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Deracheha: Women and Mitzvot

Cosmetics & Shabbat I: Types of Product

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WHAT CONSISTENCY OF SKINCARE OR HAIRCARE PRODUCTS—OILS, CREAMS, ETC.—ARE
APERMISSIBLE TO APPLY ON SHABBAT?

Why Cosmetics?

Cosmetic, skincare and haircare products serve a few purposes. They can enhance one's appearance, strengthen and enrich skin and hair, prevent or treat damage, and create a pleasurable feeling.

On Shabbat, the prohibition of performing labor, *melacha*, presents special challenges for those of us who incorporate these items into a daily routine. As a result, Shabbat is often the **only** day of the week on which people refrain from using such products. This is ironic for two reasons:

One, because the rabbinic commandment of honoring Shabbat obligates us to invest in our cleanliness and appearance for Shabbat:¹

Rambam, Laws of Shabbat 30:2-3

What is *kavod* [honor]? This is what the sages said, that it is a mitzva for a person to wash his face, hands, and feet with hot water on erev Shabbat because of the honor of Shabbat...Included in the honor of Shabbat is that one should wear clean clothes, and weekday clothing should not be like Shabbat clothing...

¹ Yeshaya 58:13

If you restrain your foot from Shabbat, from pursuing your needs on My holy day, and you call Shabbat an *oneg* [pleasure] and the holy [day] of God honored, and honor it [by refraining] from doing your ways, from seeking your needs and speaking of matters.

Rambam, Laws of Shabbat 30:1

Four things were said regarding Shabbat, two from the Torah, and two rabbinic that are made explicit by the prophets. Those in the Torah, *zachor* [remember] and *shamor* [keep]. And those made explicit by the prophets, *kavod* and *oneg*, as it is said, "And you will call Shabbat an *oneg* [delight] and the holy [day] of God honored.

Two, because a parallel rabbinic commandment dictates that we take special physical pleasure in Shabbat,² for example, by eating special dishes or by engaging in marital relations:

Rambam, Laws of Shabbat 30:7,14

What is *oneg* [pleasure]? This is what the sages said, that one needs to prepare an especially rich cooked dish and intoxicating drink for Shabbat... Marital relations are an aspect of *oneg Shabbat*...

In other words, Halacha gives us clear reason to want to look and feel our best on Shabbat. How best to achieve that without performing *melacha* is less clear.

In a halachic article examining some aspects of this question, Rabbanit Leah Sarna highlights its contemporary significance.³

Rabbanit Leah Sarna, "Memarei'ach: Spreading the Word," Keren Journal 3 (2018): 129-44

As cosmetics improve, diversify, and pervade the most basic creature comforts of our lives and identities, this topic has become increasingly important.... In a world where people are spreading an assortment of products on their bodies every day just in order to feel clean and comfortable, a discussion of the relevant Hilchot Shabbat seems urgent. We must be able to educate and guide people as they shop for products and apply them to their bodies, especially since "community norms" cannot be relied on for activities that mostly happen in private.

In this series, we look at the main halachic concerns raised by using cosmetics, skincare and haircare products on Shabbat. We begin with the relevant laws of using oils or similar substances on Shabbat in general. In our next piece, we discuss the use of scented or enriched products and the use of products for healing. In our final piece, we focus on makeup and the *melacha* of *tzovei'a*, dyeing.

Oil for Pleasure

Traditional sources discuss applying oil to the skin on Shabbat, an act known as *sicha*. More technically, *sicha* may refer specifically to applying oil in small amounts and rubbing it in, as opposed to *netina*, which entails pouring more oil on the skin.

Piskei Rid, Shabbat 134b

One can say that *sicha* [rubbing oil] is one thing and *netina* [placing] is another, since *sicha* is a small amount...

Sicha appears in halachic texts as a potential source of bodily pleasure, *ta'anug*, or of healing, *refu'a*. A few sources discuss *sicha* for *ta'anug* on Shabbat. First, a baraita in the Talmud Yerushalmi recognizes rubbing one's skin with oil on Shabbat as a form of *ta'anug*, and permits it even when that is not one's purpose:

² See note 1.

³ Available here: https://3c9c5fef-8db2-4f96-9dfb-feffaf25670e.filesusr.com/ugd/aa87fa_2c619f55f2e947e9a578d9acc15d48d0.pdf

Talmud Yerushalmi Shabbat 9:4

For it is taught: On Shabbat both *sicha* for pleasure and *sicha* that is not for pleasure are permissible.

Second, a mishna permits rubbing one's stomach with oil on Shabbat and spreading it over the body with one's hands, so long as one does not apply excessive force. Bartenura notes that this act is intended to give physical pleasure.

Mishna Shabbat 22:6

One may apply [oil] and rub it on the stomach, but may not work it in...

Bartenura ad loc.

Apply – oil on Shabbat. And rub – with one's hand over the entire body for enjoyment. But may not work it in – rub vigorously

The Talmud Bavli adds a caveat, that one should apply oil differently on Shabbat than one does on a weekday because rubbing oil in was strongly associated with normal weekday activity.⁴ This can be accomplished by rubbing the oil in as one applies it.

Shabbat 147b

Our rabbis taught in a baraita: One may apply oil and rub it on the stomach on Shabbat, so long as he does not do so in the manner that he does on a weekday. How should he do it? ... Rabbi Yochanan said, he applies and rubs simultaneously.

Third, in a passage that we'll discuss in more detail in our next piece, the Talmud also permits rubbing oil on a person's healed wound for *ta'anug*.⁵

Additionally, in the context of a discussion of permissible methods of warming up oil on Shabbat, the Talmud suggests that a woman rub oil on her hands and then use her oiled hands to apply oil to her baby, without specifying her purpose.⁶

Based on these sources, halachic codes permit applying oil to the body on Shabbat for pleasure, as long as one does so a little differently from on a weekday and does not use excessive force.

Shulchan Aruch OC 327:2

⁴ Rambam explains this concept, known as *uvdin de-chol*, as applicable when performing a given action on Shabbat as one does on a weekday might ultimately lead to performing a *melacha* on Shabbat:

Responsa of Rambam, Shabbat 22:28

For one never finds matters that the sages prohibited because one should not do them in the way that one does on a workday, except for matters that could possibly accustom one to perform *melacha*...

⁵Shabbat 53b

Come and hear. One may apply [oil] and pick off [scabs] for a person, and one may not apply and pick off scabs for an animal. Isn't this a case where there is a wound, and [it is permitted] because of pain? No, a healed wound, and for pleasure.

Rif Shabbat 24b

But with a fresh wound and because of pain, one may also pick off scabs for an animal.

⁶Shabbat 40b

Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel says: A woman applies oil to her hand on Shabbat and warms it next to the fire and applies it to her small child and is not concerned...

One may apply and rub [oil] for one's enjoyment with a difference [from the weekday manner]. That is, one applies and rubs simultaneously, and one may not rub vigorously but with relaxed hands.

How to Apply Oil

We've seen that a person may use her hands to apply oil to the body on Shabbat, rubbing as she applies it. Let's now consider which other methods of applying oil are permissible on Shabbat, again, taking as our focus products commonly used for pleasure.

I. Avoiding Sechita Permissible methods of applying oil must avoid the *melacha* of *sechita*. *Sechita*, extracting a liquid for use (like squeezing grapes for juice) is prohibited on Shabbat under the *melacha* of *dash*, threshing.⁷ Some early halachic authorities maintain that there is a Torah-level prohibition of *sechita* from a cloth, because typical use of a wet cloth involves pressing liquid out in order to make use of it (e.g., squeezing water from a washcloth to clean the skin).

Rosh Shabbat 22:4

A liquid which is absorbed within a cloth, one who wrings to extract [the liquid] from it [the cloth] is liable [i.e., violated Shabbat on a Torah level].

One thus may not place oil on a cloth (or a cotton ball and the like), and then use it to apply the oil to the skin, as a precaution against performing *sechita*. However, Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach permits one first to apply oil to the body and then to spread it lightly, whether with a cotton ball or cloth, since merely spreading oil does not raise a concern of *sechita*.⁸

Shemirat Shabbat Ke-hilchetah 14:32

It is permissible to apply liquid oil to a baby, but it is prohibited to put the oil on cotton or an absorbent cloth (because of the prohibition of *sechita*)...but one may apply it with his hand, or with a cloth (not - a sponge!) made of synthetic material. And it is permissible to apply the oil to the baby's body and to spread it gently with cotton or a cloth to the entire desired area. [Note 92: For he only spreads the oil that is on the body and wipes with the cotton in a way that does not inevitably lead to *sechita*; thus I heard from Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach.]

It also follows that use of a hard, roll-on applicator (as for roll-on deodorant) presents no concern of *sechita* and is thus clearly permitted.

Applying oil to hair, however, does potentially raise a rabbinic-level question of *sechita*

⁷ A second type of *sechita* describes a stage of laundering, *melaben*, where wringing is part of the cleaning process. This might be relevant if placing water or a cleanser on a cloth or cotton ball prior to Shabbat, and then pressing it against the face on Shabbat:

Ran (on Rif) Shabbat 41a

Rabbeinu Tam explained that there are two types of wringing: one is a *tolada* [Torah-level sub-category] of *melaben* [laundering] and one is a *tolada* of *dash* [threshing]. And that which is a *tolada* of laundering is specifically with a cloth that becomes clean and with liquids that clean. And that which is a *tolada* of *dash* is with any liquid, as long as one needs the liquid that is wrung out, similar to threshing...

⁸ All references to *Shemirat Shabbat Ke-hilcheta* are to the third edition, 5770.

regarding the hair:⁹

Responsa Chelkat Ya'akov OC 21

To oil the hair, one can easily come to *sechita*, and if so, it is difficult to permit...

Nevertheless, Rav Auerbach also permits applying oil to hair, so long as one is careful to avoid using too much oil in any one place and potentially squeeze it out:

Shemirat Shabbat Ke-hilchetah 14:54

A woman is permitted to rub her hair with hair oil (brillantine) [note 140: and so I heard from Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach...], but in any case she should use only a little oil in order that she not come to *sechita* of the hair [note 141...And I heard from Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach that she should also take care not to pour a great quantity of oil in one place on her hair and transfer the absorbed oil from place to place, for this entails the prohibition of *sechita*]...

To summarize, one may apply oil using the hands, or a roll-on, or by pouring directly from a container. To avoid concerns of *sechita*, one should not apply oil with cloth or cotton (although they may be used to further spread the oil), and should place only a limited amount of oil on the hair.

II. Using a Spray What about sprays? One might have thought to prohibit them because they resemble the *melacha* of *zoreh* (winnowing), dispersing items by casting them into the air.

The Talmud Yerushalmi, however, notes that *zoreh* applies only when the wind assists or would be needed to assist with the dispersal:

Talmud Yerushalmi Shabbat 7:2

If one spit and the wind carried it off, he is liable [on a Torah level] because of *zoreh* [winnowing], and anything that requires wind is liable because of *zoreh*.

Penei Moshe ad loc

And anything that requires wind - Meaning, that it is accomplished by means of the wind, and would not be accomplished without the wind, this is liable because of *zoreh*.

Sprays do not depend on or use wind to scatter their liquid droplets through the air, and thus are permissible on Shabbat:

Responsa Minchat Yitzchak VI:26

...Regarding the women's cosmetics that are called perfume, which comes from a bottle that has something in its opening that one squeezes between two fingers, and it is thus scattered in the air, and in this manner they apply the perfume to their necks and arms... in this matter, where the wind does nothing, rather, it is entirely the work of one's hands, it seems that according to all opinions there is not even a rabbinic prohibition because of *zoreh*... If one scatters on one's own, without help

Shulchan Aruch Ha-Rav OC 326:6

Even though *sechita* is not applicable to hair, for hair is hard and does not really absorb the liquid within it, in any case it is prohibited rabbinically.

from the wind, there is no possible consideration of *zoreh*, and this is really clarified explicitly in the Yerushalmi...Furthermore, it is implied that even if the wind helps, if it could have been accomplished even without help from the wind, it is not [prohibited] because of *zoreh*, i.e., with something that isn't prohibited when it is the work of one's hands, and the wind only helps but there is no substance to it.

III. Spraying Hair Hair sprays are more complex, on one's own hair or on a wig, because their use may violate another *melacha*, *boneh*, building. According to the Talmud, braiding one's hair¹⁰ or parting it (with a comb)¹¹ are prohibited as a form of *boneh*.

Shabbat 95a

And *pokeset* [parting the hair is prohibited] on account of *boneh* [building]. Is this the manner of building? Yes, as Rabbi Shimon ben Manasya expounded: "And God built the rib" teaches that God braided Chava's [hair] and brought her to Adam. For thus in the coastal cities they call braiding "building."

Rivash explains that *pokeset* may also refer to applying oil and water to freshly-combed hair with a comb in order to create and set a hairstyle:

Responsa Rivash 394

...It is possible that this is the grooming that girls do, that after their heads are combed well and there is no concern of pulling out hairs, they wet the comb with oil beaten with water, and pass the comb over their head to stick the hair together and set it down on the head, and this is similar to building.

In his *Bei'ur Halacha*, Mishna Berura points out that Rivash is concerned with constructing a hairstyle, but that "otherwise" there would be room to permit using a comb and oil on freshly-combed hair on Shabbat just to keep the hair stick in place:

Bei'ur Halacha 303:27 s.v. *La-chof*

It [Rivash's ruling] implies that otherwise it would be permissible to do this act of grooming, since the head was already combed well, and one only does it to set down the hair

There are two main approaches to interpreting this ruling. Rav Yaakov Posen, of Kahal Adat Yeshurun in New York, seems to suggest that it provides grounds for using a spray to **preserve** a hairstyle on Shabbat, just not to **construct** one:

Dayyan Ya'akov Yechezkel Posen, *Kitzur Hilchot Shabbat*, Shearing 18:5

¹⁰ Braiding the wig is prohibited as a form of weaving:

Magen Avraham 303:20

To braid. For it is similar to building. But one who braids detached hairs is liable on account of weaving, as Rambam wrote. And here, with hair [growing from the head] it is not considered weaving, and further because it will not endure in the end, because it is meant to be undone.

Shemirat Shabbat Ke-hilchetah 14:58

It is prohibited to braid hairs into a braid, whether hair on the head or on a wig...

¹¹Shulchan Aruch OC 303:26

It is prohibited for a woman to braid her hair on Shabbat, and to undo her braid, but she can part her hair. Rema: And there are those who prohibit parting her hair... and so they were accustomed to prohibit doing it with an implement, but with a mere finger they were accustomed to be lenient.

There are those who permit spraying a product (hair lacquer) on the hair after it is already arranged, and this is in a way that afterwards she will not need to put her hand to arranging her hair again, for this is prohibited even if only to set down the hair with her hand. But before she has fully arranged her hair there is no one here who permits it. And the halacha of a wig is similar.

One following this view would still need to take care not to pull out a hair inadvertently on Shabbat, since removing hair falls under the *melacha* of *gozez*.¹²

Rav Neuwirth rules more stringently, maintaining that any use of hardening hairspray to maintain or construct a hairstyle is prohibited on account of *boneh*:

Shemirat Shabbat Ke-hilchetah 14:56

A woman is prohibited to spray a spray on her hair in order to preserve her hairstyle, and similarly she may not do any action with any substance in order to heighten the hair...

There is wide halachic consensus to permit sprays in general. However, spraying the hair, even after it has been styled, remains a matter of debate. The halacha of mousse is similar to that of hairspray, since it is essentially an aerated liquid used to style hair. Some halachic authorities would prefer a spray to mousse, since using mousse entails a shift from liquid to foam (and back).¹³ Gels might also raise a concern of *boneh*. (We discuss sticks, gels, and scented products in our next piece in connection with other halachic concerns.)

Defining Oil

We've seen a number of sources that permit rubbing the body with oil on Shabbat for pleasure. How specific is use of the term oil, *shemen*? Is it meant to exclude applying other substances on Shabbat?

Liquifying a Solid

Mordechai rules that "oil" does exclude some other substances. Although applying oil on Shabbat can be permitted, applying congealed fat along with oil is prohibited, because one melts the fat during use.

Mordechai *Shabbat* 338

This [statement] that we rub [oil] on a person is specifically with oil, but it is prohibited to rub in [congealed] fat and oil on Shabbat because it liquifies and it is *nolad* [generated on Shabbat] and prohibited.

¹² Shulchan Aruch OC 340:1

It is prohibited to remove one's hair or one's nails, whether by hand or with a tool, whether for himself or for others, and one is liable [for a Torah-level violation] over two hairs.

¹³ For discussion of the somewhat analogous case of using canned whipped cream on Shabbat, see the following links:

<http://www.erezhemdah.org/newsletterArticle.asp?lang=en&pageid=48&cat=7&newsletter=996&article=3786>

<https://www.hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=1082&st=&pgnum=104>

<https://www.kosher.com/lifestyle/is-it-permissible-to-use-spray-whipped-cream-from-a-can-on-shabbat-1204>

Mordechai's concern is that actively effecting a change from a solid to liquid state is prohibited rabbinically as *nolad*, a form of *molid*, creating a new entity (as *melachot* do).¹⁴ Shulchan Aruch rules this way as well, allowing for smearing oil, but not fat, on a scab:

Shulchan Aruch OC 328:22

We remove scabs from a wound and rub it with oil, but not with [congealed] fat, since it dissolves.

Therefore, a congealed substance should generally not be applied to the skin if application will make it liquify. This particular concern does not apply, however, to a substance that is more liquid from the outset. Rav Avraham Chayyim Na'eh makes this point in his discussion of whether a concern for *molid* applies to toothpaste:

Ketzot Ha-shulchan 138 Badei Ha-shulchan 31

Through rubbing the paste on the teeth there will not be any *nolad*, for the paste is very soft and remains soft...

Applying a congealed substance that will liquify with application raises concerns of *molid*, while applying a soft ointment does not.

Spreadables

Shulchan Aruch specifically raises *molid* as a concern with respect to applying congealed fat. We might infer that there is no other halachic constraint on applying it, or substances like it, to the skin for pleasure. Later authorities, however, express concern that applying congealed fat to the skin could violate the prohibition of *memarei'ach*, spreading out a substance to make it smooth.¹⁵

To what substances does the prohibition of *memarei'ach* apply? A mishna tells us that spreading out **wax** to seal a hole in a barrel is prohibited as *memarei'ach* on a Torah level.

Mishna Shabbat 22:3

...And if it [a barrel] is punctured, one may not put wax on it because he is *memarei'ach* [spreading]. Rabbi Yehuda said: A case came before Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai in Arabia and he said, 'I am concerned that he is liable for a sin offering.'

¹⁴ Rashi Beitza 23a s.v. de-kamolid reicha

...It is rabbinically prohibited, for one who creates a new entity is close to performing a new *melacha*.

¹⁵ Tzitz Eliezer suggests that any *memarei'ach* in this case would be rabbinic, so Shulchan Aruch simply chose one of two rabbinic prohibitions to mention:

Tzitz Eliezer 7:30

We have found that it has already been noted about the words of Shulchan Aruch, why he did not write explicitly because of the rationale of *memarei'ach*...And we already mentioned above that the later halachic authorities maintained to rule as Halacha that *memarei'ach* applies to congealed fat. And it seems correct to say that, if we maintain that with fat the prohibition of *memarei'ach* is only rabbinic, that removes the difficulty of why Shulchan Aruch did not explain the rationale as on account of *memarei'ach*, and it is that he took up one of them...being that even if he had explained this rationale too, the prohibition would only be rabbinic.

In the ensuing Talmudic discussion, Rav and Shemuel debate whether smoothing a less solid substance into a hole in a barrel would violate *memarei'ach* on a rabbinic level, lest one come to spread wax on Shabbat:

Shabbat 146b

And if it was punctured etc. *Mishcha*, Rav prohibited and Shemuel permitted. The one who prohibited [maintains that] we make a decree on account of wax. The one who permitted [maintains that] we don't make a decree.

What is *mishcha*? Rashi defines it as thick oil:

Rashi ad loc

Mishcha- Thick oil.

Rambam refers to it as *shuman*, fat, and rules stringently in accordance with Rav:

Rambam, Laws of Shabbat 23:11

...Even with fat we do not plug up the puncture, a decree on account of wax.

Shulchan Aruch thus rules that one may not spread thick oil to plug a hole on Shabbat. At the same time, he explicitly permits plugging the hole with any substance the use of which does not entail smearing:

Shulchan Aruch OC 314:11

It is prohibited to place wax or thick oil on a puncture of a barrel to plug it since it is *memarei'ach*...but other substances, which do not entail spreading...it is permissible.

In other words, wax or wax-like substances (e.g. a wax-based lip balm in a tub) may not be spread on Shabbat out of concern for *memarei'ach*, and this prohibition presumably applies to the body as well as to other surfaces.¹⁶ Spreading "thick oil" or congealed fat raises a concern of *memarei'ach* on a **rabbinic** level. Regular oil presents **no** concern of *memarei'ach* on the body, given that it is not smoothed in any way when smearing it.¹⁷

¹⁶ There is some halachic debate on this point:

Shemirat Shabbat Ke-hilchetah ch. 34 note 64

...Regarding the fundamental halacha of *memarei'ach* on the human body, I heard from Rav Yitzchak Klein ob"m, the Rav of Nierenberg, that he discussed this with our master Chazon Ish, whether the prohibition of *memarei'ach* is applicable, and Chazon Ish was inclined to be lenient. However, his words require explanation, for behold Chazon Ish 52:16 only permits casting an ointment on a wound, and not spreading it...

Maharsham, Da'at Torah OC 328:26

One cannot say that specifically with a poultice there is *memarei'ach* but not on the body of a living being, for in *Shabbat* 74b and the Rav Ha-maggid Hilchot Shabbat 9:7, it is explained that plucking a feather from a bird is *memachek*...and see further in Rambam Hilchot Shabbat 11:5 and 11:6...and what is *mocheq*, this is removing hair or wool from the skin after death until he makes the surface of the skin smooth...one who plucks a feather from the wing, this is a *tolada* [Torah-level sub-category] of *mocheq*, and liable, and so one who spreads [*memarei'ach*] a poultice of any size or wax or tar and the like of things that are spreadable until he smooths their surfaces is liable on account of *mocheq*...

¹⁷ Mishna Berura rules this way as well:

Beit Yosef OC 314

...With thick oil, even though its spreading is not so recognizable, in any case it is prohibited since *memarei'ach* is slightly applicable to it, for one can come to confuse it with wax, but it is permissible to plug up the barrel with any other substance.

It follows that when use of oil on the body is permissible on Shabbat, any substance spread on the body with a consistency like regular oil is permissible, and that substances with the consistency of thick oil, such that they might be confused with wax, should generally not be spread on the body.

The same goes for hair:

Shemirat Shabbat Ke-hilchetah 14:54-55

A woman is permitted to rub hair oil (brillantine) into her hair...But using hair ointment (pomade), or hairstyling gel is prohibited in any case [note 142: on account of the *melacha* of *memarei'ach*].

Classifying Substances

Determining precisely which substances fit under which category is more challenging. Labels alone are insufficient; the viscosity of products called ointments, creams, lotions, or gels vary greatly within each product category. Further complicating matters, viscosities shift with temperature, becoming thinner and more free flowing at higher temperatures and thicker and more solid at lower temperatures.

One response to this difficulty is to limit the regular oil category to liquids as thin as or thinner than most oils. Along these lines, Tzitz Eliezer suggests that it is best not to try to identify a more precise standard for permissibility, lest those uneducated in Halacha come unwittingly to sin. (He presumes that women belong to the category of the halachically uneducated.)

Responsa Tzitz Eliezer VII:30

We can see very many ointments that are thick in a way that *memarei'ach* [on a Torah level] properly applies to them, and even soft ointments sometimes thicken from being set aside for a long time, and if so, it is impossible to provide measures for this matter and to entrust it to women and the ignorant, that the law for each person should be in his own hands to decide a matter which borders on and might lead to [violating] a Torah-level prohibition.

Others do provide a standard. For example, Rabbi Moshe Heinemann, Rabbinic administrator of the Star-K, suggests checking viscosity with a viscometer (not on Shabbat). According to his standard, the ruling regarding hand soaps would vary, but a typical liquid dish soap, or anything that pours faster, would be acceptable for use.¹⁸

Mishna Berura 314:45

...Specifically thick oil since *memarei'ach* is slightly applicable to it, he may confuse them [thick oil and wax].

¹⁸ Available here: <https://www.star-k.org/articles/articles/seasonal/353/the-kashrus-shabbos-and-pesach-guide-to-cosmetics/#footnotesC>

Rav Dovid Heber, The Kashrus, Shabbos, and Pesach Guide to Cosmetics

Thick oils and creamy hand soaps that are viscous and pour slowly are also subject to this prohibition. For example, Softsoap Liquid Hand Soap may not be used on Shabbos due to its thickness...Oils that pour faster (with a viscosity of 600 cP or less) are not subject to this prohibition. For example, the Star-K tested Ultra Dawn Concentrated Dish Liquid/Anti-Bacterial Hand Soap at room temperature (70°F) and determined that it is permissible to use on Shabbos. Regular liquid dishwashing soap may also be used.

In a discussion of liquid soap, Rav Mordechai Eliyahu suggests a more lenient, common-sense standard—pourability:

Responsa Ma'amar Mordechai IV:84

There are soaps called “Emma.” If this Emma is thick, it is prohibited to use it on Shabbat, but if it is thin, it is permissible to use it on Shabbat. And the definition of thick and thin is: If one pours the bottle and it pours out, this is considered thin. And if not, it is considered thick.

How do we define pourability? Rav Posen provides a more detailed explanation of this position, permitting use of a substance that flows by itself like an oil:

Dayyan Ya'akov Yechezkel Posen, Kitzur Hilchot Shabbat 32, note 19

It seems that the measure of thickness is not what is written there, that it is just if it is a little thick...rather that it is so thick that we cannot pour it out like oil and it doesn't flow on its own, rather we must smooth it with the hands like fat, and in this respect it resembles *memarei'ach*. And since its measure is not stated explicitly, thus like all rabbinic measures we take this leniently.

Rav Posen further explains that since the appropriate measure of viscosity is not stated clearly in halachic texts and the matter is rabbinic, we may err on the side of leniency.

Common custom varies from household to household and from community to community.¹⁹ Those who take a more stringent position may be able to widen the range of products available to them on Shabbat by diluting them.²⁰

Leniencies for Viscous Products

Memarei'ach classically entails smoothing or spreading a layer of something **onto** a surface (e.g., wax onto a barrel). Does it also apply when the substance is rubbed **into** the surface and fully absorbed?

¹⁹ Substances that are liquid enough to meet any of these standards before rubbing in would presumably not raise a concern of *molid* either.

²⁰ When necessary, a product can be diluted on Shabbat:

Shemirat Shabbat Ke-hilchetah 14:18

If he did not prepare, it is permissible to put soap or soap flakes in hot water (in a *keli sheni*) even on Shabbat in order to prepare liquid soap, and even to shake the container with the water and soap in order to speed up the process of dissolving...Note 53: For one can say that in this case, where he does not crush it with his hands, it is more lenient, for he is only performing an action so that the water will quickly dissolve the soap, and this is not dissolving it directly...

In the context of discussing whether stepping on top of spit on the ground smooths it,²¹ Magen Avraham ventures that when one rubs a substance in fully, and intends for it to be completely absorbed, that does not violate *memarei'ach*:

Magen Avraham 316:24

One can say that *memarei'ach* is only relevant when his intent is that a substance be spread onto its fellow [substance], but here he wishes that it [spit] be absorbed into the ground...

However, Eliya Rabba calls Magen Avraham's ruling into question.²² Indeed, the reasoning behind it is unclear. Perhaps, as Tzitz Eliezer argues, rubbing spit into the ground does not constitute *memarei'ach* only because the person just wants to be rid of it (and does not seek to benefit from it). That puts it in the halachic category of a *melacha she-eina tzericha le-gufah*, a *melacha* not performed for its classic purpose, which is more lenient than a regular performance of *melacha*.²³

Responsa Tzitz Eliezer VII:30

For Magen Avraham only said this with respect to cases like rubbing spit to be absorbed into the ground, which is [a *melacha*] not required for its classic purpose at all, for it came to him unwanted and he did not need it, and which is not the case in our matter of discussion for ointment upon a wound, for since he already has a wound he wishes to place the ointment on it and to spread it or rub it, and how much more so in scrubbing the teeth with a paste, for it all comes to him willingly and by design...

Alternatively, as Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach explains, the critical point is not whether someone seeks to benefit from the substance. Rather, Magen Avraham might mean that *memarei'ach* only applies to a substance that one wishes to smooth out and thus not to a substance that is spread out to the point of absorption into another surface.

Shemirat Shabbat Ke-hilchetah, 33 Note 64

²¹ Shabbat 121b

For Rav Yehuda said: Spit, one steps upon innocently...

Rashi explains that deliberately stepping on the spit would violate Shabbat by smoothing and evening out the ground, but doing so unintentionally would be permissible. Rambam, however, does not mention *memarei'ach* in this context:

Rashi Shabbat 121b

Spit, one steps upon it innocently, - For he does not intend to spread it and to even out holes [in the ground], for even though it is inherently *memarei'ach* [spreading], when he does not intend it, it is permissible because it [spit] is despised.

Rambam, Laws of Shabbat 21:2

One should not spit on the ground and rub it in with his foot lest he even out holes, but it is permissible to step on spit upon the ground when he walks innocently.

²² Eliya Rabba 316:35

It requires further study for Rashi [121b s.v. spit] and Ran and Tur said that it is *memarei'ach*.

²³ According to the view that *memarei'ach* is at issue, it's not clear, however, why spit would be considered thicker than regular oil, unless it is very phlegmy or creates a thin layer of mud with the top of the ground. Tzitz Eliezer suggests that oil is less of an issue than spit because spit is not as readily absorbed as oil:

Responsa Tzitz Eliezer VII:30

For the way of oil is to be absorbed and not so is the way of spit, which remains flat atop a wound, and therefore specifically with spit it is prohibited and not with oil...

I heard from Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, that if one spreads the ointment until it all dissolves and is absorbed in a person's body, it is not called *memarei'ach*, and he prohibited only when the ointment remains and one wants to spread it over the body.

This was reportedly Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik's position as well.²⁴ There is some precedent for relying on this view in cases of need for healing²⁵ or in cases in which no remnant of the substance is desired and one's interest is not in smoothing it out. We find an example of this type of leniency in some more lenient views regarding the use of toothpaste on Shabbat, such as Rav Ovadya Yosef's.²⁶ Others reject the relevance of Magen Avraham's ruling to defining *memarei'ach*, as did Tzitz Eliezer—both in general and with respect to toothpaste. (Practice regarding toothpaste is split: some do not use any on Shabbat; others use runnier or liquid toothpaste; others use regular toothpaste.)

As we saw above, it is permissible to apply liquids the consistency of regular oils for pleasure on Shabbat, and they require no special leniency. With thick skincare products that might be similar to wax, and thus raise a Torah-level concern of *memarei'ach*, leniency based on rubbing in to the point of absorption would be more difficult to apply. What of substances in between, particularly those whose halachic categorization is subject to debate? In these cases, a full rubbing in provides greater grounds for leniency. Thus, for example, Rav Nahum Eliezer Rabinovitch permits use of moisturizers that meet Rav Posen's definition on Shabbat, so long as they are rubbed in to absorption:

Rav Nahum Eliezer Rabinovitch, Spreading Hand Cream on Shabbat, *Si'ach Nahum* 20

Hand cream or Vaseline that comes in a tube and is liquidy (a sign of the matter is that it squirts out with a light push), and when placed on the skin it immediately dissolves and is absorbed and does not create a recognizable layer on the skin, it is permissible to use it on Shabbat.

By using something that could pour easily (or diluting a product to that consistency) and by rubbing it in completely, one can potentially satisfy many halachic opinions and

²⁴ Nefesh Ha-Rav, Collection of Practices, pp. 168-169

Our Rav [Rav Soloveitchik] thought that it is permitted to use toothpaste on Shabbat...And he said that it is not applicable to prohibit on account of *memarei'ach* except in a place where one adds a new smooth surface on top of something...and that which the sellers of the paste declare in their ads, that an invisible smooth surface will remain on top of the teeth to protect them, first of all, presumably it is not true. And even if we assume that it is so in truth, in any case, something which is invisible does not entail violation of a *melacha*.

²⁵ Da'at Torah OC 328:26

I was asked if it is permissible to rub a thick ointment on a wound and swelling (which they call in this language "salve") until it liquifies and is absorbed. One can say in accordance with what Magen Avraham wrote in siman 316 there, that if he wants it to be absorbed into the ground, it is permissible...and so too in this matter under discussion...but in accordance with what Eliya Rabba wrote...It requires further study...and in any case, where there is illness, even when there is no danger, one may rely on the view of Magen Avraham...

²⁶ Responsa Yabi'a Omer OC IV:27:2

It seems that the words of Magen Avraham and the later authorities [who concur] with him are relevant also to our case, for one who spreads toothpaste, his intent is only to clean the teeth and scrub them, and this type of case is not considered *memarei'ach* at all, and is permitted.

have a wide range of serums, rubs, moisturizers, and lubricants to choose from on Shabbat.

Another potential basis for leniency, though usually applied only in cases of medical necessity, is to dab a product on rather than spread it. (See more on this in the discussion of using oil for healing in our next piece.)

Soap and Stick Products

Common custom is to use liquid soap or cleansers (and sometimes alcogel) on Shabbat, although the permissibility of those that are thicker or lather is subject to some debate.²⁷ As we have seen, there is a range of halachic opinions regarding viscous or creamy products with the consistency of liquid soap, and a strong halachic basis for the practice of many communities to use liquid soap as is. Some communities dilute their liquid soap so that it even more clearly meets the consistency of an oil, and thus more clearly skirts any question of *memarei'ach*.

Bar Soap

What about bar soap? An intriguing responsum of the Rambam permits using a substance called *borit* to clean one's hands on Shabbat:

Responsa of Rambam, Laws of Shabbat 6:15

Washing the hands with *borit* and its alternatives, whatever does not definitely remove hair, is permissible.

Borit can be translated as soap.²⁸ It's likely, however, that Rambam has the Mishnaic *borit*, a plant, in mind here,²⁹ so this source is inconclusive.

Rema also uses the term *borit*, but he defines it as soap. He rules that use of a solid

²⁷ Rav Moshe Feinstein, apparently concerned about how lather affected soap's consistency, raised questions about using liquid soap on Shabbat. He uses *memachek* where he might intend to use the *memarei'ach*. As stated, common custom follows the more lenient views.

Responsa Iggerot Moshe OC I:113

Even with soap that is liquid like water, even though many have the practice to permit, permitting it is not so clear to me, since it becomes lather and spreads much more than its [original state] through the washing, and if so, it is recognizable that there is a little bit of smoothing [*memachek*], not like other liquids such as water and oil. Even though it is possible that with liquids there is no prohibition of smoothing. Therefore, in my home our practice is not to permit this, and thus it is fitting to be stringent.

Responsa Yabi'a Omer IV OC 27

... About washing with soft soap, see Responsa *Iggerot Moshe* (OC 113), who is stringent with this. And he did not mention the words of the halachic authorities in this. And the fundamental halacha is to be lenient with this...

Aruch Ha-shulchan OC 326:11

... There are those who prepare melted soap on erev Shabbat that they call lather, and it is permitted to clean the hands with this...

²⁸ Responsa Yabi'a Omer OC IV:27

... For in the language of the mishna the meaning of *borit* is not our soap. And in any case, it seems that Rambam intended our soap.

²⁹ Responsa Ma'amar Mordechai IV 84

It's clear that Rambam's term "*borit*" is the grass from which we make soap, like *borit* of a leek that is mentioned in the incense...

soap presents a concern of *molid*, since the soap dissolves when rubbed on the hands.³⁰

Rema OC 326:10

It is prohibited to wash one's hands with salt, and all the more so with *borit*, which they call *Seife* [soap] in German, or with other tallow that dissolves on one's hands, and is *nolad*....

Based on this approach, use of bar soap on Shabbat would seem to be prohibited. Rema's approach to soap has been subject to debate. Magen Avraham raises the possibility that the concern of *molid* does not apply to soap at all.³¹

An alternate concern regarding soap, raised first by Tiferet Yisrael, is that using a soft but not liquid type of soap—likely more similar in consistency to wax than what we use today—would constitute *memarei'ach*:

Tiferet Yisrael, Kalkelet Shabbat, Principles of 39 Melachot

It seems to me that soft soap is prohibited according to all opinions, because it is *memarei'ach*.

Memarei'ach is actually a *tolada* (Torah-level sub-category) of the *melacha* of *memachek*, smoothing out a surface (e.g., removing hair from an animal hide).³² Ma'aseh Roke'ach adds that, in his view, using bar soap also raises a Torah-level concern of *memachek*, because one smooths out the surface of the bar of soap.³³

Ma'aseh Roke'ach Hilchot Shabbat 22:13

From here one can derive the prohibition of washing on Shabbat with the *borit* that they call *savon* [soap], for one perforce is *memarei'ach* and *memachek*, which is an arch-category of *melacha*, and it is an inevitable result [*pesik reishet*] that pleases him, and so wrote the halachic authorities and it is clear. And one should caution the people about this greatly, for I heard that many people stumble with this prohibition.

³⁰ Rema cites Responsa *Binyamin Ze'ev*.

Responsa Binyamin Ze'ev 250

With one who washes with *borit* that he rubs it with his hands, it becomes liquid and is *nolad* and prohibited...

³¹ He notes that concern for *molid* with respect to substances becoming liquid may be misstated, since perhaps the issue is limited to where the liquid entity is drinkable, and *sechita* may be at play.

Magen Avraham 326:11

For it becomes dissolved through him. And in Shiltei Gibborim he wrote that there are those who permit it, for specifically hail and snow that stand to become drinkable [water] are prohibited, see there where he expands on it.

³² Rashi Shabbat 146a

For he performs *memarei'ach* – and there is concern on account of *memachek*.

Shabbat 75b

Rabbi Acha bar Chanina said, one who rubs [a hide] between the pillars on Shabbat is liable on account of *memachek*.

Rashi ad loc, s.v. Ha-shaf bein ha-amudim

...One who rubs there on the floor of the building on which they are leaning in order that [the hide] should be smooth – is liable on account of *memachek*.

³³ It's not clear if the effects of exfoliants are strong or noticeable enough to raise a parallel concern of *memachek* of the skin.

A number of halachic authorities, including Rav Ovadya Yosef, have raised questions about this stringent view on *memarei'ach* with respect to bar soap, especially since one intends to rinse the soap off immediately.

Responsa Yabi'a Omer OC IV:27

Thus is the halacha, for detaching and cutting off a portion of the soap, as much as he needs to wash with, is certainly not considered *memachek*. And spreading it on his hands also resembles what Magen Avraham wrote as cited above, that there is no concern of *memarei'ach* with this, since he intends only to wash with it...*memarei'ach* does not apply, for a person wants his hands to be clean and does not wish to [maintain the soap's] existence.

In a similar vein, Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach challenges the applicability of *memarei'ach* or *memachek* to a soft solid soap.

Shemirat Shabbat Ke-hilchetah – Notes to Chapter 14, note 49

...How does a concern of *memarei'ach* apply to soft soap, for he does not want to spread the surface of the soap.... And thus is the opinion of Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach to permit, for he has no intention at all to spread and smooth out the soap, and also since the soap is mixed with water, it does not last. And Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach added that this is like matters that are permissible which custom treats as prohibited.

In practice, Mishna Berura accepts the stringent view on *memarei'ach* and *memachek* with respect to soap.³⁴ Many modern halachic authorities, among them Rav Moshe Feinstein, apply this stringency to modern bar soaps.

Responsa Iggerot Moshe OC I:113

In the matter of washing with [bar] soap on Shabbat and Yom Tov, it is clearly prohibited on account of *memachek*.

Common practice is to avoid using bar soap on Shabbat.

Stick products

Stick products, like lipstick and chapstick, often include wax as a central ingredient.

³⁴ Mishna Berura 326:30

It is *molad* – and resembles crushing snow and hail, which is also prohibited for this reason as explained above in siman 320, and see Magen Avraham who wrote in the name of Shiltei Giborim that there are those who permit this, for they consider the Sages' prohibition on crushing snow and hail to be on account of the decree of squeezing fruits that are used for juice, for the snow and hail are also used for their water. And if so, *borit* and other tallow that are not used for their liquid are permissible from the outset. And see the book Tiferet Yisrael, who wrote that with our *borit*, which is soft, it is prohibited according to all opinions on account of *memachek*, and it is similar to the matter of wax in 314:11, see there. And thus I found in the book Divrei Menachem in the name of Ma'aseh Roke'ach in Hilchot Shabbat 22:13, that he performs *memarei'ach* and *memachek*, and this is an arch-category of *melacha* and an inevitable result [*pesik reisha*], etc., and it is clear, and one should caution the people greatly about this. Aside from all this, it is understood from Rashi on [Shabbat] 50b "that *borit* removes hair," and thus wrote Ran, and thus is the custom of all Israel to be stringent with this.

Deodorant sticks are also made with waxy materials. This raises additional concerns of *memarei'ach*, since the classic case of *memarei'ach* entails spreading a layer of wax.

Rav Avraham Chayyim Na'eh has questioned whether this concern rightly applies to lipstick (setting aside the issue of dyeing, which we address in the final piece of this series). Since the stick is smooth to start with, so he sees no concern of *memachek*, smoothing it out. He also argues that lipstick transfers color to the lips, rather than creating a smooth layer over them, so *memarei'ach* is not at issue.³⁵

Ketzot Ha-shulchan 145, Badei Ha-shulchan 20

...In our topic under discussion, where she holds the lipstick in her hand and passes it over her lips and the appearance of the lipstick is transferred but it is not spread on the lips at all, and the surface of the lipstick was already smooth from before, and she does not smooth out dents in it, it does not seem that there is a prohibition of *memarei'ach* in this...

It's not clear if Rav Na'eh would extend his argument to other stick products, such as a deodorant or a chapstick, which likewise are smooth from the start but are used to different effect.

Many modern halachic authorities, including Rav Moshe Feinstein, are stringent regarding all stick products:

Responsa Iggerot Moshe OC I:114

In the matter of whether a woman is permitted to adorn herself with lipstick, it is prohibited for two reasons, on account of the prohibition of *memachek* and the prohibition of *tzovei'a* (dying).

Widespread practice is to avoid using stick products on Shabbat, in line with the stringent approach.

On the whole, though, according to many views, there is a wider range of product types and methods of application that may be used for pleasure on Shabbat than one might have thought. To fill out this picture, our next piece explores the parameters of using scented and enriched products, and of using products for healing purposes.

Further Reading

- Rabbi Dovid Heber. "The Kashrus, Shabbos, and Pesach Guide to Cosmetics." Star-K.org
- Rav Avraham Mordechai. "*Shimush Be-mishcha Be-Shabbat Le-yadayim Yeveshot o Sedukot o Petzu'ot.*" *Ohr Torah* 484 (2018): 261-274.
- Rav Ya'akov Yeshaya Neuwirth. *Shemirat Shabbat Ke-hilchetah*. Jerusalem: Feldheim, 2011.
- Dayyan Ya'akov Yechezkel Posen, *Kitzur Hilchot Shabbat*. New York: Z Berman Books, 1984.
- Rabbi Dovid Ribiat, *The 39 Melochos*. New York: Feldheim, 1999.
- Rabbanit Leah Sarna. "*Memarei'ach*: Spreading the Word." *Keren Journal* 3

³⁵ Available here: <https://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=7727&st=&pgnum=41>

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