

Washing the floor

Washing a tiled floor is prohibited on Shabbat

The **Gemara** (151b) implies that it is prohibited to wash a tiled floor or to smear oil on it:

There was an incident with a student of Rabbi Meir who followed him into the bathhouse on Shabbat. The student wanted to rinse the ground. Rabbi Meir said to him: One may not rinse it on Shabbat. The student wanted to smear the ground with oil. Rabbi Meir said to him: One may not smear it on Shabbat. The Gemara explains: The ground in one place can be confused with the ground in another place, and the Sages therefore prohibited these activities even on a tiled floor, such as that of a bathhouse, due to a concern that one may ultimately do so on a dirt floor and smooth it out.

In other words, washing and oiling a dirt floor is prohibited due to Filling holes (Rashi),¹⁴ and therefore the Sages also prohibited washing and oiling tiled floors, because one might confuse these activities and come to wash or oil a dirt floor.

The **Rambam** (21:3) and the *Shulḥan Arukh* (337:3) rule accordingly:

One may neither oil the ground nor wash it, even if it is tiled.

Why were the Sages more stringent with regard to washing than sweeping?

Why is the *halakha* stringent when it comes to washing tiled floors, whereas with regard to sweeping, the Rambam and the *Shulḥan Arukh* rule leniently, as explained above? The *Maggid Mishne* (21:3) explains that washing the floor is not as necessary as sweeping, and therefore the Sages were more stringent in their decree:

14. The *Mishna Berura* (337:16) explains that even those *Rishonim* who maintain that sweeping the ground should not be prohibited due to filling holes apparently concede that washing is prohibited, as one who washes is more interested in improving the ground than one who makes do with sweeping. Therefore, there is a greater concern that one may fill in holes intentionally.

One may not oil . . . or wash the floor . . . [and] even though sweeping is permitted on tiles, these matters are prohibited. [The Sages] decreed against it, as they are not as necessary as sweeping.

The *Mishna Berura* concurs (337:17).

What is the *halakha* if all of the houses in a location are tiled? The ruling here apparently depends on the dispute among the *Rishonim* discussed above. According to the opinion of **Rashi** and *Tosafot*, the Sages prohibited sweeping tiled floors only in a place where there are dirt floors, but if all of the houses in that location are tiled, there is no reason to prohibit sweeping. According to the **Ramban**, by contrast, there is no difference between one place and another. Rather, the Sages did not always issue a decree in a case of tiled floors, but in a situation where they did issue a decree, e.g., concerning washing the floors, the decree applies even in a place where all the houses have tiled floors. This is also implied by the **Rambam** (21:3), who states that oiling or washing the ground is prohibited even if the floor is tiled, without distinguishing between different locales.

In practice, the *Beur Halakha*, as stated above, is lenient with regard to sweeping the house in a place where most of the houses have tiled floors, but when discussing washing the floor, he gives no intimation that he is prepared to be lenient in the same way. It is possible to explain this discrepancy as follows: Sweeping the house is permitted by the **Rambam** on any tiled floor (and according to the **Ramban**, on dirt floors as well), and the reason we are stringent is based on the opinion of *Tosafot*, who compare the decrees of sweeping and dragging heavy items. Consequently, there is no reason to be more stringent than *Tosafot* themselves, who are lenient in a place where all the houses have tiled floors. By contrast, with regard to washing the floor, the prohibition in the case of tiled ground is stated explicitly in the Gemara, and therefore, it is more difficult to be lenient in the dispute among the *Rishonim* and permit washing the floor even in a place where all the houses have tiled floors. Indeed, the *Shemirat Shabbat KeHilkhata* (23:6) states that one should be

When all the houses are tiled: A dispute among the *Rishonim*

Practical *halakha*: One should be stringent

In a place where cleanliness is especially important, one may be lenient

stringent about this, and prohibits washing floors in all places, and this is the opinion of most *Aḥaronim*.

Nevertheless, the *Shemirat Shabbat KeHilkhata* (23:6) adds that in exigent circumstances, e.g., in hospitals, where one must be very strict about hygiene and cleanliness, one may be lenient with regard to washing the floor on Shabbat. The same should apply in an army dining hall, when there is a great deal of dirt on the floor, that there is room to be lenient due to hygienic concerns:



Washing a tiled floor: This is prohibited even in a place where all floors are tiled. (In exigent circumstances one may be lenient.)

One may not wash the floor even if it is tiled, neither with a rag nor with a squeegee stick... but in exigent circumstances, for example, in hospitals, where hygiene is particularly important, one may be lenient and permit washing tiled floors, provided that one uses only a squeegee stick.

The reason for this lenient ruling is explained in a note:

See the *Mishna Berura* (337:17), [who writes] that sweeping is more necessary than washing, and therefore [the Sages] permitted it in the case of tiles. If so, one may say that in exigent circumstances the *halakha* with regard to washing is like that of sweeping, especially as this is a place where there are individuals in ill health.

In other words, we are lenient with regard to sweeping a tiled floor, and the reason that we are stringent when it comes to washing is that it is not as urgent as sweeping, as stated by the *Maggid Mishne*. Therefore, in a place where washing is particularly necessary, one may be as lenient as in the case of sweeping. It should be added that here one may also include the opinion of *Rashi* and *Tosafot* that washing a tiled floor should be permitted in a place where all the floors are tiled. The *Or LeTziyon* rules likewise (2, 43:8).

When there is a danger that someone might slip and hurt themselves it is certainly permitted to wash the floor, as the prohibition applies only by rabbinic law, and the Sages did not apply their decrees when there is a concern of injury (42a, *Shulhan Arukh* 334:27).

In any case where we are lenient with regard to washing floors, this applies only to moving water with a squeegee, but **one may not use a rag** to clean the floor, as this creates problems of squeezing and laundering (*Mishna Berura* 337:17). One may use a rag **for absorbing water**, as having the rag soak up water in this manner is considered “a manner of dirtying (*derekh likhlukh*)” This practice is not prohibited lest one squeeze the rag, as people are not particular to keep such cloths clean (*Rema* 301:46; *Mishna Berura* 337:172, 302:47). Nevertheless, in practice one must be careful not to squeeze the rag, nor to wash the floor with it, lest one squeeze it. One who does not absorb the water with a rag may sweep the water away with a squeegee to a tiled floor adjacent to the house, despite the fact that the water will presumably flow from there to untiled ground. This is similar to a point that was made with regard to Sowing (p. 588) in the name of Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach.

Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach (*Shemirat Shabbat KeHilkhata* 23:7, note 27) writes that if **water has been spilled on the floor**, it is permitted to remove it with a squeegee. According to this opinion, the prohibition of washing the floor applies only when one places water on the floor in order to wash it, not when one removes water which has been spilled.

Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach (*Shemirat Shabbat KeHilkhata* 23:7, note 27) further suggests a novel interpretation, that it is even

permitted to pour water onto a dirty area and remove it with a squeegee, as local cleaning of this type is not including in the prohibition of washing. This is also the ruling of the *Or LeTziyon* (2, 43:8) and the *Yalkut Yosef* (5, p. 65).

Washing is permitted when there is a danger of slipping

One may use a rag only to absorb water

It is permitted to sweep away water that has spilled

Local cleaning is permitted



Cleaning of a particular dirty area is permitted.

PLOWING

Summary

In conclusion, on Shabbat it is prohibited to wash a floor, whether or not it is tiled. Even nowadays, when all houses have tiled floors, it is appropriate to rule stringently in this regard. Nevertheless, there is room to be lenient in certain cases, provided that one uses a squeegee without a rag:

1. If there is great need, e.g., in hospitals or in a place where a spilled substance threatens (in a serious manner) the state of hygiene or the honor of Shabbat, one may be lenient and wash the floor with a squeegee.
2. When there is somewhat of a need (even if not as great as above), one may spill water onto a dirty area on the ground, and afterward sweep away that water with a squeegee.
3. If water spills on its own, it may be removed.