

## Playing with marbles

The prohibition  
against playing  
with nuts, and the  
reasons for it

In the **Gemara** in *Eiruvין* (104a), there is a dispute between *amora'im* with regard to the prohibition of producing noises on Shabbat: Does this include all noisemaking (Ulla) or “only a pleasant musical sound” (Rabba)? In this context, the Gemara notes that there is a prohibition against playing with nuts on Shabbat:

The Gemara asks: But with regard to that which Rav Yehuda says that Rav says: Women who play with nuts [by rolling them on the ground until they collide with each other], it is prohibited for them to do so; what is the reason for this prohibition? Is it not because [knocking nuts together] produces a sound, and any production of a sound is prohibited? No, it is prohibited because perhaps they will come to level the holes. As, if you do not say that this is the reason, there is a difficulty with that which Rav Yehuda said: Women who play with apples, this is prohibited. What production of a sound is involved there? [Apples do not produce a loud noise when they collide with each other.] Rather, the reason is that they will perhaps come to level holes, [and the same reasoning applies to nuts].

The Gemara considers the possibility that the prohibition against playing with nuts is based on the prohibition of producing a noise on Shabbat, and it cites it as a proof for the opinion of Ulla that all production of noise is prohibited. The Gemara ultimately rejects the proof: Perhaps only “a pleasant musical sound” is prohibited, in accordance with the opinion of Rabba, and playing with nuts is prohibited for a different reason, in case one smooths out the ground and fills holes. This stands to reason, as playing with apples is also prohibited, despite the fact that this game does not produce a noise.

According to **Rabbeinu Yeruham** (12:7), there is a practical difference between these two reasons with regard to whether it is permitted to play with nuts on top of a mat, where there is no concern of filling holes. If one accepts the opinion of Ulla, such games are prohibited even on a mat, whereas if one follows the opinion of Rabba, then they are permitted on a mat, as there is no filling of holes.

Playing with nuts  
on a mat

In practice, the *halakha* is in accordance with the opinion of Rabba, that there is no prohibition against producing a noise unless it is “a pleasant, musical sound” (*Shulhan Arukh* 338:1). Therefore, the *Shulhan Arukh* and the **Rema** (338:5) rule that the prohibition of playing with nuts is solely due to the concern that one may come to fill holes, which does not apply in a place in which there is no issue of smoothing out the ground:

The *halakha*: It is  
permitted to play  
with nuts where  
there is no concern  
of filling holes

One may not play with walnuts or apples and the like, due to filling holes.

[REMA]: This applies only [to playing] upon the ground, but it is permitted on top of a table, as there is no need to decree against it due to holes.

Accordingly, one may not play with nuts, or marbles, and the like on a dirt floor, but one may play with them on a table.

May one play these kinds of games on a **tiled floor**? This matter apparently depends on the aforementioned dispute of *Rishonim* as to whether there is a decree with regard to a tiled floor even though the Gemara does not explicitly say so, as is the case with sweeping the

Playing with nuts  
or marbles on a  
tiled floor

house. If so, then just as the *Shulḥan Arukh* and the Rema disagree with regard to sweeping a tiled floor, they would disagree in this case as well. The *Shulḥan Arukh* would permit playing with nuts or marbles on a tiled floor, whereas the Rema would prohibit such games, lest one also play on a dirt floor.<sup>15</sup> The *Mishna Berura* (338:20; *Shaar HaTziyun* 23) indeed rules that according to the opinion of the Rema one may not play with nuts on a tiled floor, adding that this conclusion can be inferred from the statement of the Rema himself, that the lenient ruling applies specifically to a table, not the floor.

In a place where  
all the houses are  
tiled

What is the *halakha* in our time, **when all of the houses have tiled floors**? May one play marbles on the floor of the house, even according to the Rema? It seems that one may be lenient here, just as the *Beur Halakha* is lenient with regard to sweeping the house. Accordingly, the *Shemirat Shabbat KeHilkhata* (16:5) permits playing with marbles inside the house (but not outside, even on a tiled

15. Yet, there is a case to be made that the *halakha* should be more stringent with regard to playing with nuts and the like than sweeping the house (apart from the reasoning of the *Ketzot HaShulḥan*). The *Maggid Mishne*, as cited above, explains that we are more stringent in the case of washing than sweeping the house, which is prohibited even on tiled floors according to all opinions, because washing is not as necessary as sweeping. According to this explanation, since playing with nuts is not a vital activity, we should be stringent here as well, and it should be prohibited in all opinions on tiled floors even in a place where the majority of houses are tiled. This conclusion can also be inferred from the opinion of the *Shulḥan Arukh HaRav* (338:6), who equates playing with nuts to smearing oil on the ground (see *Ketzot HaShulḥan* 146, *Badei HaShulḥan* end of 60, s.v. *umihu*). Despite this reasoning, it is clear from the statement of the *Beit Yosef* (338, s.v. *katav Rabbeinu Yeruḥam*) that in his opinion those who are lenient with regard to sweeping the house are also lenient with regard to playing with nuts. The majority of the *Aḥaronim* state likewise, without attribution, and the *Shemirat Shabbat KeHilkhata* and the *Hazon Ovadia* rule similarly. See also *Arukh HaShulḥan* 338:12, who maintains the opposite, that there is more room to be lenient with regard to playing with nuts than sweeping the house, and that the game should be permitted on tiled floors according to all opinions, “as playing is not a fixed practice to the extent that one form should be prohibited due to another.”

floor), and Rav Ovadia Yosef concurs (*Hazon Ovadia* 4, p. 53).

Yet, there are grounds to be stringent with regard to a game of marbles, as stated by the *Ketzot HaShulhan* (*Badei HaShulhan* 146, end of 60):

This applies specifically to sweeping, as generally one does not sweep a courtyard or alley on Shabbat, only the house. Therefore, since all the houses have tiled floors, it is permitted. By contrast, one might play a game of nuts in a courtyard or alley, which are not tiled, and consequently it is prohibited even in houses with tiled floors.

In other words, sweeping is performed specifically inside the house. Therefore, since the entire reason to prohibit sweeping in a tiled house is due to the concern that one might come to sweep a **dirt floor**, in a place in which there are practically no such houses, there is no reason for the decree. By contrast, a game of nuts and the like is played outside as well as in the house, and therefore this should be prohibited even in a house with tiled floors, in case one plays **outside on a dirt floor**. It makes no difference in this regard whether the houses in the locale have tiled floors or not, because the activity is not done specifically in houses. The *Shevitat HaShabbat* is also of this opinion (*Horesh* 28).

On the other hand, *Shemirat Shabbat KeHilkhata* (as above) stated that a game should not be prohibited lest it be played outside. Therefore, in his opinion, where most houses have tiled floors, it is not prohibited to play marbles and the like **on the floor in the house**. He concurs, however, that these games should not be played **outside, even on a tiled surface**, since here the decree lest one play the game on an untiled floor applies.

The practical *halakha* varies from game to game. If a game is always played on a tiled floor it may be played on Shabbat on the floor of the house, but not on a tiled outdoor area, in accordance with the opinion of the *Shemirat Shabbat KeHilkhata*. With regard to a game that is played both inside the house and on a dirt floor



Playing with marbles indoors is permitted, particularly in places where they are not played with outdoors.

The *halakha*:  
Various games in  
a house with tiled  
floors

outside, one should be stringent, in accordance with the opinion of the *Ketzot HaShulhan*, and not play it even on the floor of the house. As for **marbles**, in the past it was very common to play with them outside, and therefore it was appropriate to be stringent even inside the house. Today, in places where one typically plays with them only inside the house, there is room to be lenient and permit playing with them on the floor of the house, but not outside.

The above distinctions apply to Ashkenazim. For Sephardim, there is no distinction between the various places. One may play with marbles and the like on tiled floors inside and outside the house, but one may not do so on untiled floors, as stated in *Hazon Ovadia* (vol. 4, p. 53).

Soccer

This discussion is also relevant to soccer, which also requires level ground.<sup>16</sup> From the foregoing, it is clear that **according to all opinions, one cannot play soccer on dirt, grass or the like**. Regarding playing soccer on a tiled or paved terrain: In light of the above, since soccer is also played on non-paved terrain, Ashkenazim should be stringent and not play on paved terrain even indoors (while Sephardim may do so). Those who are lenient and play soccer **indoors** have on whom to rely.<sup>17</sup> However, soccer should not be

16. Although the *Shulhan Arukh* (318:45) rules that a ball is considered *muk-tze* and cannot be moved, the Rema (ad loc.) is lenient, and nowadays, since balls are manufactured expressly for games, Sephardim may also be lenient.

17. As above, in the opinion of the *Shemirat Shabbat KeHilkhata* and Rav Ovadia Yosef, marbles and ball games and the like are not prohibited on the floor indoors, where most houses are tiled. Additionally, today there are many paved areas outdoors as well, and most sports facilities are paved.

**On paved ground adjacent to the house**, the default halakhic position for Ashkenazim is to be strict, however there is room to be lenient, especially for small children. This is because in most of the houses there is paved area adjacent to the house (see *Responsa Mahazeh Eliyahu* 8:2). Generally, such games do not compromise the dignity of the Sabbath, and may even enhance it, as many children today need an outlet for their energy. In any case, these game should be limited in duration, so that Shabbat can be utilized for learning Torah with one's children will be used mainly for parent and child study, and for family board games and the like.

played on paved surfaces in public areas, and in particular not be played in sports facilities and the like, since apart from decree of filling holes, this is a **desecration of the honor of the Sabbath**.<sup>18</sup> The latter point is equally applicable to Sephardim.

IN CONCLUSION, the Sages made a decree prohibiting playing games with nuts or similar items that require a smooth ground, in case one fills in holes while playing the game. For Sephardim, this decree does not apply to tiled floors, whereas for Ashkenazim the decree in principle does apply even to tiled floors, but as nowadays most apartments are tiled, one may be lenient especially with games that are always played on tiled floors, but only on the floor of the house, not outside. Sephardim should also not play soccer in public paved areas since this dishonors Shabbat.

Summary

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18. The halakhic authorities mention the words of the Midrash (*Eikha Rabba*, 2:4) in which it is stated that the city of Tur Shimon was destroyed because its inhabitants would play ball games on Shabbat. However, the parameters of this issue vary according to one's age and the general circumstances prevailing in a given time and place; a full discussion of this issue is not possible here.