

Opening Food Packages on Shabbos:

A. Introduction:

2. There are Six separate prohibitions related to opening sealed containers on shabbos.
3. Almost every type of packaging used today is subject to at least one of these prohibitions.
4. ***It is preferable that all food containers (e.g. bottles, cans, milk cartons, boxes, bags, etc.) be opened before shabbos.***

B. The Prohibition of “Koraya” - Tearing:

1. It is prohibited to tear any soft material (e.g. cloth, leather, cardboard, paper, plastic) in a constructive manner.
2. Tearing in a destructive manner is prohibited Rabbinically.
3. The rabbis made an exception to this rule and allowed one to tear in a destructive fashion in order to obtain an item needed for shabbos meals.
4. According to many opinions, It is forbidden to tear open a bag, wrapper, or cardboard box, even to remove food, unless the packaging is damaged in the process.

C. The Prohibition of “Asiyas Pesach” - Fashioning an Opening:

1. Preparing an opening in a sealed container, by way of which to remove the enclosed items is prohibited.

D. The Prohibition of “Makeh Be’Patish: Completing the Formulation of a Utensil:

1. Providing the finishing touch to any utensil is prohibited. It is figuratively known as ‘banging the final blow with the hammer.’
2. This activity often applies when unscrewing sealed bottle caps.

3. Most bottle caps are sealed, so that when unscrewed for the first time, the lower part of the cap breaks off and forms a ring around the bottle.
4. Alternatively, the lower part cracks and widens, enabling the cap to be fully removed.
5. The cap originally serves simply as a seal for the bottle and only when unscrewed and broken becomes a functional cap which can be removed and re-attached.
6. Many authorities rule that unscrewing the cap is forbidden under the category of “Makeh Be’Patish” as it serves to complete the formulation of the functional cap.

E. The Prohibition of “Mochek” - Erasing:

1. It is forbidden to tear words or pictures when opening any container, as it violates the prohibition of erasing
2. ***The Ashkenazic custom is to avoid ripping letters when opening a package on Shabbat, while the Sephardic custom is to be lenient in this issue.***

F. The Prohibition of “Mechateh” - Cutting or tearing to a specific size:

G. The Prohibition of “Soser” - Destroying a Utensil:

H. Background & Basic Principles:

1. **Tosefta:** “It is permitted on Shabbos to rip the skin (in olden times, skins were used to seal barrels) off the top of a barrel (as long as there is no intention of creating a spout).”
2. **Chazon Ish** explains that it is permitted because the ripping is done in a destructive manner. The person who opens the barrel has no interest in preserving the cover for later use. A Shabbos Labor done in a destructive manner is not considered a prohibited activity and is permissible even Rabbinically.

3. The Chazon Ish permits ripping off a salami wrapper, for example, since the wrapping is destroyed while it is being ripped.
4. According to this approach, it is permitted to rip something on Shabbos only if the packaging will be destroyed as it is being opened.
5. Other poskim explain the reason it is permitted to rip the skin off the barrel (or the wrapper off a package, etc.) is that ***the wrapper is totally “subordinate” to its contents***. Removing the wrapper is like removing a nutshell from a nut or unwrapping the binding which surrounds dates from the fruit—both of which are clearly permissible according to the Shulchan Aruch.
6. As long as one is tearing for the sake of removing contents from a package, it is permissible to tear.
7. According to this approach, it makes no difference if the package is destroyed in the process or not; even if the wrapper remains partially intact and is able to retain its contents, tearing is permitted.
8. Even according to this view, it is forbidden to tear the packaging with the intent of reusing at a later date, since in that case one is completing the formation of a utensil on Shabbos—Makeh b’patish.
9. Ramifications for opening cans on Shabbos: According to Chazon Ish when one opens a can one “completes the formation of a utensil.” Before the can was opened it was a “closed shell,” unusable as a utensil. After it is opened it becomes a container which can serve as a utensil. Since it was not destroyed in the process of being opened, it is forbidden to be opened on Shabbos.
10. In the view of yet other poskim, opening a can is not “completing the formation of a utensil” but rather “breaking an existing utensil” which is also prohibited on Shabbos.

11. The other poskim mentioned earlier do not consider opening a can as “completing the formation of a utensil” [nor do they consider opening a can as "breaking an existing utensil"]. In their view, since cans are generally discarded after their contents are removed, no usable utensil is created. Opening a can is merely like the peeling off of a “shell,” which is a permissible activity.
12. If the can is made from durable material which is meant to last and be reused in the future, then it is prohibited according to all poskim to open it on Shabbos, since none of the leniencies mentioned above apply.

I. Practical Applications:

1. Milk Cartons:

- opening a spout of a milk or orange juice carton violates the prohibitions of tearing and fashioning an opening.
- It is permissible to puncture the bottom of the container, rendering it unfit for further use, and to open the spout afterward, and to pour the contents into another utensil.

2. Bottle Caps:

- Bottle caps which lift off without breaking may be removed on Shabbos.
- Those which break when unscrewed may not be opened, as this violates ‘Makeh Be’Patish.’
- Unscrewing the cap at the perforated edge may be a violation of Mechatech, since the cap is being cut down to a specific size.
- Some poskim prohibit opening all bottle caps that leave a ring or perforate along the edge. Some consider it Mechatech while others consider it Makeh b’patish
- Some poskim permit opening plastic bottle caps but forbid opening the ones made from metal. This is because plastic caps are functional even before they are screwed onto a bottle (as opposed to metal ones which—

due to differences in technology—become operational only after being unscrewed from the bottle the first time).

- Some poskim permit opening all bottle caps, since in their opinion neither makeh b'patish nor mechatech is being violated.
- All poskim agree that it is forbidden to open bottle caps which are stamped with the date of production, etc., and the letter formation will be broken or erased when unscrewing the bottle cap.
- According to the stricter opinions, one who needs to open such a container should first puncture the cap (without cutting any printed words). The punctured cap may then be unscrewed. since it is no longer fit for use and can not be considered a 'complete utensil.'
- or better yet, puncture a wide hole in the cap and then pour the beverage through the punctured hole.

3. Cardboard Boxes: (e.g. containing cookies, paper goods, etc.)

- It is permitted to rip off the tape which seals this type of box.
- But it is forbidden to open such a box if the flaps are glued together tightly and must be separated to open. Corrugated boxes are often reused after their contents are removed, and one is particular to open them in a manner which is not destructive, so that it can be reused. This may be a violation of Tearing and Forming an opening.
- One is permitted to tear or cut open this type of box (without tearing printed words or pictures) only in a manner which damages the box.
- Most Poskim permit to open a cookie or cereal box or bag, even if one does not immediately empty out its contents and even if the box or bag is not destroyed in the process.

- It makes no difference if the box is made out of cardboard, plastic or paper, nor does it make a difference if the box contains food or something else such as medicine, clothing or toys.
- It is only prohibited to open a container which is made of strong, long-lasting material such as a barrel or a corrugated box which might be reused in the future.
- There are dissenting opinions who are stringent and forbid opening all boxes, unless it is done in a manner that damages the box without ripping letters.

4. Paper and Plastic Bags:

- Most Poskim permit to opening of bags, even if one does not immediately empty out its contents and even if the bag is not destroyed in the process
- There are dissenting opinions who are stringent and forbid opening all bags, as bags fall under the prohibition of tearing and forming an opening.
- Accordingly, one is permitted to tear or cut open a bag (without tearing printed words or pictures) only in a destructive manner.

5. Metal Cans: (e.g. tuna, soda, tomato juice, canned fruits)

- In the opinions of Rav S.Z. Auerbach & Rav Ovadya Yosef, it is permitted to open both a soda can or a tuna fish can on Shabbos. Makeh b'patish does not apply to any utensil which will be discarded after its contents are removed, even if the contents are not removed immediately but will remain in the can for some time. In addition, Mechatech does not apply when lifting off a tab from a can of soda or beer, since one is not aiming to make a tab of a certain size, but rather to lift the tab off in the easiest way possible, which is where the manufacturer perforated it.

- Other poskim forbid the opening of all cans on Shabbos for various halachic reasons—either because of Mechatech, Makeh b'patish or Soser.
- According to the stricter opinions, these may only be opened if: 1) the can is opened only halfway, and 2) the contents are removed immediately and the container discarded.

6. Packaging of wine bottles, coffee jars, candy bars, paper goods, sugar packets:

- It is permitted to rip off or tear a wrapper which surrounds wine or grape juice bottle caps, candy bars, freeze pops or any items necessary for Shabbos.
- It is permitted to rip off a seal that covers the contents of a container, such as the inside seal of a coffee jar or an aluminum foil seal on a yogurt container, etc.
- When tearing any packaging, one must be sure that no letters or pictures are torn.
- It is permitted to cut or tear between the letters of a word or between words.
- It is permitted to poke a hole and insert a straw into bags or boxes which contain beverages.
- It is permitted to uncork a wine bottle, as long as one does not break any letters.

7. Peel Off Seals:

- It is permissible to remove a protective plastic seal on yogurt containers, tubs of butter or cottage cheese, coffee jar, and wine bottles in the normal way.

8. Leben or yogurt cups:

- Sometimes come attached to each other and must be separated along a perforated line before they can be eaten individually
- Contemporary poskim debate whether or not it is permitted to separate attached yogurt or leben cups from each other.

- Some consider it a violation of Mechatech and Makeh b'patish while others hold it is permitted altogether
- NOTE: Even if one mistakenly opened a can or a bottle in a manner which is clearly prohibited, it is not forbidden to eat the food or beverage

“Tochein” - Grinding:

A. The Prohibition:

1. “Tochein” - grinding - is breaking down a substance into small particles.
2. The prohibition is not limited to grinding food into powder.
3. It includes any activity that reduces a large item into very small pieces.
4. Shredding, grating, and chopping are all forbidden.
5. Dicing or otherwise cutting a food item into **very small pieces** is also prohibited.
6. The precise definition of what constitutes ‘very small pieces’ is unclear.
7. Accordingly, one must refrain from cutting any food matter into pieces generally considered by people to be ‘very small’ even though these pieces could, in turn, be cut into yet smaller pieces. e.g. - one may not cut onions or the vegetables into what people would call ‘very small pieces.’

B. Mashing:

1. Mashing is also considered a form of grinding.
2. When the mashing results in a large piece being reduced to small, separate pieces (e.g. mashed potatoes), it is definitely forbidden.

3. Even where the mashing leaves a single, soft mass (e.g. a mashed banana), some Poskim rule that it is prohibited.

C. Utensils Which May Not Be Used:

1. It is forbidden to use any sort of utensil to reduce an item to small pieces.
2. This includes not only tools designed specifically for grinding, such as a grinder, masher, or grater, but even utensil commonly used in ordinary food preparation, such as a knife or fork.
3. Specialized grinding implements may not be used under any circumstances to cut up any sort of food item.
4. Certain exceptions do apply to ordinary cutting utensils.

D. Types of Food Subject to this Prohibition:

1. The prohibition applies only to foods that are produce of the earth, such as fruits and vegetables.
2. Meat, poultry, fish, eggs, cheese and all other foods that are not produce of the earth are not subject to this prohibition.
3. Even these foods may only be cut with ordinary utensils, such as a fork and knife.
4. Specialized bringing implements are forbidden with all foods.
5. “Ein Tochein Acher Tochein” - there is no prohibition against grinding something that was previously ground.
6. If a food was once ***ground finely***, (not just into small pieces) and was then reconstituted into solid, one is permitted to bring it up again - but only with ordinary utensils.