



Homeopathic Remedies on Shabbat

Question: Is it permitted to ingest homeopathic remedies on Shabbat?

Answer: We start with our approach to “alternative medicine,” which includes homeopathy (some use the terms interchangeably). Alternative medicine is subject to disagreement, from the grass roots to health agencies. As in most realms, extreme opinions are likely incorrect. Some treatments under the umbrella of alternative medicine are helpful; others are quackery and serve as a placebo at best (although sometimes placebos are useful). The efficacy or even safety of some medicines and treatments (homeopathic or conventional) is uncertain or varies from person to person. We are not in the position to take a stand on which treatments fall into which category. For the purpose of this general question, we will treat the remedy in question as one to which the user

legitimately attributes medicinal efficacy and about which the objective observer is rightly skeptical.

It is prohibited to perform medical procedures, including ingesting medicine, to cure or calm a non-severe malady (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 328:37). The rationale is concern that one who is involved in such activity might violate Shabbat in the process, i.e., by grinding herbs (Shabbat 53b). The cases in which the prohibition does not apply fall into two broad categories: 1. When the need justifies certain halachic compromises (see Shulchan Aruch *ibid.* 17). *Nafal l'mishkav* (needing to lie down) is a classic description of such need (Rama, OC 328:37). 2. When the procedure is not considered dealing with illness or is otherwise dissimilar from cases in which there is a concern of *chillul Shabbat*.

In category #1, since normal Halacha is compromised, the steps taken must be truly warranted. Therefore, the Magen Avraham (328:1) allows *chillul Shabbat* to save a life only if the medicine is **known** (not theorized) to be effective (based on the Rama, Yoreh Deah 155:3 regarding eating

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non-kosher medicine). Therefore, even if someone is sick or suffering enough to allow medicine, he should not be allowed to use a homeopathic medicine if that is not scientifically accepted (as Halacha grants medical experts authority to determine the medical situation in a given case (Shulchan Aruch, OC 328:10)).

However, our case is different from the Magen Avraham's in a couple of ways. On the one hand, there the need is to save a life, which brought the Pri Megadim (ad loc.) to ask why one may not try even an otherwise forbidden treatment of unknown efficacy if it is the only chance at survival. On the other hand, the violations to be waived are of a Torah level, whereas here we only need to waive a Rabbinic violation, so might even an unproven remedy not suffice? Actually, the Pri Megadim says that it is specifically by a Rabbinic prohibition and not life-threatening illness that we need a proven medicine.

Might one argue that if the medicine is legitimate, it should be permitted based on need, and if it is not, it should be permitted because it is a non-medicine? Halachic logic dictates that it is not the status of medicine that causes the prohibition but that a sick person is searching for a cure that is close enough to cases of possible *chillul Shabbat*. In that way, homeopathic medicine is no better than conventional medicine.

Therefore, we believe that most homeopathic (see Shevet Halevi V:55) and other unproven treatments are forbidden on Shabbat (we will not get into defining what activities might be outside the realm of medicine and therefore permitted – see Mishna Berura 306:36). If one wants to use them for nagging situations that are not *nafal l'mishkav*, standard medicines are also problematic. Usually little is lost if one takes doses right before and after Shabbat. Presumably, one can use the leniency of inserting the medicine into a food or drink so that it is indiscernible before Shabbat and then eating on Shabbat (see Shulchan Aruch, *ibid.* 21; Orchot Shabbat 20:131). In unique cases, one who perceives great need and no alternatives should contact his rabbi and/or doctor. ■

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