Bicycle on Shabbat

Introduction:

The question whether one is allowed to ride bicycle on Shabbat seems to have gotten a lot of attention. As a matter of fact, we could say it has gotten too much attention. There are so many problems which plague today’s orthodox society, and bicycle on Shabbat should can hardly claim one of the Ten Top spots. To name but a few examples, the following are waiting for practical solution, ones which takes into account all facets of the problem and all of the possible consequences of action or lack thereof: Organ donation; Agunah (women whose husbands refuse to give a religious divorce); affordable Kosher meat; family planning; embezzlement by and corruption of Jewish leaders (as someone told me when I’ve publicly rebuked a Rosh Yeshiva involved in money laundering: everybody [in the Orthodox world] does it; sexual harassment of children, students, and women; the disparaging approach towards non-Jews; affordable Jewish education.

I am not writing this as a critic or as someone who is trying to find faults. The Jewish world, except for very brief periods during the reign of King Solomon, was never perfect. Some of the problems we face today are as old as the Jewish People itself, while others are a product of technological progress and globalization. I am pointing out these problems in order to show that we have much more serious things to deal with. We must harness the energy of rabbis and laymen alike for the common goal of Tikkun Olam, making this world a better place not only for Jews but for all humanity. As long as there are people who suffer, physically and emotionally, because of the way Judaism is taught and practiced, the duty of the rabbis and the religious leaders has not been fulfilled yet.

Why then is riding bicycle on Shabbat such a contentious issue and why does it get preferential treatment in the Orthodox world? I believe that the answer has to do with visibility. All the problems mentioned above, and many others which are ignored and neglected, are either confined to the private arena, are a one-time occurrence, or are questions of policy and politics, while biking takes place publicly, every Shabbat.

There is an added element in biking as it falls under the rubric, at least for some rabbis, of activities which are not in the spirit of Shabbat, or Shabbes’dik. These include ball playing, exercising, taking care of pets, and reading magazines and non-Jewish books. Much has been written in Halakhic literature about these subjects, but it seems that one essential concept has been missing from the conversation. That element is the completely different nature of modern society and Mishnaic society, whose scholars were in charge of much of the legislation dealing with the spirit of Shabbat.
In Mishnaic times, for example, ball playing was identified with Greek culture, since only Greek noblemen had the luxury of free time. Likewise, Jews could not think of exercising on Shabbat because they were engaged in taxing physical work all week long and longed for some rest on the Seventh Day. Play time in Mishnaic society was understood in the context of children and teenagers, but not in that of adult men burdened with work and military service.

In contrast, today’s society understands very well the important role playing plays (pun intended) in the development of a healthy child and the well-being of humans (and some other mammals) of all ages. Especially important is the physical play, or rough and tumble play, as Dr. Stuart Brown beautifully shows in his book Play: How it shapes the brain, opens the imagination, and invigorates the soul.

Another major difference is that physical activity in general has become the cornerstone of today’s society, which has moved away from hard physical work. Whereas in the past most humans built their muscles and lost their body-fat in the daily grind, today’s urbanite office-dwellers have neatly divided their life into work and leisure, including in the latter recreational physical activity.

To conclude the introduction, the spirit of Shabbat is a constantly changing and highly individual concept. What is for one person a fun activity which perfectly fits Shabbat, could for another border on torture. Very much like a family trip where each one has a completely different idea of fun (We are all going to enjoy the Museum of Ancient Medicine, and no, we are not going on the Total Madness rollercoaster), the spirit of Shabbat has to be negotiated on an individual and family basis. When it comes to Halakha, as long as there at least one opinion which allows a certain activity, one can rely on it for his or her spirit and pleasure of Shabbat.

Benefits of Biking on Shabbat

So far we have discussed the importance of studying any problem, including halakhic, in its totality. In the same measure that a rabbi considers a potential harm to the image of Shabbat because of biking, he should also consider the benefits of biking. Let us look at those benefits:

1. It allows people to get to shul with more ease.
2. Living at a greater distance from the shul means in many places a more affordable housing, so if a family decides to bike on Shabbat, it could diminish the burden of renting or buying a house.
3. Many observant teenagers complain that on Shabbat they feel stuck at home. Biking would allow them to meet with friends and socialize, thus making the Shabbat into a positive experience. This is in line with the statement of the Shulhan Arukh that those who enjoy physical activity are allowed to do so on Shabbat, suggesting that this for them is Oneg Shabbat.¹
4. Biking allows a person to relax, enjoy nature, and engage in an invigorating and healthy activity.

Of course, there is a limit to allowing activities on Shabbat because they are considered pleasant by some people. That limit is that if the activity is not biblically forbidden, the joy one derives from it makes it permissible.² It stems from here that if one of the leading authorities on Jewish Law sanctions a certain activity, anyone can rely on that opinion, regardless of local or communal practices, if that activity improves his or her Shabbat experience.

There is indeed such an authority, R Yosef Hayyim of Baghdad, famously known as the Ben Ish Hai,³ a prolific author of more than 70 books and a scholar who received questions from all over the Jewish world. In his Responsum Rav Pe'alim, we find a comprehensive discussion of riding bicycle on Shabbat. The discussion is an answer to a question sent to the rabbi by Mr. Meyer Saleh, one of the many Iraqi Jews who immigrated to India in the 1800’s:

1. The Question from India

“…regarding the vehicle called bicycle, which people ride on Shabbat… in Bombay there is a vehicle called gari⁴. The gari has two wheels and it is not drawn by animals or humans, but rather by the rider who pushes the pedals with his feet. We wanted to know if using this gari on Shabbat and Yom Tov is allowed.⁵

2. The Ben Ish Hai Rules that Riding Bicycle on Shabbat is allowed

Here is the response of the ben Ish Hai:

“It is allowed to ride this gari, which is operated by the rider, 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…”

The Ben Ish Hai sees the bicycle as a mechanical extension of the rider. He draws a distinction between riding a bicycle, which involves only the rider, and between being carried in a chair by porters⁶. He goes on to say that one cannot forbid the use of bicycle as a measure for preventing confusion, such as misunderstanding the nature of bicycle and allowing other activities. He stresses that today’s rabbis are not allowed to make new decrees and restrictions, and that we should rely on people’s common sense.
Following this clear warning against the tendency to oppose to and reject any technological innovations, he says:

“I wish that our generation would have kept the decrees that are explicitly stated in the words of the Sages.”

It is important to note that R Yossef Hayyim foresaw the developing trends in 19th century Judaism. On one hand, he saw the reclusive approach of Ashkenazi rabbis who feared that modernity and progress would obliterate the traditional way of life, and therefore added protective measures and fences around Halakha. On the other hand, he saw how people are drifting away from observance of Halakha, feeling disenfranchised, and he understood that additional prohibitions and restrictions will not stop that trend.

3. The Ben Ish Hai Allows Riding Bicycle Even Without an Eruv

The ben Ish Hai goes on to say that riding a bicycle is allowed, under certain circumstances, even in a place without an eruv:

“In a city without an eruv… it is only allowed for one whose actions are beneficial to the community [such as the rabbi who needs to teach a class], but not only if the community needs to learn from him, or that he has to supervise an issue with a communal implication… even if he is a cantor and there is no one else to read the Torah it is considered a communal need. Not only that, we should also allow [riding] for one who goes to perform a Mitzvah, for example to the synagogue to hear Kaddish or Kedusha… and it is far, and he is weak because of an ailment or old age and cannot walk, this is allowed as well… but in a city with an Eruv one can ride bicycle even for recreational purposes both on Shabbat and Yom Tov.”

Note that under the rubric of Mitzvah the Ben Ish Hai lists hearing Kaddish. He is not talking about one who needs to recite Kaddish but rather of one who wants to hear Kaddish. The ben Ish Hai is extremely generous in his definition of Mitzvah because in essence he sees no problem in riding the bicycle even where there is no Eruv, and he wants to maintain some boundaries.

This ruling of the Ben Ish Hai has been followed by many Sephardic Jews around the world, but has been contested by some rabbis for feeble reasons, most probably because of an intuitive feeling that “it is not right” to ride bicycle on Shabbat. The arguments of those who seek to forbid will be mentioned briefly
later, since we can rely with total confidence on the Halakhic authority of the Ben Ish Hai. We need, however, to address two arguments which claim that the Ben Ish Hai himself would not stand by his ruling today.

4. First refuted argument: The Ben Ish Hai spoke of solid tires

The first argument is that the Ben Ish Hai referred to bicycle with a solid tire. Those who present this argument claim that the Ben Ish Hai would not permit riding bicycle with air-filled tires. To refute this argument we could simply check the facts and find that the first pneumatic tire was invented in 1888 and that the Ben Ish Hai passed away 21 years later, in 1909, so he would have had plenty of time to learn about the pneumatic tire and change his ruling accordingly. This research, however, is not necessary, for in the very same Responsa, the Ben Ish Hai refers to the pneumatic tire, thus putting all these speculations to rest:

“It is known that the gari has around the wheel a tube made of elastic material… a special tool is used to fill this tube with air to make the ride smooth…”

It is obvious from the description that the Ben Ish Hai was familiar with the pneumatic tire and that there is no room for the above mentioned argument.

5. Second refuted argument: The Ben Ish Hai retracted his ruling

The second argument against following the ruling of the Ben Ish Hai is that he allegedly changed his mind towards the end of his life and wanted to retract his ruling. This argument was strongly refuted by Hakham Ovadia Yosef, who writes:

I have heard from Baghdadi rabbis that once the Ben Ish Hai understood the mechanism of the bicycle he has changed his mind… the truth is that the Ben Ish Hai knew every detail regarding the bicycle… he [the Ben Ish Hai] wrote: I heard that some say that we should fear that the bicycle will break and the rider will fix them on Shabbat. This is foolishness which should not be mentioned, since we cannot make new decrees which were not mentioned by the sages. There are many things which might break on Shabbat yet the rabbis did not fear that someone will fix them on Shabbat, so we should not invent new decrees.”

Rabbi Ovadia Yosef goes on to say that the rumor that the Ben Ish Hai changed his mind is a false rumor and should be rejected. If it were true, says Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, the Ben Ish Hai would have written so in
one of his later books. As a matter of fact, not only did he not retract his ruling. But he has reiterated it in
the last book he published, Divre Haim. In that book he writes (p. 200) that one might argue that if the
bicycle would have been invented at the time of the Sages they would deem them forbidden on Shabbat,
but we do not accept this argument since the power of announcing new prohibitions is reserved to the
Sages of the Mishnah alone, and it is therefore permissible to ride bicycle on Shabbat.\footnote{6}

6. R Ovadia Yosef on the ruling of the Ben Ish Hai

Rabbi Ovadia Yossef reinforces this statement in his last book, the tenth volume of his Responsa Yabi’\textquotesingle a
Omer. He writes to a rabbi who wanted to forbid wearing electronic watches on Shabbat and uses the
ruling of the Ben Ish Hai on bicycle as an example\footnote{7}:

As long as the rabbis did not say that a certain object is forbidden we cannot declare that it is
forbidden, even if we have new data which did not exist at the time of the rabbis, as for example
regarding this watch. The Ben Ish Hai also wrote so and he repeated it in his book Divre Haim
regarding the permissibility of riding bicycle on Shabbat. We see that there are many things
which the Sages would have been able to declare forbidden, but despite that they let them be
permissible. Similarly, regarding the bicycle, even if we find a reason to forbid for fear that they
will break and one will fix them on Shabbat, and even if we claim that if bicycle existed in the
time of the rabbis they would have forbidden, they are still permitted. That is because only the
early Sages were able to make decrees, and since they are not among us today we do not have
such authority…

Rabbi Yosef goes on to say that there were those who wanted to forbid bicycle on Shabbat because it is
not in the spirit of Shabbat, but he quotes others who refute them and say that there is nothing in riding
cycle which will make them more appropriate for Shabbat or for weekdays. The only reason one would
not use bicycle on Shabbat, concludes Rabbi Yosef, is because of the problem of Eruv. If one rides
cycle where there is no eruv he might take it from the private to the public domain. Note that riding in
the public domain is not a problem, even without an eruv, as the Ben Ish Hai explains, since the bike is
not being carried but rather become one with the rider.

Rabbi Yosef repeats his insistence that the bicycle is permissible according to the Ben Ish Hai a third
time, also in the tenth volume of his Yabi’\textquotesingle a Omer.\footnote{8} Here he actually supports the ruling of the ben Ish
Hai with the ruling of R Yaakov of Emden, the Yaabetz, who says that we should be very cautious when
coming to institute new prohibitions because usually they cause more harm than good. He again rejects
the rumor that the Ben Ish Hai changed his mind, and quotes R Eliyahu Mani, a great scholar and one of the elders of the Baghdadi community, who says that even though he would consider being strict regarding the bicycle, he would not dare rule against the Ben Ish Hai.

7. Common problems: air and chain

R Shelomo Zalman Auerbach rules that it is allowed to inflate a ball on Shabbat. He explains that this action is not considered fixing since all the air in the world is one entity, so one is just putting back in the ball or the wheel the air that was there originally.\(^{15}\) One can rely on this ruling if there is a need to inflate a tire.

Another common problem is that the chain comes off. Because it is common, and because it is almost certain that it will happen again, putting it back in place is not considered fixing.\(^{16}\)

If you are still concerned about leaving the bike somewhere if they break, check out Priority Bicycles which promise to be almost unbreakable. [www.prioritybicycles.com](http://www.prioritybicycles.com)

Conclusion:

The ruling of the Ben Ish Hai, in summary, was important and relevant in its time, and even more so today. With the dispersion of Jewish communities and the tendency to live in suburbs, more and more people do not live within a walking distance from the synagogue or from their family and friends. Riding bicycle on Shabbat for them is a blessing which allows them to connect with the community, family, and friends.

According to the Ben Ish Hai one is allowed to ride bicycle on Shabbat. If there is no Eruv, it is allowed to ride it for a necessity or Mitzvah, but the definition of Mitzvah is very broad. Some people have a custom not to ride bicycle, but as I mentioned in other rulings, one is allowed to adopt another custom, especially since in this case we are talking of a relatively very recent custom. Additionally, we can rely on the rule “see what people are doing and follow it”\(^ {17} \). Since in the Syrian community of New York and New Jersey many observant people ride bicycle on Shabbat, it has become an acceptable custom for all who want to adopt it.

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1 See Pirhay Kehuna of R Rahamim Hai HaCohen on Berachot 19:2
The popular name for bicycle in West Bengal in the 19th century, shortened from ekka-gari which was a horse drawn cart.

The name used in the East is bicycle as mentioned by Prof. Tzvi Zohar and Prof. Rabbi Jose Faur.

In recent years we are witnesses to a growing understanding of the progressive and inclusive approach of Sephardic rabbis of the 18th–20th century. Among others, we should mention the book-workers in the east and west. Rabbi Israel Moshe Hazan – The Man and His Deeds, by Prof. Rabbi Jose Faur; and Prof. Menahem Elon’s discussion in his book. The writer is thankful to all of them.

In previous footnote, the discussion of Rabbi HaCohen and the comment by the editor.

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שהוי"ת ביער אないこと, אל ראהו, זכרה, כל נפשו, בטוח שאורו חכם. שעון יאיר חכם, וברוחו התורה, ובגרות התורה, ובשניהם, ובתרבותם, וב렇ם, וביהדותם, ובニー התרבותה, ובשתיקה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, ובפי התרבותה, וב피

מהרש”ג ח”ב (סי’ יג) להתיר. ו"מש בשו”ת מימי ח”א (סי’ רכ’ה) לאסור משם בחיקול ו打ちו בם. "וכם מטעם שםך הרבח שתי"ג צמחה..."  

רב Ceremony וח”ב, יש”ת מנחת שמחה, ח”ל א. סמך. וא… וא…) מהדברות הוא וכד…”อง，则 ראתAck. על גב

שנאיור אחר על הנה שהשתלד ב…”ר, א. חלמאיס, עם מהם בשניה, אלה אשר משם…”ר, אלא דרש מהדברות הוא כ…”ר כ…”ר

הרב שלמה זלמן אוירבך, שו”ת מנחת שלמה, חלק א, סימן יא: …או כמכניס אוירבך,acio ש…”ר,Ⲫ…, אך לא דרש מהדברות הוא כ…”ר כ…”ר

הרב מנשה קליין, שו”ת משנה מגננה, חלק ז, סימן מט: הרי הוא כ…”ר כ…”ר כ…”ר

הלכות, חלק זא סימן מט: הרי הוא כ…”ר כ…”ר כ…”ר

הלכות, חלק זא סימן מט: חלמאיס, עם מהם בשניה, אלה אשר משם…”ר, אלא דרש מהדברות הוא כ…”ר כ…”ר

Y. Yevamoth, 7:3: “a law regarding the court is ambiguous… see what the public is doing and follow them.”