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Bridgeport Scooter Business Motors Into Unorthodox Market

Orthodox Jews now have a friend on the Sabbath.

Bridgeport Township - based Amigo Mobility International Inc. has devised a scooter that will give Orthodox Jews, forbidden by faith from turning on electrical devices on the Sabbath, wheels on the holy day.

The "Shabbat" scooter - a name derived from the Hebrew word meaning Sabbath - is specially designed to keep users from switching circuits on or off.

Instead, the Amigo powers up and starts moving on its own when put into Sabbath mode.

Allan R. Thieme, president and founder of Amigo, said the scooter



MELANIE SOCHAN/THE SAGINAW NEWS

The Shabbat Amigo, designed and manufactured by Amigo Mobility International, Inc. in Bridgeport Township, features a switch that enables an Orthodox Jew to change the unit to Shabbat mode, allowing the person to use it on the Sabbath without breaking doctrine.

is the first of its kind in the Orthodox Jew market. Models already are selling in North America.

Within four months, Thieme plans to start selling them in the Holy Land.

"If it's right, people are going to come," Thieme said. "This is so right. You can feel it."

The company developed the Shabbat scooter in partnership with the Zomet Institute in Israel,

which advocates doctrine-friendly technology for Orthodox Jews. The institute inspects and certifies every chair to ensure that it is kosher.

Since producing its first Shabbat retail model in April 2004, Amigo International has sold about 10 scooters. Orders are in for 15 more.

KEEPING KOSHER

The problem: Orthodox Jews with motorized wheelchairs can't use electrical devices on the Sabbath.

The solution: A special wheelchair from a Bridgeport Township company.

The future: Holy Land sales will begin within four months.

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The Saginaw News

FROM THE
COVER

Scooter *Jewish law allows exceptions for people in need*

Officials estimate a market of about 800,000 Orthodox Jews in the United States and Israel.

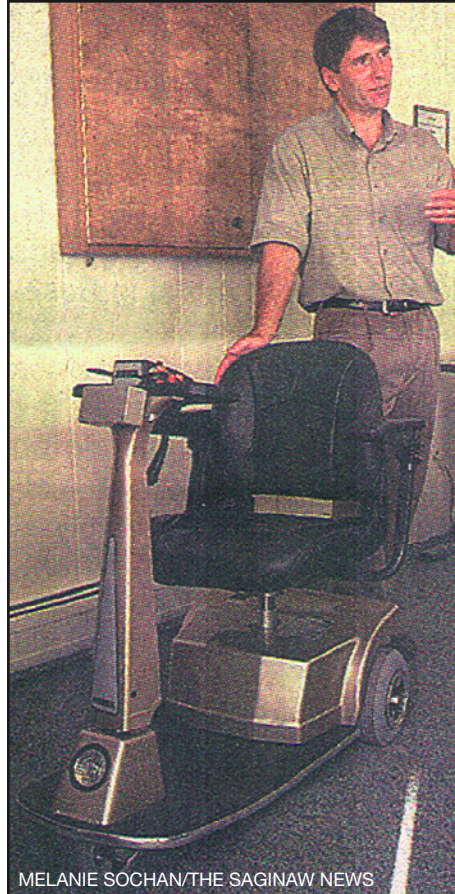
Under Jewish law, the faithful are forbidden from lighting or extinguishing fire on the Sabbath – a ban construed in modern times to apply to all electrical devices, including televisions, light bulbs and scooters.

The law does not punish indirect actions that produce the same effect, however. An Orthodox Jew may not blow out a candle on the Sabbath, but if he opens a window and the wind blows it out, then he has committed no sin.

The law does not allow Jews to intentionally carry out non-Sabbath activities under the principle, but it does provide exceptions for people in dire need. Health is among those needs, said Rabbi Yisrael Rozen of the Zomet Institute. While not life-threatening, physical disabilities are a legitimate need that may allow a person to use the principle of indirect action for driving a scooter on the Sabbath, he said.

Here's how the Shabbat Amigo operates: By switching the scooter into Sabbath mode, the user activates a timer that automatically sets the chair in motion.

The user may put the chair in reverse by flipping another switch, which again triggers a timing mech-



Mike LaBrake, Amigo Mobility International, Inc. director of operations, explains how the "Shabbat" Amigo works.

anism and changes the scooter's direction. In each case, the timer takes about 20 seconds to engage.

Consistent with Jewish law, the scooter uses no headlight on the holy day.

Designers plan to create an LED headlight that would provide light and yet satisfy the requirement.

But the acceptability of the scooter on the Sabbath isn't black

and white, said Rabbi Yisroel Weingarten of the Shabad House in Flint.

"It is a wonderful concept at first thought for somebody who absolutely needs it," he said. "But it really isn't so simple."

Weingarten said Jews first should consult their rabbis to determine if their conditions are severe enough and the need pressing enough to merit use of the scooter.

"It's not a definite no, and it's not a definite yes," he said. "It must be decided on a case-by-case basis."

The scooters, which took about a year to develop, cost about \$3,500 apiece. A traditional Amigo would cost about \$1,100 less.

Thieme said he is optimistic about the model's prospects on the market, saying the strength of the Amigo company is in its ability to design special products for those with disabilities.

"I don't think about failure," Thieme said. "I don't know what failure is."