

A slew of new products are practical, innovative, and meet a Torah need.

by Shmuel Blicker

Everyone is familiar with those red, blue, and green kitchen items — towels, spatulas, etc. — that are color-coded for *fleishig*, *milchig*, and *pareve*. That was the start of what retailers have come to call “products for the mitzvah-observant.”

Then, along came KosherLamp, the ingenious invention by a rabbi in Toronto that captivated *frum* Jews worldwide. And now, with the combination of new technology and inexpensive manufacturing in China, a slew of new products have hit the stores that are practical, innovative, and meet a Torah need.

Shmuel Veffor is the man who invented KosherLamp. He knew that the Talmud defines *oneg Shabbos* as having light in the house so that people won't be bumping into furniture and into each other. But, he asked, how does one insure *Oneg Shabbos* when a sleep-over guest wants to get organized before going to bed? Or when one sibling wants to read, while the other is trying to fall asleep? Or when the baby gets up at 3 a.m. for a feeding?

Years earlier, Veffor had seen “light-boxes” installed over the patients' beds at Shaare Zedek hospital in Jerusalem. On Shabbos, the light source is blocked by sliding a metal plate, thus darkening the room without turning off the light.

So one afternoon, Veffor and his son visited their local Home Depot store, where they picked up an assortment of raw materials and rigged together a basic prototype for KosherLamp's simple but ingenious design: two independent cylinders, one inserted into the other. Each cylinder has its own “window”; when the inner cylinder is twisted, the “windows” are aligned and light comes out. When they are not aligned, the light is completely blocked.

A few days later at shul, Veffor mentioned his idea to a friend, Moshe (Lou) Orzech, who had ten years of experience designing and producing lamps. The two shook hands and became partners in the venture.

Veffor says that the partnership with Orzech was a match made in heaven. “Typically, if a rabbi would come up with an idea like this in his garage, he would never be able to carry it through to reality,” Veffor says. “There are complex issues of engineering the prototypes, choosing the right materials, selecting a factory in China, mold and sample fees, designing the packaging, import licensing, patent attorneys, etc. The costs are so high that most people would get stuck. To succeed, you really need to be multi-talented so you can do most of the work yourself.”

TECHNOLOGY FOR MITZVOS

With KosherLamp, there remained one technical hurdle: the lamp was not venting the heat from the bulb, presenting a potential fire hazard. So Veffler developed a zig-zag tunnel inside the lamp, taking advantage of a law of physics whereby heat and air can travel around corners, while light cannot.

Since the shade and the lamp are two separate pieces, major poskim including Rabbi Yosef Sholom Elyashiv of Jerusalem and Rabbi Dovid Cohen of New York ruled there is no problem of moving the shade on Shabbos.

The KosherLamp has been so successful that the company has issued new versions: a Regency model which has a bigger window and a brighter bulb and a "Teddy light" for kids. And a few other companies now produce smaller, less expensive units geared specifically for the Israeli market.

Let There be Light There's one issue of lights on Shabbos that is unfortunately all-too familiar: "Oops ... I accidentally shut the light off on Shabbos." This is especially problematic with children and guests who are unaccustomed to the idea of not touching light switches.

For years, the only option was to put tape on the switches. But this proved cumbersome and unattractive.

Three years ago, Isumer Margareten of Brooklyn had a brainstorm: Since light switch covers in America commonly have two metal screws, he came up with the idea of using the power of magnets to attach a "Shabbos switch cover" to a regular light switch.

It took Margareten two years from the idea stage to production. "When I was building the prototype, my main problem was finding a magnet that was strong enough, because those two screws provide only a small amount of metal to hold it on. Then I saw the toy BrainyMag, a super-strong magnetic construction set, and I knew I'd found the right magnet."

Magnattach, the magnetic Shabbos switch protectors, came onto the market about a year ago and have already sold over 50,000 pieces. "It's exciting to think about



how many acts of *chillul Shabbos* have been prevented," Margareten says.

And what about the problem of how to disengage the refrigerator light for Shabbos? A product called ShabboSwitch utilizes a slider, which extends to hold the switch down, allowing one to open the refrigerator without activating the light. And, as an added bonus, the manufacturer provides a free "Reminder Call" every *erev Shabbos* telling customers to activate their ShabboSwitch.

Shabbos Toothbrush Veffler, a creative wizard who has a list of forty ideas for new products, is putting the finishing touches on his latest invention that should hit the stores this summer.

"I understand some of the blocks that people have," says Veffler, who spent twenty years doing kiruv with Aish HaTorah in Jerusalem and Toronto. "One issue is the lack of a good option for brushing teeth on Shabbos. People would tell me, 'What do you mean there's a three-day Yom Tov, and I can't brush my teeth?!'"

So, Veffler set out to create the Shabbos Toothbrush, which addresses four halachic issues related to brushing teeth on Shabbos:

When a wet toothbrush presses against the teeth, many *poskim* consider it a problem of *Sechitah*, since the water is squeezed out of the densely-packed nylon bristles. The Shabbos Toothbrush is made with rubber bristles, which are far enough apart so that no liquid is absorbed or squeezed out of the bristles.

A second issue is that sharp nylon bristles of a regular toothbrush can cause gums to bleed. This is a problem of *Chavalah*, causing oneself to bleed on Shabbos. The soft, rounded rubber bristles of the Shabbos Toothbrush do not cause

bleeding. Says Veffler, "And in the rare case that sensitive gums bleed even with the Shabbos Toothbrush, you should really call your dentist!"

What about the toothpaste? Most *poskim* prohibit the use of regular toothpaste, since spreading cream or ointment is prohibited on Shabbos

under the *melachah* of *Memareach*. So, Veffler designed a special "Shabbos Toothwash," a concentrated liquid that avoids the problem of *Memareach* and is certified kosher by the OU.

And finally, there is the issue of *Uvda D'Chol*, weekday activity. Just as we walk differently on Shabbos and wear different clothes on Shabbos, so too the experience of brushing teeth should be different on Shabbos.

For starters, the Shabbos Toothbrush is labeled as a separate, distinctive toothbrush for Shabbos. But, beyond this, the brushing experience is different. "Because of the rubber bristles, the Shabbos Toothbrush feels more like a mouth-cleaning gum massage, quite different than if you've brushed your teeth," says Veffler.

Rabbi Yisrael Belsky of Torah v'Daas examined and approved the Shabbos Toothbrush but added a stipulation to prevent

such situations, most people rely on the *bidieved* approach of approximating the right direction and trying to direct his *kavanah* toward Jerusalem.

This problem gave rise to KosherCompass, a portable device which eliminates the need to guess which way to face when davening. KosherCompass is an ingenious system that is completely non-electric, with no computer chips, circuitry, or batteries. It actually consists of two compasses: first, there is a regular compass that always points north. But, this compass is cleverly hidden beneath the surface, and its magnetism actually provides the "power" to drive a second, upper compass, which always points to Jerusalem.

"It appears to defy the laws of nature," explains the inventor of KosherCompass, Moshe Abraham of Jerusalem. "It's as if some supernatural energy is turning it toward the *kedushah* of Jerusalem."

KosherCompass uses complex physics formulas and mathematic equations (called rhumb lines) to account for the latitude and distance from Jerusalem, as well as the curvature of the globe. KosherCompass comes with a list of worldwide cities, so you can calibrate it for your specific location.

Veffler says, "Hashem doesn't want us to suffer; He wants us to think about Him all the time. And the idea of *uvda d'chol* is that He wants us to think about Him more on Shabbos. So, if the Shabbos Toothbrush and increasing *oneg Shabbos* is helping to connect more to Hashem, then that's a positive thing. Whereas if it's helping someone forget that it's Shabbos, then that's a problem."

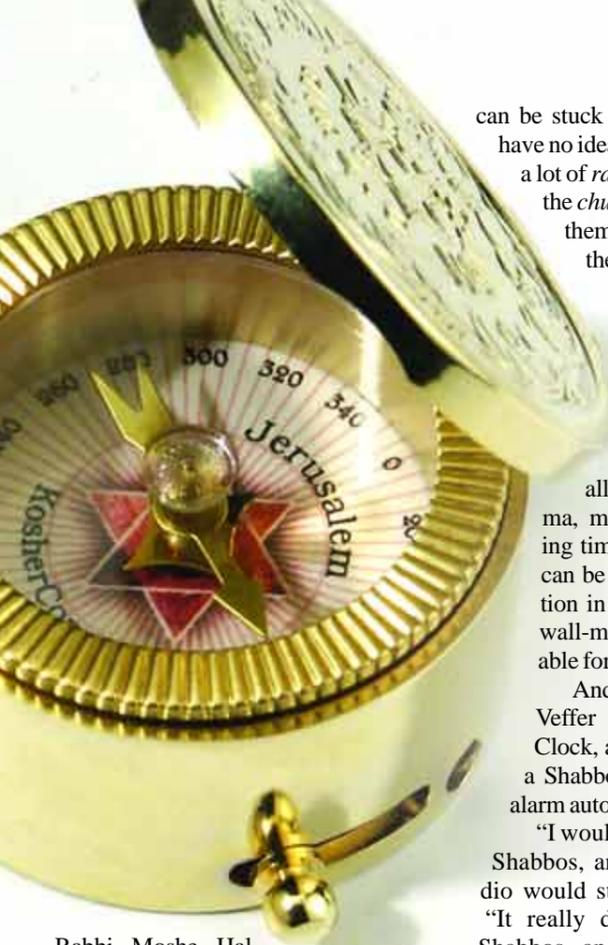
Space and Time We've all had the experience of being away from home as the final time for Minchah approaches and realizing that we don't know which direction is Jerusalem. In

such situations, most people rely on the *bidieved* approach of approximating the right direction and trying to direct his *kavanah* toward Jerusalem.

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Rabbi Moshe Halberstam, *ztz"l*; Rabbi Moshe Sternbuch, and Rabbi Yaakov Perlow have given written *haskamahs* for the KosherCompass.

In traveling to various Jewish communities worldwide, Abraham has found another, unfortunate, use for KosherCompass. "I've checked hundreds of shuls, and I'm amazed at how frequently the *aron kodesh* is not in the direction of Jerusalem," he says. "Sometimes it may be due to building regulations, but other times it's based on the assumption that the proper direction to daven is always toward the east, *mizrach*. But, really one should face toward Jerusalem, relative to where you are: In Johannesburg, you daven north, and in Moscow you daven south."

In the event that the Ark is not built facing Jerusalem, the *halachah* suggests that one should daven while standing in the direction of the Ark, so as not to show disrespect to the Ark and/or not to be contrary to the other congregants. Nevertheless, one should still turn his head toward the direction of Jerusalem.

Moshe Flumenbaum of the HaSofer shop in Jerusalem says, "I sell the KosherCompass to people who travel a lot. They

can be stuck in airports and hotels and have no idea which way is which. Also, a lot of *rabbanim* use it for setting up the *chuppah*. And we've even sold them to soldiers for use out in the field or in a tank."

Another new gadget that helps people daven properly is the Jewish Watch. This is a regular wristwatch that keeps both English and Hebrew dates and provides all the times for sunrise, Shema, midday, sunset, candlelighting times, the Omer count, etc. It can be programmed for any location in the world. There is also a wall-mounted version that is suitable for home or synagogue.

And, speaking of timepieces, Veffler has developed KosherClock, a digital bedside clock with a Shabbos mode that shuts off the alarm automatically after one minute.

"I would be in people's homes for Shabbos, and the weekday clock-radio would start blaring," says Veffler. "It really disturbed the sanctity of Shabbos, and we'd have to bury the alarm under blankets."

KosherClock actually has five separate alarm settings, meaning that, for example, you can set the first alarm to go off on Shabbos morning at 8 a.m. The second alarm could be set for 8:15 a.m., which has the effect of a snooze alarm. The third alarm could wake up your wife at 9 o'clock. The fourth alarm could be set at 4 p.m. for your afternoon *chavrusa*. And, if you tend to get carried away with your learning, set the fifth alarm to warn you that it's time to walk to shul for Minchah. And KosherClock has a Shabbos cover, a *heker*, so that people won't inadvertently turn off the clock if they're drowsy.

"I used to be afraid to take a nap on Shabbos afternoon," says Veffler. "I could never sleep comfortably, because I was always afraid that I wouldn't wake up in time for Minchah."

Consumer Education One of the biggest challenges in a kosher kitchen is preparing bug-free lettuce and fresh herbs. Depending on where you live, grains and rice can present the same challenge.

Professional *mashgichim* use large, expensive photographic light boxes to

help check for infestations. But, since this is not practical for a private kitchen, people endure neck and eye strain, wet sleeves, and sore arms from looking upward to check produce with a fluorescent light or sunlight.

To address this need, Kosher Innovations developed Bug Checker, a smaller, portable version of the light box used by professional *meshgichim*. While a regular light board has fluorescent bulbs and plugs into the electricity, Bug Checker uses rechargeable batteries and LED lights, so there are no bulbs to ever burn out.

"There is a growing awareness of the problem of bugs in food," says Veffler. "Especially in America, the changes in the pesticide laws have made bug problems more common than they used to be."

Another new product addresses the issue of how to leave a message on Shabbos. Everyone knows that on Shabbos it's *asser* to write letters or to put letters together to make words. But, in a case where the words already exist, the halachah allows them to be put together to make sentences.

Based on this, Kosher Innovations developed a Shabbos Message Board that comes with about 150 pre-printed words, each on an individual magnet. You can arrange the words on your

refrigerator in order to spell out a message, such as, "I'ma, heat up the kugel from the freezer, because we're having extra guests." (The magnets are no problem of *tofair/koreyah*, because their essential use is temporary.)

"Teenagers are always coming and going," says Veffler, who conceived and designed the Message Board. "People can sometimes panic and even send out search parties if they don't know where their kids are on Shabbos. It usually turns out that the child just went to his friend's house and had no way to leave a message."

With all these new products, the question could be asked: Doesn't this promote the idea of consumerism, which the *frum* community is working so hard to fight against?

"*Halavai* that people are spending money for better kashrus and *oneg*

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Shabbos," says Veffler. "If we can get people to spend as much money *lichvod mitzvos* as they do for the mundane items, maybe that will actually put things into better balance."

These products have also proven a great opportunity to educate people about halachah in a practical way. The light board comes with a manual on how to check vegetables for bugs. And the toothbrush package gives a brief overview of the halachic issues. Rabbi Reuven Spolter of the Young Israel of Oak Park (Michigan) has given entire *shiurim* on the KosherLamp and the KosherClock, examining all the relevant issues and halachic sources. And Veffler has plans to create a curriculum for schools, based around his products.

In the Kitchen Sometimes, technology actually creates new halachic problems. For example, electronics and safety features in kitchen appliances, like digital displays, lights, and beeps, have added complexity to life in the kosher kitchen.

To address these issues, General Electric, the world's sec-

ond largest company, worked with the Star-K certification agency to install a "Sabbath Mode" feature on over 100 models of GE refrigerators, ovens, and ranges. On refrigerators, the Sabbath mode disables the internal light and icemaker and switches the defrost heater to a fixed timer.

Amazingly, this Shabbos mode is not an add-on item but is a standard feature that can be utilized, if desired, but otherwise stays inactive and unnoticeable to the non-Jewish consumer.

What about someone who wants to put a *blech* on top of their electric range? Most modern ranges are equipped with a safety device that shuts down the oven's power after it has been operating consecutively for twelve hours. The GE Sabbath Mode overrides the twelve-hour shut-off, making it possible to use the range to keep cooked foods warm on Shabbos.

For those with gas stovetops, a halachic issue arises on Yom Tov. Although it is *mutar* to open the gas and then light it from an existing flame, you cannot turn the gas off. As a result, this causes a lot of wasted gas and also creates a danger of accidents with children running around. The issue is especially relevant on the second night of Yom Tov, when you can't start preparing for the evening *seuda* until nightfall, and you need to heat up large quantities of food quickly.

To address this need, the Zomet Institute in Israel invented a special gas timer, called Chagaz. This device attaches to the gas line and enables one to allocate gas for a certain amount of time, for example 30 minutes. "You can open more gas burners to a much higher flame than you normally would, because after thirty minutes the gas automatically shuts off," explains Dan Marans, the executive director of Zomet. "It not only saves gas, but it gives parents peace of mind."

Needs of the Disabled Zomet has made a great effort to address the needs of the mobility-disabled, people in wheelchairs and those unable to walk long distances. In previous generations, people who couldn't walk to



shul on Shabbos would be effectively cut off from the community, causing distress and severely limiting their *oneg Shabbos*.

About ten years ago, Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, *ztz"l*, asked Zomet to design an electric wheelchair for Shabbos. "He felt that if we could reduce the *melachah* to the greatest possible extent and limit it to a level of *d'rabbanan*, then the issue of *oneg Shabbos* could provide a *heter*, depending on the circumstances of each individual case," explains Marans.

With the ongoing guidance of Rabbi Yehoshua Neuwirth, author of *Shemiras Shabbos K'hilchasa*, Zomet was able to work out the halachic principle: The

wheelchair is turned on in an indirect manner (*gramma*) and immediately begins moving forward at a very slow speed. In this way, the electrical current is already "existing," so that when the person adjusts the wheelchair to move faster, it is only a case of "adding" to an existing current and the *chillul Shabbos* is minimized.

In recent years, electric scooters, which operate like a small golf cart, have become popular modes of transportation for mobility-challenged people. In designing a Shabbos version, Zomet eliminated the headlights, digital displays, and beeps, and added the same mechanical features as the Shabbos wheelchair.

But the question remained: Who would produce the actual scooters? "We contacted all the leading American scooter companies," says Marans, "and many of them wouldn't even speak with us because of the relatively low market potential. But, to their credit, the Amigo scooter company agreed to modify their existing product. They felt that from a human welfare perspective, it was the right thing to do."

Today, Zomet produces about 100 "Shabbos Scooters" a year. They manufacture a special electronic card that goes into the scooter, and then Amigo installs it at their plant near Detroit. Zomet then sends an engineer from New York to check each unit.

"You can't imagine the difference this makes in people's lives," says Marans. "One eight-year-old wrote me, 'Until I had your scooter, I felt like a rock watching Shabbos pass me by.' Another girl was using one of our Shabbos wheelchairs and told me how excited she is to now be able to go outside and jump rope with her friends. I asked her: 'How can you skip rope in a wheelchair?!' She answered: 'I can't. But, at least I can be there to twirl the rope.'"

So, what's in store for the future of innovative kosher products?

Veffler is currently working on six new products and says that people are coming to him all the time with ideas for new products. "We send out an NDA (non-disclosure agreement) that we will hold their idea in confidence," he says. "For example, someone recently contacted us with a product idea, and it turns out that we had been pursuing the same idea for the past two years. I had a design on paper but, in trying to design a working prototype, I ran into a technical problem. I spoke with engineers, and they couldn't solve the problem. So I told this man, 'Why don't you figure out how to solve this problem, and then we can move forward as partners.'"

Veffler says the definition of a good product is something that satisfies a practical, everyday need. "And I figure if I need it," says Veffler, "then others probably do too." ■