Biking on Shabbat

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Rabbi Dr. Shmuly Yanklowitz is the President & Dean of the Valley Beit Midrash (a Jewish learning & leadership center), the Founder & President of Uri L'Tzedek (Orthodox Social Justice), the Founder and CEO of Shamayim (Jewish animal advocacy), the Founder and President of YATOM, (Jewish foster and adoption network), and the author of books on Jewish ethics.

Many are struggling today, in different ways, with Shabbat observance. This challenge is an issue for us to be sensitive to and to be responsive to in all ways possible. One dimension of the challenge for many observant Jews today (or those working to become more observant) is where they can live. Homes that are very close to the shul that they can (or want) to go to are often out of their financial reach. Given the option of driving a car to shul, it seems far more halachically responsible to ride a bike to shul[i]. This can make Shabbat observance far more palatable for many people. And we must be concerned with people being stretched financially. Our halakhic tradition teaches "Chas HaKadosh Baruch Hu al Mamonam Shel Yisrael" (G-d cares about our financial stress)![ii]

This is most important for rising costs in observant Jewish life in America[iii]. Homes in close walking distance to shul are often unaffordable for countless people. What if one could choose to live 2-5 miles away from shul instead of just half a mile (or one mile at most)? A family living 2-5 miles away, yet still within the eruv[iv], most certainly should consider biking to shul instead of just staying home, and certainly instead of making an imprudent decision to buy a home well out of their budget. In addition to the financial concerns, there are many who need other types of pleasurable (personal or familial) experiences on Shabbat for the day to be deeply fulfilling and we should not judge those ways but enable deeper options, where *halakha* can allow it.

Some suggest that it is prohibited to bike on Shabbat[v]. Four possible reasons[vi]:

1. *Shema yitaken* (lest you come to fix a broken chain or a flat tire – i.e., a problem of *makeh b'patish*)[vii] and as such, it may also be *marit ayin* – that the act is permitted but it may be mistaken by an onlooker to be an impermissible action[viii].

2. *Uvdin d'chol*[ix] (it's what we do on weekdays – i.e., it's not *Shabbosdik*).[x] Further, some suggest that one should move slowly on Shabbat, and not even walk briskly.[xi]

3. One might leave the *eruv* or the borders of Shabbat accidentally[xii][xiii] and because of this, it may be a *muktzah*[xiv] object[xv]

4. One might make grooves in the dirt with the wheels[xvi], which could be a violation of the *melacha*[xvii] of plowing (*charisha*)[xviii]

These positions have heavy-weight poskim behind them and should be taken very seriously. But these are reasons for a *beit din ha-gadol* to enact new legislation. But these are not halakhic principles that can obviously, easily, and stringently, be applied to a new case in our day.[xix] We did

not have bikes in ancient times, of course, and the power to create new prohibitions was reserved for the rabbis of the Talmud. We don't simply say that because we haven't seen an act being done[xx] that it cannot be permitted.[xxi] Without an explicit prohibition in the Talmud[xxii], we need not create new prohibitions. [xxiii] The Maharshag wrote that we don't create new *gezeirot* about *uvdin d'chol*, [xxiv] and Rabbi Chaim Zimmerman[xxv] was upset by new arguments about why biking shouldn't be allowed also arguing that we don't create new *gezeirot*.[xxvi]

Of course, it will be a breach of the contemporary Orthodox norms if one bikes and that is something to take seriously. Just because something is technically permitted, doesn't mean that everyone should do it. We must be sensitive to the norms of our tradition and to the norms of our religious community. So, if one were to choose to bike, they should be aware of the social implications of that choice as we should generally seek to limit areas where we diverge from communal norms to foster communal harmony. Further, for those merely looking for enjoyment, Shabbat should be meaningful and pleasurable but we should remember that the primary goal is not fun.

If one is going to bike, one should take certain precautions. Firstly, they should service their bike regularly and only use bikes that are in good reliable shape. Secondly, they should be willing and able to continue travel with a broken bike rather than repair it if some rare event occurs[xxvii]. Thirdly, they should be clear on the boundaries of the *eruv* and *techum*[xxviii] and be sure to stay inside. This should only be done with an eruv.[xxix] Fourthly, one should use the bicycle as a means to perform a mitzvah (go to shul, attend a seudah[xxx], teach Torah and other mitzvot such as bonding with one's children) but not for physical exercise goals as that would indeed be *uvdin d'chol.*[xxxi] Fifthly, one should focus on biking on roads, sidewalks[xxxii], and bike paths and try to avoid dirt roads. Of course, we must note the importance of safety precautions as well.[xxxiii]

It is very common for observant Jews to push strollers, often with inflatable tires, on Shabbat. The issues one could raise with such a stroller are almost identical to issues of biking (Will one leave the eruv? What if a tire is flat? What if it makes grooves in the dirt?) and so almost all of the potential challenges of biking have already been addressed through the permission of using strollers.

The reasoning that biking is not officially prohibited should be enough. But if one's norm is to ensure that a major rabbi has officially permitted a practice then they can rely on the Ben Ish Hai. Rav Yosef Hayyim[xxxiv] of Baghdad[xxxv] fully permitted riding a bicycle in the streets of the walled city of Baghdad on Shabbat.[xxxvi]

"It is allowed to ride…on both Shabbat and Yom Tov, in a city where there is an Eruv. It is not considered a non-Shabbat activity… since the rider only moves his feet and the bicycle moves by itself, it is not like being carried in a chair by other people [which is forbidden] … it is allowed without doubt in a city with Eruv even for recreational purposes, and even more so if one is going to perform a Mitzvah…"

Rav Ovadia Yosef is sympathetic with the position of the Ben Ish Hai.[xxxvii] In regards to inflating bike tires on Shabbat, Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach[xxxviii] rules that it is allowed to inflate a ball on Shabbat[xxxix]. The same reasoning should apply to inflate a bike tire. So, fixing a bike, in some ways, may not be a problem in the first place. In any case, the concerns around biking are not about any prohibition at all, just that it may end up leading to a prohibition.

Orthodoxy continues to demand more conformity to new stringencies. There is often a pervasive fear of suggesting approaches outside that mainstream. But we can take a more halakhically-pluralistic approach to Shabbat observance. Once something is permitted as a matter of halacha, then if some don't find it enjoyable, meaningful, helpful, or in the spirit of the day to ride a bike on Shabbat, that's great. If others find it meaningful or helpful, then they should embrace the opportunity. Observant Syrian Jews in Brooklyn, today, ride their bikes on Shabbat[xl]. We should not encourage people to refrain from the permitted absent sufficient religious concern.

If some prefer not to bike for whatever reason, there are other options in addition to biking such as non-electric scootering and rollerblading[xli] that may be more appealing to some. Just as Modern Orthodox synagogues open their parking lots to those who choose to drive (while driving is a halakhic violation of Shabbat), shuls should start offering bike racks (since biking is not a halakhic violation of Shabbat) and it could encourage more people to attend.

In many Asian cities and in some European cities, biking is closely connected to work and thus *uvda d'chol* may indeed be a concern[xlii]. But biking in America is not work related and thus not *uvda d'chol* in the classical sense of work conduct. Poskim in Europe (and perhaps Israel) who don't allow biking have different concerns whereas biking in America is for recreation, not work. It seems that the

minhag not to ride a bike came from a time when bikes were connected to work, perhaps like watches. This has changed and thus the practice should change in America (but perhaps not in Israel, China, or Europe). In this model though, perhaps someone in America who bikes to work (or uses a bike for work) should not bike on Shabbat.

What is the goal of Shabbat? To pray? To relax? To serve God? To eat and sleep? To learn Torah? To recharge? So many different explanations emerge. Many suggest some leisurely activities are not prohibited but are simply “not shabbosdik.” I believe in an approach where we empower people to make their own religious choices based upon their own religious worldviews, within the confines of halakha[xliii]. To be a religious person is to take responsibility for one’s religious life[xliv]. In an era, where the high majority of the Jewish people are not interested (and even offended by) Jewish law, we need to invoke more urgency[xlv] on making observance accessible and meaningful.[xlvi]

“Whoever delights the Shabbat, is given all their heart’s desires!”[xlvii] May we do all we can to preserve the beautiful sanctity of the day. And do all we can to find joy in the gift of Shabbat and come closer to God and to actualize our unique life missions in service of God.

[i] It also seems it would be a better option to bike than to stay home all Shabbat, lose one’s financial stability by purchasing a home out of their reach, or take on a detriment to one’s family Shabbat experience in any way, unnecessarily.
[ii] The Maharshal applies this argument against new glatt kosher demands.

[iii] See the Nishma survey on how much Modern Orthodox families are struggling financially to keep up with the economic demands.
[iv] Even if one goes out of the eruv, in almost all cases, the area outside of the eruv is a karmelit, so we are only looking at a d’rabbanan concern, not d’oraita.
[v] Rabbi Gedalia Felder, Yesodei Yeshurun, Laws of the Sabbath, pp. 385-7

[vi] See Tzitz Eliezer 7; 30

[vii] Eruvin 104a; Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 339

[viii] Rav Moshe teaches that marit ayin is only when someone misunderstands the facts, not when someone misunderstands the halakha. In that later case, one should learn the halakha (OH 1:96).

[ix] Maybe uvda d’chol for a mitzvah is mutar?
[x] Shabbat 150a-b; Shut Chassam Sofer 6:96; Ramban, Parashas Emor

[xi] Shabbat 113a

[xii] Kaf HaChaim 403:8

[xiii] Shmirat Shabbat Kehilchatah 16:18 permits little children to ride a tricycle within the Eruv borders. This is not only because Tosafot allowed a three wheeled cart but also because a tricycle does not have a chain. Further, there was no prohibition on a wagon. In Israel, it’s very common for kids to ride scooters on Shabbat.

[xiv] Kli shemelachto li’issur?
[xv] Tzitz Eliezer, Vol. 1, no. 21, sec. 27; Responsa Tzitz Eliezer, vol. 7,30: 1.

[xvi] Rav Ovadia Yosef ruled that creating grooves in the snow is not a problem at all (Yabia Omer OH 5:28). We will need to determine if snow is the same as dirt. If not, we’d be looking at a psik reisha, lo nich lei.
[xvii] Grooves in the dirt is not a pesik reisha and it is no lo nicha lei.
[xviii] Rabbi Azriel Hildesheimer (Orach Chaim 1:49)

[xix] BT, Bava Metzia 59b

[xx] There is a debate about "Lo Ra’inu Eino Ra’aya" (the inference from what hasn't been to what ought not be) and both sides have merit.
[xxi] BT, Eduyot 2:2

[xxii] Rosh, Shabbat, 2:15
[xxiii] See many more sources supporting the idea that we don't make new gezeirot in Encyclopedia Talmudit volume 5 on "gezeira."

[xxiv] Maharshag chelek beit, siman yud-gimel

[xxv] https://www.theyeshivaworld.com/coffeeroom/topic/is-it-permitted-to-ride-a-bicycle-on-shabbos
[xxvi] Rabbi Sliman (Solomon) David Sassoon permitted biking. Rabbi Shamah, the talmid muvhak of Rabbi Sassoon, has written about his bicycling position. Also, Rabbi Eliezer Cohen, ruled in theory and in practice that people within the eruv had permission to take their bicycles to synagogue and back on Shabbat.
[xxvii] If someone's bike breaks and it is not rideable anymore, rather than repair it, one should lock it up there, if it is too far to walk to one's destination, and then return after Shabbat to retrieve it.
[xxviii] A limit of 2,000 Amot (cubits) outside the city
[xxix] Although, a case could be made that, in a karmelit, outside an eruv, there would not be a problem. Aqira and hanaha are not taking place.

[xxx] Building community on Shabbat is so important and many do not go out for meals but the travel is too far for them to walk on Shabbat.

[xxxi] If one is going on a long ride to break a sweat and get exercise, this would not be a worthy Shabbos goal, although, it is certainly a wonderfully worthy weekday activity. Further, those biking for exercise are far more likely to bike too far. A pleasurable Shabbat bike ride would be about a calm ride with children as a way to teach them or bond with them, when that is particularly meaningful to a family. Or a couple who wants to get out of the home for some special time together.

[xxxii] One should only, of course, bike on a sidewalk if there are not pedestrians and if it is legally permitted.
[xxxiii] Some basic safety reminders:

1. Bikers must wear helmets
2. One should not bike in a busy city with fast traffic
3. One should not bike at night
4. One should only use bikes in good shape
5. One should only bike on the sidewalk (where permitted) or where there are well-marked bike lines.
6. One should not bike when it is raining or snowing (or likely about to start to rain or snow) or if the streets are still very wet.

[xxxiv] 1833-1909
[xxxv] The Ben Ish Hai, Orach Chaim Volume 1, #25

[xxxvi] Responsum Rav Pe'alim

[xxxvii] See Yaskil Avdi. However, it's worth noting that Rav Ovadia shares that the Ben Ish Hai may have retracted his view (Chazon Ovadya, Shabbat Vol. 4, p. 40) and ultimately, he believes one should be strict (Chazon Ovadia p. 43 and Yabia Omer Vol. 10 – OC 55:29 and Hazon Ovadia IV, p. 40). See Leviyat Chen (107).

[xxxviii] Minchat Shlomo, siman 11:5
[xxxix] This comparison only makes sense in regards to low air that needs more air but not in regards to a broken tire.
[xl] This is not a new phenomenon. In the Syrian community, it was always considered permissible to ride bikes on Shabbat.
[xli] Even Aish HaTorah has no problem with rollerblading:
https://www.aish.com/atr/Rollerblading_on_Shabbat.html Then again, Ohr Somayach doesn't like it:
https://ohr.edu/ask_db/ask_main.php/72/Q1/
[xlii] "Uvdin di'chol is not a gezeira, so it can't be dismissed with the same logic as adding new gezeirot in general. Rav Dov Linzer writes: "In contrast, Rav Moshe Feinstein's position parallels that of Ramban. Rav Moshe was asked whether an egg- or cheese-cutter should be forbidden on the basis of uvda di'chol (??"? ??"? ?"? ?"?, ???? ??? ?). He first points out the irony that a labor-saving device would be considered contrary to the spirit of Shabbat. Rav Moshe then analyzes all the cases that are defined as uvda di'chol and concludes that an uvda di'chol activity is one that is connected to professional work. However, it is not a problem when the act is done ??? ????, in an ad hoc fashion to address an immediate Shabbat need.[1] The problem is when the act

is done with close attention and on a scale that suggests weekday work, what the Gemara refers to as ???? ???? ???? ????.”

[xliii] One potential drawback of a bike culture, even given all the potential gains, is the potential loss of a more physically close Jewish community.

[xliv] In addition to American Jewish life, Rabbi Dr. Nathan Lopes Cardozo writes about how allowing bicycles could make Shabbat observance so much more possible and appealing in Israel today: https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/take-the-bike-or-tram-get-a-free-coffee-and-observe-shabbat/

[xlv] This doesn’t feel like one of the most urgent religious issues but the continuing assimilation and disinterest in Jewish observance is indeed something we must be more and more responsive to.

[xlvi] Hora’at sha’ah, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Mamrim 2:4

[xlvii] BT, Shabbat 118b