

# The Dallas Morning News

## LIGHTER DUTY

### New devices help modern Jews observe ancient Sabbath laws

By MICHAEL KRESS

Special Contributor to The Dallas Morning News

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For Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights, observant Jews might consider giving the gift of light – in the form of a new lamp designed for use on the Sabbath, when Jewish law prohibits turning electrical devices on or off.

Despite the ban, there is nothing unkosher about this invention, dubbed, appropriately enough, The KosherLamp™ brand shabbos lamp. The lamp's bulb stays on throughout Shabbat – the Sabbath, which runs from sundown Fridays through sundown Saturdays – but a shade around the bulb can be twisted, either allowing the light to shine through or blocking it out.

Jewish observance has always been difficult, but today's Jew can rely on technology and product engineering to make life a little easier. The KosherLamp™ brand shabbos lamp is one of several new products geared toward easing the rigors of the traditional Jewish lifestyle.

“You are seeing a desire among people to observe the commandments, but perhaps with a minimum of fuss and without spending vast amounts of time, which they don't have,” said Jonathan Sarna, a professor at Brandeis University in Waltham, Mass., and author of *American Judaism*.

“What's so interesting about these examples is they're ways of being part of and apart from secular society at the same time and harnessing modernity in order to strengthen traditional Jewish religious observances.”

And there's nothing wrong with that, said Rabbi Avi Shafran of Agudath Israel of America, an Orthodox organization.

“Shabbat is about pleasure, is about relaxation. That is the spirit of it,” he said. Products that make it easier to remain observant “empower the spirit of Shabbat, and not the opposite,” he said.

Some high-end ovens come with a “Sabbath mode,” which ensures that opening it on Shabbat will not cause any forbidden activities, such as turning on lights, changing digital displays, or triggering the heating mechanism. In Sabbath mode, the oven won’t shut off automatically after several hours, like it usually does, so it can be left on throughout the Sabbath. (Cooking is forbidden on Shabbat, but pre-prepared food may be heated.)

For those without a Shabbat-friendly oven, the British company Vikron makes a stand-alone warming device for food that looks like a piece of furniture.

And General Electric and others have recently introduced a device for refrigerators that disables the light and ice maker, ensuring that opening the door will not cause a Sabbath desecration.

Sukkot is the autumn festival during which Jews eat and sometimes sleep in temporary huts. In the past, the huts, called sukkot, had to be built from scratch or from kits that required tools and significant construction time. Today, Jews can buy snap-together sukkot that assemble in minutes, no tools needed. A Greensboro, N.C., company called Shabbat-to-go sells a “Hanukkah-to-go Bag,” which contains the essentials for celebrating the festival: a menorah, candles, a card with the blessings, a dreidel (the top-like toy traditionally played on Hanukkah) and holiday chocolates. The company also sells “Seder-in-a-sac,” which contains a Seder plate and other items for the Passover ritual.

Many of the inventions were developed in Israel, where rabbis are constantly working to ensure that the country’s health and defense systems can function without breaking Shabbat.

One example: the Shabbat pen, which circumvents the rule against writing on the Sabbath by taking advantage of a provision in Jewish law that an action is only prohibited if it is permanent. This pen’s ink disappears after a few hours, so observant doctors, soldiers and others on weekend duty can write quick notes, then rewrite them after Shabbat in permanent ink.

If such products seem to take advantage of technicalities and loopholes to skirt the laws on observance – they do. But that’s not necessarily a problem, Jewish law experts said.

“One could argue that the very fact that you set guidelines for how you do it is a point in and of itself,” said Dr. Chaim Waxman, a Judaic studies scholar at Rutgers University in New Jersey.

The idea of using technicalities to make life easier goes back to Talmudic times. The ancient sage Hillel came up with a type of contract that would circumvent the law abolishing debts during the Sabbatical year, which came every seven years. Hillel’s solution ensured that people would not be hesitant to lend money, for fear that the borrower would wait until the Sabbatical year then renege. With modern technology, many new loopholes were born.

Observant Jews have for years set lights, ovens and other devices on timers for the Sabbath. Ho-

tels that cater to Jewish guests sometimes employ “Shabbat elevators,” which run continuously and stop at every floor, eliminating the need to push buttons.

On Shabbat, “work” is prohibited, and that’s defined in Jewish law as “anything that is creative, that creates a new reality,” said Rabbi Shafran of Agudath Israel.

The law, he said, deals with actions, not the effects of those actions: Lighting an oven or flipping a light switch is forbidden, but that doesn’t mean the law intends for Jews to sit in darkness or eat cold food on the Sabbath. If there are ways to get light and a hot meal within the boundaries of the law, that’s acceptable, he said.

Still, the technological “cheats” make some Jewish scholars uncomfortable.

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, one of the most respected Orthodox authorities before his death in 1986, opposed the use of timers on Shabbat, making an exception only for lights, according to Rabbi Ari Kahn, who teaches at Bar Ilan University in Israel. (Despite Rabbi Feinstein’s opposition, timers of several varieties became popular.)

The makers of today’s products try to assure customers that a little convenience is OK.

Orthodox Jews “want to be very sure they are observing Jewish law punctiliously, and all of these products come with multiple rabbinic certifications,” said Dr. Sarna, the Brandeis professor.

GE’s Web page for the refrigerator device prominently promises rabbinic approval. And The KosherLamp™ brand shabbos lamp Web site features multiple endorsements.

Rabbi Kahn, who served as a consultant to the lamp company, noted that the device used to manipulate the light is entirely nonelectrical. “It’s like saying, ‘Can I leave a light on in the hall and close my door and open my door?’ Of course you can,” he said.

Aside from whether a gizmo is technically permissible, observant Jews must grapple with another question, Rabbi Shafran said: “Does this in some sense undermine the spirit of the law?” For example, even many rabbis who are OK with timers disapprove of using them to watch television on the Sabbath.

But most experts see no problem with most of the products.

And their proliferation suggests that most Orthodox Jews are increasingly comfortable with incorporating traditional observance into their modern lives.

“They don’t see modernity as necessarily in opposition to their religious observance, and therefore want to make it as comfortable as possible to have, in a sense, both worlds,” Dr. Waxman

said.

The use of a Sabbath oven or a snap-together sukkot requires something in addition to rabbinic approval: money. Only those who have achieved a certain level of affluence need worry about the Sabbath implications of ovens and refrigerators with digital readouts and automatic settings.

The clientele for GE's Sabbath refrigerator device, which is sold separately from the refrigerators themselves, falls in the "upper 2 to 5 percent of the market," a company spokeswoman said. The device costs about \$300. Freestanding GE electrical ovens with a built-in Sabbath mode start around \$550 and run to more than \$3,000, according to information on the Web site. More low-tech GE ovens can be had for less than \$500.

"Many of these products are geared to an upwardly mobile Orthodox community ... that has attained much more wealth, and with it, has much less time to do things," Dr. Sarna said.

It's a big change from the 1960s and '70s, when do-it-yourself Judaism was popular. The mood then was exemplified by The Jewish Catalogs, a series of books on how to make ritual items at home.

Call it the difference between hippie Jews and yuppie Jews, both mirroring the secular trends of their times.

The Jewish Catalogs were modeled after the iconic Whole Earth Catalog, a '60s how-to manual for those seeking a simpler life, closer to nature and less dependent on what many viewed as the crass, materialistic society.

Snap-together sukkot and The KosherLamp™ brand shabbos lamp, on the other hand, are geared toward a 21st-century world accustomed to time-and effort-saving products, from pre-chopped vegetables and self-adhesive stamps to TiVo and Google.

Many of the Jews who purchase Sabbath-ease products were raised in largely secular homes and became Orthodox as adults, said Shmuel Veffler, the Toronto rabbi who invented The KosherLamp™ brand shabbos lamp.

"People who are working toward becoming more traditional, who are trying to observe Shabbat and want to make Shabbat observance part of their life – they really appreciate the lamp," he said.

"Our society is one that likes to come up with convenient things. And to make things more comfortable and convenient in terms of Jewish observance – why not?"