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Learning secular subjects on Shabbat

1. According to Sephardim, one should only learn Torah on Shabbat and one may not learn any secular subjects. However, the Ashkenazic minhag is to allow learning secular wisdom such as science and math textbooks but a pious person should refrain.¹
2. According to Ashkenazim, one may read Jewish history texts that inspire mussar and Yirat Hashem. Many authorities forbid reading novels on Shabbat.²
3. It's permissible to learn Torah on Shabbat even if one is doing so for some need for after Shabbat.³ However, one may not study secular subjects for a test during the week.⁴

1. The Mishna in Shabbat 148b records the prohibition to count the number of guests from a list on Shabbat. Abaye explains that this is a rabbinic restriction so as not to come to read a Shatar Hedyot on Shabbat. What is a Shatar Hedyot? The **Rambam** (Pirush Mishnayot Shabbat 23:2) explains Shatar Hedyot to mean letters and says the reason for this is that on Shabbat one may only read Navi and it's explanations and not even a book of wisdom and science.

However, the **Rashba** 149a explains Shatar Hedyot as business documents. Therefore, Sh"t Rashba 7:288 permits reading books of wisdom and medicine on Shabbat and quotes the Ramban who agreed.

S"A 307:17 rules like the Rambam who says that on Shabbat one should only learn Torah and not books of other wisdoms, however, he mentions that some are lenient. **Mishna Brurah** 307:65 writes that the minhag is like the lenient opinion; however, a pious person (Yireh Shamayim) should be strict. Based on the Mishna Brurah, **Shemirat Shabbat KeHilchata** 29:49 permits reading professional literature and textbooks which don't include any business. Rav Shlomo Zalman (Nishmat Avraham 307:5) is quoted as saying that a doctor could learn medicine on Shabbat but a medical student may not.

However, **Yalkut Yosef** (Shabbat vol 2, pg 214, 626) rules like Shulchan Aruch that one should only learn Torah on Shabbat and is only lenient to allow a medical student who has a test after Shabbat and is pressured for time to study medicine (except for the study of surgery) on Shabbat. **Menuchat Ahava** (vol 1, pg 234) writes that the halacha follows S"A but one shouldn't protest those who are lenient because they have what to rely on. **2. S"A** 307:16 writes that secular literature, romance, and history of wars are forbidden to read on Shabbat and

even during the week because it is considered an activity of scoffers (Moshav Letzim) and it is like following idolater's practices (Al Tifnu El HaElilim) and reading romance is also a violation of provoking the Yetzer Hara. **Mishna Brurah** 307:58 writes that Josephus and a few other Jewish history books aren't included in this prohibition because one learns from them ethics and fear of heaven (Yirat Hashem).

Rav Chaim Kanievsky (quoted by Menucha Shelemah pg 226) says that it is forbidden to read narratives and dramas on Shabbat because they do not inspire to Yirat Shamayim. Similarly, Shabbos Home (**Rabbi Simcha Cohen**, vol 1, pg 57-8) writes that the minhag is lenient by science, math, and medicine but not history and fictional novels which are not considered 'wisdom', however, one who fears heaven should refrain from any secular wisdom on Shabbat.

However, 39 Melachos (**Rabbi Ribiat**, vol 4, pg 982) (based on Rama 307:1 and Mishna Brurah 307:65) writes that strictly speaking pleasure reading is permitted but concludes that it's best to refrain from any secular book on Shabbat. 39 Melachos adds that obviously if there's objectionable material it's forbidden to read on Shabbat or the week.

3. Shemirat Shabbat KeHilchata 28:84 (in new editions 92), 39 Melachos (vol 4, pg 982), Yalkut Yosef (Shabbat, vol 2, pg 216).

4. Shemirat Shabbat KeHilchata (chap 28, note 206) quotes Rav Shlomo Zalman as being in doubt whether studying secular subjects not for the knowledge but only to do well on a test is considered Hachana. **39 Melachos** (vol 4, pg 982) rules that it's forbidden because of Hachana. However, Rav Aviner (www.RavAviner.com) permits studying for a test on Shabbat if one enjoys the learning and doesn't cause one stress.

Note: This is not an official YU RIETS production, however, it was shown to Rav Willig Shlita and discussed with Rav Schachter Shlita. Questions? ikesultan@gmail.com. -Ike Sultan (student in MYP)