

## 7. Laws on Treatment of a Minor Ailment and One Whose Illness is Not Critical

דִּינֵי מִי שֵׁשׁ לוֹ מִיחֹוּשׁ בְּעֵלְמָא וְחוּלָה שְׂאִין  
בוֹ סַכְנָה

As stated earlier, *Chazal* prohibited whole areas of activity on Shabbat to protect against the violation of *melachot*. One such area is taking medication on Shabbat. Since, in their day, making medicine involved grinding herbs, it was thought that taking medicine would easily lead people to transgress the *Melachah* of Grinding. Even though taking medicine today will not lead the average person to violate this *melachah*, the *gezerah* remains intact,<sup>1</sup> as any *gezerah* which was crafted by *Chazal* and accepted by *Klal Yisrael* remains binding despite changes in circumstance.

1. **Grinding Medicine Tablets** As we will see, there are times when taking pills is allowed. You may grind tablets in order to dissolve them in water or juice for children or people who have difficulty swallowing pills. The reason is as follows: In the *Melachah* of Grinding, there is a principle which states that once something has been ground once, you can grind it again. For example, there is no prohibition of grinding a cookie since the wheat that went into the cookie was ground once before. Therefore, grinding the same wheat a second time is permitted. So too, medicine tablets consist of compressed powder which has been ground once before. Therefore, grinding medicine tablets is, ironically, permitted.

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Despite the ban, the laws regarding taking medication are nuanced and complex. It is first necessary to distinguish between the following three categories:

- (1) People who are indisposed and feel discomfort (מיחוש בעלמא), and people who suffer from a minor ailment (חולי קצת).
- (2) People who are ill, but whose illness is not critical (חולה שאין בו סכנה).
- (3) People who are critically ill (חולה שיש בו סכנה).

1. If you feel discomfort,<sup>2</sup> but are able to function as a healthy person, you are not permitted any medical treatment<sup>3</sup> on Shabbat,<sup>4</sup>

2. **Measuring Temperature and Blood Pressure** You are permitted to take your temperature with a mercury thermometer on Shabbat if you think you might have a fever. A woman who is required to take her temperature daily in order to determine the time of ovulation may do so on Shabbat. You may shake down the thermometer for immediate use or for further use on Shabbat, but not to prepare it for use after Shabbat. You may dip the thermometer in oil, or in Vaseline. You may clean it with alcohol and then dry it with cotton, but you should not dip the cotton in alcohol and wipe it off. Some permit the use of a thermometer which registers the temperature on tape when placed on the skin by a change of color or by illuminating figures or numbers imprinted on the tape. It is advisable not to use one where the tape is blank and the figures become visible only when the temperature is taken. You may take other measurements such as pulse rate and blood pressure to determine a patient's medical condition. The results may be recorded with clips attached to prepared charts, or written down by a non-Jew.
3. **Medication to Relieve a Slight Ailment** The rabbinic prohibition (*gezerah*) applies to a person who experiences discomfort due to a mild, localized pain or a slight ailment; it does not apply to someone who is confined to bed or whose whole body is affected by the illness or by severe pain. It definitely does not apply to one who is critically ill, in which case we are required to provide or facilitate medical treatment, even if it involves doing a *melachah* on Shabbat. However, even when the pain is mild and localized, treatment which does not involve medication, such as applying pressure to prevent swelling, or heat where needed, is permitted to relieve discomfort.
4. **Medicine Prescribed to Be Taken Daily** Medicine that is prescribed to be taken daily may be taken on Shabbat, if its omission would result in illness or would delay or jeopardize recovery. A woman, who is daily taking fertility pills, or oral contraceptive pills with medical and *halachic* sanction, is permitted to take them on Shabbat. In general, you do not need to take a strict view regarding the use of medicines on Shabbat, especially since people no longer prepare their own medicines, and most people are not even capable of doing so.

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even if it does not involve a *melachah*. The prohibition includes rubbing yourself with oil, or having it done by someone else, even by a non-Jew.

2. You may eat any food or drink any beverage that is normally consumed by people in good health, even if it is apparent that it is intended as a remedy.<sup>5</sup> You are not allowed to eat or drink, as a cure, whatever is not considered a food or beverage by healthy people.<sup>6</sup> You are permitted to drink sweet syrup and to swallow a raw egg to make your voice more pleasant, as it is not medicinal since your throat is not sore.

3. If you have a mild toothache and are not in great pain, you should not take some vinegar or liquor for relief and then spit it out, as spitting it out makes it apparent that it was taken as medicine. Rather, you should swallow it, or dip it on a piece of bread and eat it in the usual manner. Likewise, if you have a slightly sore throat, you should not just gargle some liquor to relieve the soreness, you should swallow it.<sup>7</sup>

4. Where massaging with oil is done only for medical treatment, you are not allowed to try to relieve pain in your limbs or scabs on your

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5. **Taking Vitamins, Sedatives and Aspirin** You are permitted to take vitamins on Shabbat, as it is common for healthy people to take vitamins to preserve their health and prevent illness. Sedatives or tranquilizers taken to calm the nerves and relieve tension are likewise permitted on Shabbat, because tension and lack of sleep can cause considerable pain or adversely affect a person's whole body. Opinions differ on the permissibility of taking aspirin for a mild ache or pain. Someone who has a severe headache may take aspirin or other medication.
  6. **Medication for Mild Aches or for Prevention** A generally healthy person with mild aches or pains, such as a stomach ache and heartburn, should not take any medication on Shabbat. But you are allowed to drink soda with lemon, or tea, etc., to obtain relief from these ailments. If the pain is severe and the ailment affects the whole body, you are permitted to take medicine to alleviate it. You are permitted to suck a candy even if it is to keep from coughing, but not medicated cough drops, unless you have a severe cough or cold. You are permitted to inhale menthol to relieve congestion and stuffiness in your nose. You may also take medicine that is intended as a preventive measure. For example, a person who suffers from hemorrhoids or is prone to constipation may take a laxative, etc. Moreover, if necessary, relief can be sought by means of a rectal suppository or an enema. Medicine for the relief of diarrhea may be taken by someone who is ill, and for a severe case of diarrhea even by an otherwise healthy person.
  7. **Rinsing with Mouthwash** You may rinse your mouth with mouthwash on Shabbat, since it is not for a medicinal purpose but for clean breath.

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head by rubbing oil on the affected area on Shabbat, since it is apparent that you are doing it for medicinal purposes.<sup>8</sup>

5. You are allowed to apply a hot water bag to your ear and to other parts of the body as well in order to obtain relief from pain. When it is medically indicated, a hot water bottle or a hot water bag can be used in the usual manner. You are, likewise, permitted to soak your feet in warm water to obtain relief from pain. You are also permitted to apply an ice bag to relieve a swelling caused by a blow or a fall, or to lower a high temperature.

6. You are not allowed to apply anything to try to heal a slight discomfort in your eyes, unless it is intended merely to enable opening your eyes.<sup>9</sup>

7. If you have a superficial wound, you should not place a bandage with ointment or any medicated dressing on it for the purpose of healing.<sup>10</sup> But you are permitted to cover the wound with a bandage to

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8. **Applying Baby Oil, Vaseline and Other Ointments** You may not apply Vaseline, moisturizers, hand creams, etc., to the hands or other parts of the body. However, if the condition causes some minor pain, you are permitted to apply oil or some other liquid lotion, but not Chapstick, to dry, cracked lips or hands. Vaseline or another ointment may be applied by a nursing woman to her nipples if they are sore, or on a baby to relieve or prevent diaper rash. This should be done without rubbing or smearing it on. The Vaseline or ointment can be applied to gauze before Shabbat and then placed on the affected part on the body. Baby oil may be applied, but not with cotton or a cloth, for concerns of ringing out the cloth (*sechitah*). You are allowed to use baby powder.
9. **Cleaning the Eyes and Treating an Infection** You may wash out the secretion from your eyes with a swab of cotton and warm water. You may treat a mild eye infection or inflammation with eye drops and ointment. A serious eye disease is considered *pikuach nefesh*, and should be treated even if it involves violation of Shabbat; see Chapter 8, paragraph 6.
10. **Cleansing and Treating a Wound** You may cleanse a wound on Shabbat by first applying water or an antiseptic such as hydrogen peroxide and then wiping it dry. You should not apply absorbent cotton that had been soaked with water or with the antiseptic. Since iodine causes considerable staining, you should rather use tincture of iodides, which is colorless and does not stain. You may bandage a wound to keep it from becoming infected. You may apply ointment to a wound by pressing it out of the tube or dabbing it on, without rubbing or smearing it on, and then covering it with a cloth or bandage. It is advisable to prepare bandages of various types and sizes before Shabbat. You may apply a medicated bandage to a wound if it was prepared

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keep it clean and protect it from irritation. If the dressing was on from before, you may cleanse the wound by lifting the bandage partly at one end and then at the other without removing the bandage altogether. You are not permitted to ask a non-Jew to prepare a bandage with ointment on Shabbat, unless it is a severe wound that has affected the whole body.

8. You are not permitted to place a cloth on a wound that is bleeding slightly, because the blood will color it. You should first wash away the blood with water or wine and then cover the wound with a bandage. If this does not stop the bleeding, then medication and bandages should be applied as necessary,<sup>11</sup> if possible by a non-Jew. It is forbidden to press a wound in order to extract the blood.

9. Piercing an abscess that is already draining in order to enlarge the opening of the wound is a violation of Shabbat, since this is a medical procedure. But if a person pierces it only to drain the pus which is causing pain, and he or she does not mind if it closes up again, it is permitted. You should pierce it with a needle or something sharp, but not with the fingernails, because you are likely to tear the skin and tissue surrounding it. If possible the piercing should be done by a non-Jew, as a Jew may intend to have the wound remain open for the pus to continue to drain.

10. A sore that has healed may be covered with a bandage that was prepared before Shabbat, since it is only for the purpose of protecting it.<sup>12</sup> It is permitted to remove a scab from a sore.

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before Shabbat. The bandage should not be secured with a double knot, but with a single knot or bow, or with a clip or safety-pin. You may remove it on Shabbat for adjustment. You may apply a bandage with adhesive tape, such as a Band-Aid. You should not remove the adhesive from your skin if it will pull out hair, unless it is essential to do so. It may be removed by moistening it with water or a prepared solvent. See Part II, *Melachah* 23, note 4, and Part II, *Melachah* 30, note 2.

11. **Stopping Severe Bleeding** You may use styptic powder (which helps clotting) on a wound to stop the bleeding. If the bleeding is severe, as in the case of arterial bleeding which is life-threatening, whatever is necessary to stem the flow of blood is permissible.
12. **Changing a Bandage** You are permitted to change the bandage on a wound to keep it from putrefying or if it is causing pain. The wound may be wiped and cleansed providing you can avoid extracting blood, or if only the blood that was already collected there is drawn out; see note 10 above for further details on bandaging a wound.

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11. You may remove a splinter with a needle, but you should take care not to cause bleeding, since you are not allowed to make a wound on Shabbat.

12. If someone is confined to bed due to illness,<sup>13</sup> although it is not life threatening (חולה שאין בו סכנה),<sup>14</sup> or suffers from a debilitating ailment which has affected the whole body,<sup>15</sup> and is likened to being

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13. **Calling the Nurse in a Hospital** A sick person who is confined to bed, even if not critically ill, may summon help by ringing an ordinary bell on Shabbat, even though that is generally not allowed. A patient in the hospital may summon a nurse by ringing an electric bell, provided it does not put on an incandescent light. In an emergency, and when the patient must use the facilities, he or she may ring the bell, in an indirect manner, even if it will put on a light. A person who is dangerously ill may ring a bell to summon help under all circumstances.
14. **Someone Whose Illness is Not Critical** A person who experiences severe pain, such as migraine or a severe headache, and a feeling of weakness and fatigue throughout the entire body, is considered to be ill, although not critically (חולה שאין בו סכנה) and is permitted to take medication and medical treatment as required. A person is, likewise, permitted to take medicine to prevent symptoms of serious illness such as asthma, diabetes, rheumatic fever, and heart disease. Someone who is running a fever above normal temperature, is, likewise, considered to be non-critically ill. However, someone who has an abnormally high fever, or who has fever accompanied by chills, or one whose fever, even if moderate, is not due to a cold or a sore throat, but may be caused by an internal condition, is considered to be critically ill (חולה שיש בו סכנה). In general, especially with children, where there is fever you should practice caution, unless it is clear that it presents no danger. For someone who is seriously ill, whose condition is possibly life-threatening, every Jew is obligated to do whatever is necessary, even if it involves desecration of Shabbat.
15. **Medical Treatment for Children** Children up to the age of nine or ten, or older, depending upon their physical condition and stage of development, are considered to be in need of special care. You are therefore permitted to do whatever is necessary for them, just as for someone who is considered a non-critically ill person. You may give them medicines and medical treatment as required. If the child feels ill and has a fever, even if moderate, he or she is considered to be critically ill and Shabbat is to be desecrated, when necessary, to provide food and medical treatment. For example, if a child has a high fever and needs to be put in the bath, you can run some hot water to make the bath tolerable so that the child can sit in it in order to be cooled down; see Chapter 9, note 10.

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bedridden (although he or she is able to walk about)<sup>16</sup> you are permitted to ask a non-Jew to administer medical treatment and cook for the sick person on Shabbat. Such a patient may take medicines and have medical treatment administered, either by him or herself, or by others,<sup>17</sup> provided it does not involve violating a *melachah*, even if it is only rabbinically prohibited. You may ask a non-Jew to perform even a Torah prohibition in this case.<sup>18</sup> If a non-Jew is not available, and it only involves the transgression of a rabbinic prohibition, it may be done by a Jew in a manner different from the way it is usually done (*shinui*).<sup>19</sup>

16. **Psychiatric Illness** Psychiatric illness is considered equivalent to physical illness for *halachic* purposes; see ahead Chapter 8, note 6.

17. **Use of a Vaporizer or Nebulizer** When it is necessary to use a vaporizer on Shabbat for a child who has difficulty breathing, if it is a cold water vaporizer, you may add water as needed on Shabbat. If it operates automatically, you should take care that the water is not depleted, causing it to shut off and to begin operating when the water is added. If it is a hot water vaporizer, you may not add water because of the prohibition of cooking, but may ask a non-Jew to do it. If the patient's condition is serious and a non-Jew is not available, you may add boiled water to the vaporizer, ideally in a different manner from the usual, as with the left hand. You should boil the water before Shabbat and keep it on the fire to be added as needed. You should start the vaporizer before Shabbat, or activate it by means of a timer that is set before Shabbat. If these preparations were not made before Shabbat, and the patient is critically ill, you may activate the vaporizer on Shabbat and add water as necessary. Similarly, you can use a nebulizer if someone is suffering from an asthma attack or is having difficulty breathing. If it can be anticipated, it is best to set the nebulizer on a timer for use on Shabbat. If that proves impossible, you may turn the nebulizer on with a *shinui*.

18. **Discharged from the Hospital on Shabbat** If a patient is discharged from the hospital on Shabbat, he or she may be driven home by a non-Jew on Shabbat. Since the patient, in all likelihood, is somewhat weak immediately following discharge and will recuperate better at home (and will not be exposed to the many illnesses that being in the hospital exposes someone to), it is permitted to have Shabbat violated by a non-Jew.

19. **Violating a Rabbinic *Melachah* for a Non-Critically Ill Patient** According to some *poskim*, in a case where it is absolutely clear that the patient is in no mortal danger, you may violate rabbinic *melachot* (*shevut*) but not *melachot* from the Torah. This is even if there is a chance that one of his or her limbs might become damaged. However, according to Rav Aaron Soloveichik, (in a letter which appears in the appendix of this book,) you can be lenient and violate even *melachot* from the Torah to save a limb in this circumstance.

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13. Routine<sup>20</sup> vaccination or injections of children as required by health regulations should not be administered on Shabbat.<sup>21</sup>

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20. **Infertility Treatments on Shabbat** There is a discussion among the *poskim* relating to a couple who undergo infertility treatments, some of which are necessary on Shabbat. Some are of the opinion that anyone with any part of the body which does not function properly is considered a *choleh she'ein bo sakanah*, for whom *melachot* may be violated by a non-Jew; see *Nishmat Avraham*, vol. iv page 38. Any detailed discussion of infertility treatment is beyond the scope of this work, and couples seeking treatment on Shabbat must consult with their rabbi to determine a sound *halachic* course of action.
21. **Vaccination and Injections** You are permitted to administer a vaccination on Shabbat when medically prescribed, as for smallpox, if it cannot be postponed. You are, likewise, permitted to give subcutaneous and intramuscular injections to a non-critically ill patient, or to one who must receive the injection daily, as in the case of a diabetic who requires daily injections of insulin. The area may be cleansed and disinfected with iodine, or by pouring some alcohol and wiping it dry with a wad of cotton. The needle may be similarly sterilized. The wrapper may be removed from the syringe, if possible without tearing the print. It is best to prepare the cotton, needle and syringe before Shabbat. It is also permitted to attach the needle to the syringe as it is disposable and is subsequently discarded. You are not permitted to give an intravenous injection to a patient who is not seriously ill, but you may give it to a critically ill patient, if it is necessary to administer it on Shabbat.