning our candles since people neither tilt them nor pinch off the top of the wick. (M.B. 4)