Q: Is one allowed not to use electricity on Yom Tov?

A: Apparently many observant people believe that it is permissible to avoid using electricity on Yom Tov. If one decides to avoid the use of electricity on Yom Tov, he is allowed, as long as it does not negatively affect the joy and happiness of the holiday. There are rabbis who oppose using electricity on Yom Tov, but their arguments are ideological, rather than Halakhic.

The ideological argument is understood and well respected – we have to protect the spirit of Yom Tov. This was probably the reason for the reversal, in late 20th century, in the approach of many Sephardic rabbis, whose previous tradition was to allow the use of electricity. They were concerned that with the rising popularity of TV and game consoles, the spiritual and sacred nature of Yom Tov will sink to oblivion. I fully agree with this concern, especially in the current state of obsession with smartphones and social media.

The sad reality is, however, that by defining something such as electricity as forbidden, while people intuitively understand that it is permissible, more harm is caused. If we, as rabbis and spiritual leaders, want to impose a ban on electric devices on Yom Tov we should state that it is a fence and that according to the Halakha it is allowed to use electricity on Yom Tov. Alternatively, rabbis should invest more in education and in creating an exciting Shabbat and Yom Tov atmosphere.

In my family, for example we have always used electricity on Yom Tov and it never occurred to any of my children to use a computer (in the 90’s) or a smartphone (in the twenty-tens). They didn’t need it because besides prayers and Torah, there were books and board-games and songs and talent shows. Yom Tov, and Shabbat, done properly, should be a source of fun and excitement which one looks forward to.
Back to our Halakhic discussion:

The only Halakhic argument against electricity on Yom Tov which seems to have some validity is that it is considered דילומ – a rabbinic prohibition against creating a new object or entity. But, as many rabbis have already proven, this argument does not apply to electricity, since flipping the switch only channels existing energy.

Indeed, the widespread custom among Sephardic congregations has always been to allow the use of electricity on Yom Tov. This was also the practice in Jerusalem in mid-twentieth century, and so was the ruling of my great grandfather, Hakham Yehuda Fetaya.

The great Sephardic scholars who ruled in favor of using electricity on Yom Tov were joined by some of the leading Ashkenazi scholars, and together they represent the full spectrum of the Jewish world, including North Africa, Eastern and Western Europe, Israel, Turkey, and Egypt.

The list of those who allow the use of electricity includes: R Yosef Messas; R David HaCohen Skali; The Rishon LeTzion R Benzion Meir Hai Ouziel; R Rephael Aharon Ben Shimon; R Yaakov Moshe Toledano; Chief Rabbis of Jerusalem, R Zvi Pesah Frank and R Shalom Messas; R Masoud HaCohen; R Yechiel Michel HaLevi Epstein;

The most important names to be included in this impressive list are those of the Chief Rabbi of Netanya, R David Chelouche (B. 1920) and R Eliezer Waldenberg (1915-2006), zt”l.

Those two great scholars are known for their in-depth analysis of science and technology based related issues. They went to great lengths to thoroughly study all the scientific and factual aspects of a given question before issuing their Halakhic conclusion. The fact that they both agree on allowing the use of electricity on Yom Tov serves as a rebuttal to the last argument of the opponents.

That argument is that the rabbis who wrote at the turn of the 20th century did not understand the nature of electricity. No one can level that claim at R Chelouche
and R Waldenberg (R Chelouche actually studied the nature of electricity with an orthodox physicist, Dr. Benzion Reich). Finally, it is important to note that whereas previous rabbis argued whether turning off electricity is allowed, R Chelouche allows both turning the electricity on and off.

Because of the importance of R Chelouche’s ruling, it is presented here with translation (The full discussion is in Hemdah Genuzah, Vol. 1, pp. 67-100):

**Conclusion:** The question of whether to use or not use electricity on Yom Tov seems to be mostly ideological. According to the dry legal definitions of permissible and forbidden actions on Yom Tov, it is clear that using electricity is allowed. There are, however, many rabbis who chose to forbid it, probably in order to maintain the spirit of Yom Tov.

One who grew up not using electricity on Yom Tov is allowed to switch over for two reasons:

a) the ruling against electricity stemmed from misunderstanding of its nature; and

b) the decision of how to maintain the spirit of Yom Tov, at least in the private arena, is an individual one. Of course choices should be made and actions taken with utmost respect to the sensitivities of others. The greatest joy of our holidays, and as a matter of fact, of all of our Jewish experience, comes from the ability to coexist without being judgmental.

**Shabbat Shalom!**

**Rabbi Haim Ovadia**