

Medina & Halacha

Exploring the Jewish State
through the lens of Jewish Law

By Rabbi Shimshon HaKohen Nadel

Travel on Erev Shabbat

In November, two El Al flights from New York's JFK International Airport to Tel Aviv were delayed due to a severe snowstorm and the flight crew's late arrival. Originally scheduled to depart at 6:30pm, Flight 002 left JFK at 11:45pm on a snowy Thursday evening, more than five hours after its scheduled departure time. Flight 008 departed JFK at 12:43am Friday morning, over two hours late.

Once midair, it was apparent that neither flight would be able to make it to Israel before the arrival of Shabbat.

Flight 008 was initially to be diverted to Rome, but as there was a sick passenger onboard, El Al received permission from Sephardic Chief Rabbi Rav Yitzchak Yosef to proceed to Israel where the flight landed at 5:35pm Friday evening, nearly an hour after Shabbat began.

But Flight 002 would get much more attention in the media. Shortly before take-off, some religious passengers requested to disembark, concerned that they would not arrive in Tel Aviv before sunset. According to passengers, the

captain announced that they would indeed be returning to the gate, but instead the plane took off. Flight 002 was eventually diverted to Athens, where many of the passengers spent Shabbat hosted by Chabad, before continuing on to Israel Motzei Shabbat.

This unfortunate situation was the subject of much discussion and debate, and raises questions about the permissibility and advisability of travel on Erev Shabbat.

The Talmud (Sukka 44b) states that one should not travel more than a distance of 3 Parsa'ot, equivalent to approx. 3.5 hours, on Erev Shabbat. Rashi (ad Loc.) explains that one's family will not be expecting him home before Shabbat, and will not have prepared enough food. This will lead to anger and strife. Rambam (Hilchot Shabbat 30:11) writes that if one arrives as a guest in someone else's home late in the day, his host will not be expecting him. This will lead to great embarrassment, as his host has not had time to sufficiently prepare. The Aruch HaShulchan (OC 249:1) adds another reason for the prohibition. Should he arrive unexpectedly late in the day, the members of his family or his hosts will want to rush and prepare for him. This may lead to preparing food after nightfall, resulting in a desecration of the Shabbat itself!

The Shulchan Aruch (OC 249:1) rules: "One may not travel more than 3 Parsa'ot on Erev Shabbat in order

that he reach his home while the day is still long in order that he may prepare the Shabbat meals, whether he is traveling to other homes or his own home."

Since the prohibition to travel a long distance is out of concern for food preparation, according to some authorities there is room to be lenient in certain situations: Should he send ahead a message that he is on his way, allowing his family or his host time to prepare, he would be able to travel (Mordechai, Sukkah ch. 4; Aruch HaShulchan OC 249:1). Similarly, according to the Aruch HaShulchan (Ibid.), one may travel to an inn or hotel, as they expect guests to appear at any time. This same would apply to hosts who are always prepared to have guests up until the last minute.

The Bi'ur Halacha (OC 249) also allows for significant travel if it is for the performance of a mitzva, so long as one arrives with enough time for food to be prepared.

The Beit Yosef (OC 249) and Shulchan Aruch (OC 249:1) rule that if one is in an isolated or dangerous location, he may travel longer on Erev Shabbat to reach his destination. (Obviously, in a situation of Piku'ach Nefesh one would always be permitted to travel).

According to some, the reason behind this prohibition is no longer relevant today. The Magen Avraham (OC 249:2) writes that since today

"most individuals prepare plenty [of food for Shabbat], they are therefore not concerned for this [prohibition]." Kaf HaChayim adds that since today food is readily available for purchase, we need not be concerned about not having enough time to prepare.

But many later authorities are concerned about Shabbat desecration, and rule stringently.

The Mishna B'rurua (OC 249:3) writes that one should not travel late in the day on Friday, as it may lead to Shabbat desecration. The Aruch HaShulchan (OC 249:3) warns those traveling by train to calculate carefully that they will arrive before Shabbat. He warns about Chilul Shabbat and writes that the Satan always prosecutes on Erev Shabbat.

The Kitzur Shulchan Aruch (123:15) rules that one should not travel after midday on Erev Shabbat. And Rav Ben Tzion Abba Shaul (Ohr L'Tzion 2:16:6) rules that one should make sure to reach his host's home with at least an hour to spare before the arrival of Shabbat.

Given just how precarious air travel is, especially in inclement weather, it is best to avoid traveling on Erev Shabbat when possible. Those traveling by car on Friday, should make sure to leave early and give themselves plenty of time in case of unexpected traffic. And of course - travel safely! 🇮🇱