

A new invention allows you to turn the light “on and off” on Shabbat.

No timers, no switches.

by Rabbi Shraga Simmons

Shabbat candles are perhaps the most familiar symbol of the Jewish home. Yet few may have stopped to consider the origin of this important tradition.

The Talmud defines Oneg Shabbat (lit: enjoyment of Shabbat) as having lights burning on Shabbat, as a way to bring more peace into the home. (Not so peaceful if people are bumping into each other!) As Theory goes, the more light, the more peace.

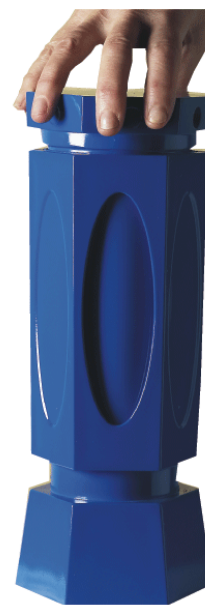
But for the Shabbat-observant family, switching on and off lights is not an option. Jewish law prohibits completing a circuit on Shabbat, as well as lighting a fire (in this case, the incandescent bulb's glowing filament). So aside from the Shabbat candles, which illuminate but a small area, how does one guarantee “peace in the home” -- for example, on Friday night, when a sleep-over guest wants to get organized before going to bed? Or when one sibling wants to read in bed, while the other is trying to fall asleep? Or when the baby gets up at 3 a.m. for a feeding?

Trying to get by with a nightlight, or with the light filtering in from a hallway or closet, often fails to do the trick.

A common remedy is to use “timers” to control the lights. For example, lights in the dining room may be set to shut off at 9 p.m. on Friday night, and lights in the bedrooms at 11 p.m. But that method had great limitations: If dinner went longer than usual, a family might wind up eating dessert in the dark. Or someone reading in bed might find the timer flicking off the lights just at the best part of the book.

Which brings us to The KosherLamp™ brand shabbos lamp™. Invented and produced by a rabbi-and-businessman duo in Toronto, The KosherLamp™ brand shabbos lamp™ resembles any regular table lamp -- but with one key difference: It is constructed of two independent cylinders, one inserted into the other. Each cylinder has its own “window”; when the inner cylinder is twisted, the “windows” are aligned and light comes out. When they are not aligned, the light is completely blocked.

With The KosherLamp™ brand shabbos lamp™, the bulb stays burning throughout the duration of Shabbat, enabling a person -- with a simple twist of the shade -- to freely turn the light “on and off.” No timers, no switches.



“We see this as a small revolution in the observance of Shabbat,” says Rabbi Shmuel Veffler, Associate Rabbi of the Aish Village Shul in Toronto and inventor of The KosherLamp™ brand shabbos lamp™. “It’s one of those things that after using the lamp, you wonder how you ever got along without it.”

Breaking the Rules?

But, you may ask, isn’t this all a bit of cheating? Isn’t The KosherLamp™ brand shabbos lamp™ -- or even setting a timer -- just a loophole to get around the prohibition of using electricity?

Veffler explains: “The only reason why someone would think this is ‘cheating’ is based on a misperception that Shabbat is all about suffering and denial. Actually, God wants us to enjoy life, so he gave us certain guidelines, to ensure that we ‘spend one day with the family and don’t run off in a million directions.’ Resting on Shabbos is not about “restrictions”; it’s about bringing one to a higher recognition of God.”

Veffler explains that it’s like a basketball star whose greatness is defined by what he can do within the rules. And it is within that structure that the player finds his greatest personal expression. To extend the metaphor, nobody claims that a slam dunk is cheating on the grounds that basketball was meant to be a game of shooting.

So what are the “rules” of Shabbat?

During the six days of the week, we work to improve the world, mirroring God’s six days of creation. But in order to remember that we’re not God -- i.e. that the world has a Creator and Sustainer -- on Shabbat, we refrain from acts of creative activity. These are defined by the Talmud as the 39 actions used to build the Tabernacle in the desert. (See: “Laws of Shabbat for Beginners”)

“The KosherLamp™ brand shabbos lamp™ is very much in the spirit of Shabbat,” says Veffler. “Every time I twist The KosherLamp™ brand shabbos lamp™ shade, it’s a way to think about God in a way that I wouldn’t during the week when flicking the switch on and off.”

Okay, so if it is permitted to use such methods, what’s to stop a person from programming a computer to perform a whole series of Shabbat activities -- like automatically turning on the TV Saturday afternoon to watch a football game?

The litmus test: *Is this in the spirit of Shabbat?*

It’s clearly not in the spirit of Shabbat to gather around the TV and watch a football game. In our case, however, additional light actually enhances the spirit of Shabbat, as the Talmud says, “in bringing more peace into the home.”

Design Hurdles

The spark for Veffler's invention came from something he had seen nearly two decades earlier when his wife gave birth at Shaarey Zedek hospital in Jerusalem. Shaarey Zedek is officially a "Shabbat-observant" hospital, where "light-boxes" are installed over the patients' beds. On Shabbat, the light source can be covered by sliding a metal plate, thus darkening the room without turning off the light.

"For many years," says Veffler, "my wife had been asking me to find something similar so she could read on Shabbat with adequate light."

So one Sunday afternoon, Veffler and his son visited their local Home Depot store, where they picked up an eclectic assortment of raw materials. They started with a simple lamp base, and then attached a louver -- similar to the one that controls the air conditioning in your car -- which served to let the light in and out. They then rigged it all together with styrofoam, electrical tape and... voila!

A few days later, Veffler mentioned his idea to Moshe (Lou) Orzech, a member of his congregation with 10 years of experience designing and producing lamps. "I saw the prototype lamp and was amazed at its simple brilliance," says Orzech. "It's one of those ideas that when you hear it, you say, 'Now why didn't I think of that?!'"

The two shook hands and a company was born -- to produce and market The KosherLamp™ brand shabbos lamp™.

"Typically, if a rabbi would come up with an idea like this in his garage, he would never be able to carry it through to reality," says Orzech. "There are complex issues of patents, design, engineering, materials, production, import licensing, etc. But in this case, I could provide all that expertise. It was a match made in heaven."



Veffler's prototype was, by his own admission, "clunky, ugly and impractical." But of more immediate concern were two technical hurdles: 1) the lamp wasn't sealed fully (light still escaped when the louver was in the "closed" position), and 2) the lamp was not venting the heat from the bulb, thus presenting a potential fire hazard.

They solved the first issue by designing the special "cylinder-with-a-cylinder" system. And for ventilation, they developed a type of zig-zag tunnel inside the lamp, taking advantage of a law of physics whereby heat and air can travel around corners, while light cannot.

Further, The KosherLamp™ brand shabbos lamp™ was designed to use compact fluorescent light bulbs, which generate less watts, and hence less heat. So instead of a traditional 40-watt incan-

descent bulb, The KosherLamp™ brand shabbos lamp™ uses a 10-watt fluorescent bulb -- producing the same amount of light, with only one-quarter the heat.

And at an average energy cost of 10 cents per kilowatt-hour, The KosherLamp™ brand shabbos lamp uses about two cents worth of electricity throughout the duration of Shabbat.

Assembly Line

The final hurdle -- gaining rabbinic approval for the lamp -- turned out to be easy. Jewish law states:

A shade which is made to direct the light or to cover it up altogether may be adjusted on Shabbat, even if it is made in such a way that it [is all one piece and the shade] forms part of the lamp. (Rabbi Yehoshua Y. Neuwirth - Shemirat Shabbat Kehilchatha 13:41b)

Actually, with The KosherLamp™ brand shabbos lamp the question doesn't even get started, since the shade and the lamp are two separate pieces. Indeed, The KosherLamp™ brand shabbos lamp was inspected and approved by top rabbinic scholars including Rabbi Yosef Sholom Eliashiv of Jerusalem, Rabbi Shlomo Miller of Toronto, and Rabbi Dovid Cohen of New York.

In May 2004, The KosherLamp™ brand shabbos lamp began rolling off the assembly line in China, and is now available in Jewish bookstores and online at www.kosherlamp.com (\$29.95 US, bulb included). Inquiries have come to the website from people in 42 countries -- from Kuwait to Finland to Australia.

And what's the reaction of Veffer's wife, Chana, the inspiration behind this small revolution? She says with a smile: "Shabbat has always been perfect. But now it's even better."