
Fulfilling Mitzvot Through Electronic Hearing Devices

Modern authorities have vigorously debated whether a sound heard through a microphone, hearing aid (which functions much like a microphone),¹ or telephone shares the status of the original sound. This issue impacts the fulfillment of numerous *mitzvot*, such as listening to the blowing of a *shofar* or to Torah and *Megillah* readings, by hearing them through these electronic media.

How Does a Microphone Work?

Before addressing the halachic aspects of electronic devices, Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach (*Teshuvot Minchat Shlomo* 1:9) describes the workings of a microphone in great detail.² It receives sound waves (the original voice or sound) and converts them into electronic signals. An amplifier/speaker system then reconverts the electronic signals into

1. Regarding why hearing aids do not violate *Shabbat*, see *Igrot Moshe* (*Orach Chaim* 4:85), *Teshuvot Minchat Shlomo* (1:9), and *The Journal of Halacha and Contemporary Society* (41:62–98).

2. In the 1980 reprint of his *Me'orei Eish*, he explains that he attained a sophisticated understanding of electric mechanisms through much reading, as well as consultation with experts who were observant Torah scholars, too.

an amplified replica of the original sound. A similar operation takes place within hearing aids and telephones. Of course, radios and televisions translate radio waves instead of electrical signals.

Can One Fulfill a *Mitzvah* with Such a Mechanism?

A number of early twentieth-century authorities believed that one can fulfill the *mitzvot* of *shofar* and *Megillah* even through a microphone system (see *Encyclopedia Talmudit* 18:749–753). However, they lacked access to precise scientific information, so they formulated their opinion based on common-sense perception, without conclusively knowing whether a microphone simply broadcasts a human voice or first transforms it into electronic signals.

A number of prominent authorities who understood microphones more accurately nonetheless considered permitting their use for *mitzvot* that entail listening. The *Chazon Ish* (in an oral communication to Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, cited in *Minchat Shlomo* 1:9) suggests that perhaps, “since the voice that is heard via microphone was created [at first] by the [human] speaker and the voice is heard immediately,³ as it would be heard in regular conversation, it is also defined as ‘actually hearing’ the *shofar* blower or the [voice of the human] speaker.”

Rav Moshe Feinstein (*Teshuvot Igrot Moshe, Orach Chaim* 2:108) and Rav Tzvi Pesach Frank (cited in *Teshuvot Minchat Yitzchak* 2:113 and *Teshuvot Tzitz Eliezer* 8:11) suggest a similar line of reasoning. Rav Moshe indicates that one never hears a sound directly from its source; rather, the vibration created when a person speaks then passes through the air to the listener’s ear. The vibrating air next to the listener is not the same air that vibrated near the speaker’s vocal chords. Thus, indicates Rav Moshe, perhaps any sound that reaches the listener as a direct result of the original sound shares the same halachic status as the speaker’s own voice. Nevertheless, Rav Moshe discourages the use of a microphone even for rabbinic *mitzvot*, such as reading the *Megillah*.⁴ Rav Shlomo Zalman, however, attacks any possibility of claiming that one can equate an electronically reproduced sound with a person’s original voice:

3. Dr. Joel Berman notes that there is, technically, a slight gap between the time it takes to hear a live sound and the time to hear a sound through a microphone. Nevertheless, human beings can hardly perceive this gap, so the *Chazon Ish* presumably did not consider it to be significant.

4. See also *Igrot Moshe, Orach Chaim* 4:126, and *Teshuvot Sheivet Halevi* 5:84.

Does not the *Mishnah (Rosh Hashanah 27b)* state that if one blows a *shofar* into a pit and hears only an echo, then he has not fulfilled the *mitzvah* of *shofar*? Why is hearing something through a microphone different from hearing an echo? They are both replications of the original sound!⁵

Rav Shlomo Zalman concludes that the *Chazon Ish's* possible leniency is highly questionable, “and I do not comprehend it.”

Argument that a *Mitzvah* Cannot be Fulfilled

The majority of authorities believe that one does not fulfill any *mitzvot* by hearing a sound through a microphone. In particular, most mid- and late-twentieth-century authorities, who benefited from a greater understanding than their predecessors of how microphones operate, reject the use of microphones for the performance of *mitzvot*,⁶ with the possible exception of Torah reading.⁷ They argue that one hears an electronically reproduced sound over these devices, whereas the Halachah requires one to hear the actual sound of a *shofar*, or voice of the reader. They note that this reproduction is substantially inferior to hearing an echo since it lacks any trace of the original sound, whereas echoes come from the original sound waves. According to Rav Shlomo Zalman, blowing the *shofar* over a sound-system is analogous to pressing a button on a computer that produces the sound of a *shofar*.

Rav Shlomo Zalman therefore writes that he is pained to rule that one cannot fulfill the *mitzvot* of *shofar* and *Megillah* through a hearing aid. Accordingly, hearing-disabled individuals should remove their

5. The *Minchat Elazar (2:72)* writes that only the *mitzvah* of *shofar* requires an original sound, as opposed to an echo. However, an echo would suffice for Torah or *Megillah* reading, so one may also read them over a microphone. Rav Shlomo Zalman and Rav Ovadia Yosef (*Teshuvot Yechaveh Daat* 3:54) counter that a microphone is far worse than an echo, as the connection between the reader and the hearer has been entirely disrupted. The microphone and speakers completely reconstitute the voice, so it is as if the listener heard it from wood or stones. Thus even if one could fulfill most *mitzvot* through an echo, a microphone is surely unacceptable.

6. Besides Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, these authorities include Rav Yosef Eliyahu Henkin (*Kitvei Hagaon Rav Y. E. Henkin* 1:122), Rav Moshe Shternbuch (*Teshuvot Vehanhagot* 1:155 and *Mo'adim Uzmanim* 6:105), Rav Eliezer Waldenberg (*Teshuvot Tzitz Eliezer* 8:11), Rav Ovadia Yosef (*Teshuvot Yechaveh Daat* 3:54), Rav Levi Yitzchak Halperin (*Teshuvot Ma'aseih Chosheiv* 1:1), and Rav Yitzchak Yaakov Weisz (*Teshuvot Minchat Yitzchak* 3:38:16).

hearing aids during *shofar* blowing and *Megillah* reading. If they cannot hear the *shofar* or *Megillah* without their hearing aids, they must not recite the blessings for these *mitzvot*.

Hearing the *shofar* and *Megillah* with a hearing aid still has some value because of the opinion of the *Chazon Ish* and Rav Moshe that one might fulfill these *mitzvot* even with a sound system. Similarly, Rav Waldenberg (*Teshuvot Tzitz Eliezer* 8:11) writes that if a Rav decides to broadcast the *Megillah* reading throughout a hospital so as to enable patients to hear it, he should not be denigrated, for he is ruling according to the reasoning of the *Chazon Ish* and Rav Moshe in a case of very great need (as these patients otherwise would not hear the *Megillah* at all).⁸ Rav Moshe (*Igrot Moshe, Orach Chaim* 4:91) rules that one may recite *havdalah*⁹ over the telephone on behalf of a

7. Many authorities also prohibit reading the Torah over a microphone or hearing it through a hearing aid (see *Kol Mevasser* 2:25; *Minchat Yitzchak* 3:38:16; and Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, cited in *Yabia Omer*, vol. 1, *Orach Chaim* 19:18). However, Rav Moshe Shternbuch (*Teshuvot Vehanhagot* 1:149 and 1:155) claims that there is no *mitzvah* to hear the reader's voice per se during the Torah reading, but rather "to hear words of Torah" (1:155) from a public reading, "for the purpose of Torah study" (1:149). Rav Shternbuch thus suggests that someone who cannot hear the Torah reading without a hearing aid may nonetheless be called to the Torah for an *aliyah* (1:149). He further defends the practice of reading the Torah over a microphone during the massive services that take place on *Chol Hamo'eid* at the Western Wall (1:155). Nevertheless, he encourages trying to hear the reader's natural voice in deference to authorities who reject his reasoning. Rav Ovadia Yosef (cited in *Yalkut Yosef*, vol. 2 [*Dinei Keri'at Sefer Torah U'Veit Haknesset*], pp. 107–108, note 14) also believes that a community fulfills its obligation to read the Torah even by reading it over a microphone.

8. See also *Teshuvot Tzitz Eliezer* 4:26, where Rav Waldenberg vehemently opposes the use of microphones for prayers. Besides his halachic concerns, Rav Waldenberg claims that using a microphone in shul denigrates the sanctity of the prayers.

9. See Rav Yisroel Dov Webster's *The Halachos of Pregnancy and Childbirth* (*Teshuvot Meraboteinu*, pp. 12–13), where he cites Rav Yitzchak Isaac Liebes who distinguishes between *havdalah* and other *mitzvot*. He suggests that, unlike other *mitzvot*, one may recite *havdalah* over the telephone under pressing circumstances for people (particularly women; see *Shulchan Aruch*, O.C. 296:8) who could not hear it otherwise. From a practical perspective, it should be noted that there have been incidents of elderly women who have burned themselves during *havdalah*, which might provide an added reason to rely on Rav Liebes's position in their situation. Alternatively, one might advise them to follow the *Biur Halachah's* opinion (296:8 s.v. *Lo*) that women should not recite *borei m'eorei ha'eish* (the blessing for the candle) at *havdalah* (see, however, *Teshuvot Igrot Moshe, Choshen Mishpat* 2:47:2, who disagrees), or one might encourage them to rely on those authorities who permit reciting *borei me'orei ha'eish* on a non-frosted incandescent bulb. (The *Shemirat Shabbat Kehilchatah*, 61:32, summarizes

listener who has no other way to hear it (such as a patient in a distant hospital).¹⁰

Responding “Amen” to an Electronically Reproduced *Berachah*

Assuming, like most authorities, that we do not equate an electronically reproduced sound with a natural voice, one who hears a *berachah* (blessing) over a microphone merely knows that it has been recited at that moment, but has not actually heard it. This situation appears analogous to the Great Synagogue of Alexandria (described in *Sukkah* 51b), which was so large that many congregants could not hear the leader. In order that they would know when to answer “amen,” someone would wave a banner to indicate that the leader had recited a *berachah*.

Rashi (*Berachot* 47a s.v. *Yetomah*) and *Tosafot* (*Sukkah* 52a s.v. *Vekeivan* and *Berachot* 47a s.v. *Amen*) both ask, why could the Alexandrians answer “amen” on the basis of a banner if the Gemara (*Berachot* 47a) forbids answering “amen” without hearing the actual *berachah*? The Gemara refers to such a reply as an *amen yetomah*, “an orphaned amen.” Rashi and *Tosafot* (in *Berachot*) explain that the people in Alexandria knew which *berachah* was being recited, despite the fact that they did not hear it, whereas the problem of an *amen yetomah* exists only when one lacks any knowledge of what the leader has uttered. Elsewhere (*Sukkah* 52a), *Tosafot* cite Rabbeinu Nissim Gaon, who suggests a different approach. He claims that the prohibition against reciting an *amen yetomah* applies only when answering “amen” to a *berachah* that one is obligated to recite and he wishes to fulfill his obligation by answering “amen,” such as the *berachot* before blowing the *shofar* or reading the *Megillah*. On the other hand, he suggests

the dispute regarding incandescent bulbs and concludes that they should not be used in place of classical *havdalah* candles except in cases of great need.) Since each of these options is subject to much debate, one should consult a competent rabbi regarding how to deal with cases of *havdalah* for elderly relatives.

10. If one has already recited or heard *havdalah*, it could present a problem for that person to recite *havdalah* on behalf of a telephone listener, because Rav Moshe is not sure if such a recitation is effective. If the listener does not fulfill his obligation through this recitation, then the caller will have recited the *berachot* in vain. To avoid this problem, either the one reciting *havdalah* should be sure to not recite or hear *havdalah* beforehand, or someone who has not yet recited or heard *havdalah* should listen to the natural voice of the one reciting *havdalah*.

that the Alexandrians relied on the flag system for responding only to those *berachot* that they were not obligated to recite.

The *Shulchan Aruch* (*Orach Chaim* 124:8) rules that the problem of an *amen yetomah* applies only to those *berachot* that one is obligated to recite, while the Rama and Ashkenazic *Acharonim* rule that the problem exists in other cases, too. Accordingly, the Rama prohibits responding “*amen*” to any *berachah*, even when one is not obligated in it, if one does not know precisely which *berachah* is being recited.¹¹

Accordingly, Rav Shlomo Zalman rules that if one hears via a microphone a *berachah* that he is not obligated to recite, he may answer “*amen*.” This situation commonly arises at weddings, where members of the audience hear the *berachot* only over loudspeakers. The bride and groom, who must hear these *berachot*, do hear the actual sound, as they stand right next to those who recite the blessings.¹²

In another interesting ruling, Rav Shlomo Zalman forbids answering “*amen*” to a *berachah* that one hears while listening to a radio (or telephone), even during a live broadcast. He argues that only one who is present in the place of a *berachah*’s recitation is eligible to answer “*amen*” (e.g., the situation in Alexandria). However, if he is not present in the place where the blessing is recited, he must not answer “*amen*” under any circumstances. Rav Yosef Shalom Eliashiv (cited in *Avnei Yashfeih* 1:9) equates hearing a *berachah* over a telephone or radio to

11. For more on the topic of *amen yetomah*, see *Taz* (*Orach Chaim* 124:4), *Biur Halachah* (124 s.v. *Veyeish*), and *Mishnah Berurah* (124:33).

12. Rav Ovadia Yosef (*Teshuvot Yechaveh Daat* 3:54) permits hearing the *Megillah* over a microphone from such close range that one can hear the reader’s natural voice, reasoning that the microphone’s presence does not detract from the natural voice. Rav Eliezer Waldenberg (*Tzitz Eliezer* 8:11:4) mentions the common practice of reciting *sheva berachot* over a microphone at weddings and expresses no objection to it. Rav Moshe Shternbuch (*Teshuvot Vehanhagot* 1:155), however, suggests that one does not fulfill *mitzvot* by hearing a mixture of a natural voice and its electronic reproduction (also see Rav Doniel Neustadt’s *The Weekly Halachah Discussion*, pp. 563-565). He notes that these two noises sound identical, so one cannot distinguish between them and focus only on the natural sound. Consequently, Rav Shternbuch (1:743) questions whether *sheva berachot*, which require the presence of ten men, may be recited over a microphone, because often there are not ten men who hear the actual *berachot* clearly, without their sound mixing with their electronic reproduction. Rav J. David Bleich opposes using microphones at weddings, as the Gemara (*Rosh Hashanah* 27a) states that two sounds (*trei kalei*) cannot be heard at the same time. Indeed, at the wedding of Rav Bleich’s son, Rav Moshe Bleich, to Viva Hammer (in 1993), no microphone was used at the Chupah.

receiving a telegram that someone will recite a *berachah* at a certain time. Just as we would never think of reciting *amen* in the latter situation, so, too, a radio listener is so far removed from the *berachah*'s recitation that he should not answer *amen*. Rav Moshe Shternbuch (*Teshuvot Vehanhagot* 1:155) similarly rules that one should answer "*amen*" only when close enough to at least hear the natural voices of other people answering *amen* to the *berachah*, but not when hearing a *berachah* from extremely far away.

Not all halachic authorities agree with this assertion. Rav Moshe Feinstein (*Igrot Moshe, Orach Chaim* 4:91) rules that one should answer *amen* to a *berachah* recited on the radio (if it is a live broadcast) or on the telephone, because of a *safeik* (doubt). As we have already quoted from Rav Moshe, he was not sure whether a reproduced sound shares the status of a person's voice, so he rules that one should respond "*amen*" in case the *berachah* does share a natural voice's status.¹³

Conclusion

Under normal circumstances, most contemporary authorities (cited earlier) accept Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach's contention that electronically reproduced sounds do not suffice for *mitzvot* that require hearing a specific natural sound. Therefore, as a general rule, one should not use a microphone for any *mitzvot* that entail hearing an actual sound (with the possible exception of Torah reading, according to some authorities). However, one should consult a competent rabbi if an unusually pressing situation arises, as some authorities believe that performing *mitzvot* through electronically reproduced sound is preferable to not performing them at all.

Rav Moshe (*Teshuvot Igrot Moshe, Orach Chaim* 2:108) writes, "In general, we should forbid the introduction of microphones into synagogues to discourage people from being obsessed with new things, a

13. It would seem that Rav Moshe considers the recitation of an *amen yetomah* to be a rabbinic prohibition, so he felt we should recite "*amen*" in such a questionable situation. However, Rav Moshe does not explicitly address the issue of an *amen yetomah* in his responsum, so it is not clear if he thinks that any concern exists for an *amen yetomah* when one hears a *berachah* over a telephone or live radio broadcast. See also *Biur Halachah* (124 s.v. *Veyeish*), who implies that "*amen*" should not be recited when a doubt exist regarding whether it constitutes an *amen yetomah*.

regrettable fixation in modern American society.” Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook (*Or Ha’emunah, Chofesh Hamachshavah Veha’emunah*) expresses a similar sentiment, “So many spiritual problems that befall individuals and the world in general . . . can be attributed to disregarding all that is old for . . . everything new.”

Of course, we should not reject positive new phenomena. Rav Moshe and Rav Kook are trying to teach us to see the new with a critical eye, while remaining anchored in our glorious past and keeping an eye on the promise of the future.