

What Alexa Can Teach Us About Teshuva

by Rabbi Yisroel Casen

“Alexa, turn on the light!”

“Hey Siri, what time is it currently in Tashkent?”

Voice-activated assistants such as Alexa and Siri use artificial intelligence and natural language processing to respond to spoken requests. After detecting a wake phrase such as “Alexa” or “Hey Siri,” the device activates its microphone and sends the recorded command to cloud servers for analysis. Machine-learning systems then interpret the request and carry out the appropriate task, whether answering a question, playing music, controlling a smart device, or setting a reminder.

The Halachic Question

We know that voice-activated devices such as Alexa may not be used on Shabbos. The precise reason, however, requires clarification. A conventional microphone presents an obvious concern: the user’s voice directly triggers the microphone’s amplification. With Alexa, by contrast, the voice itself is not visibly amplified or otherwise modified. Instead, the spoken command prompts the device to perform a separate task, such as turning on a light.

This raises two distinct questions:

1. Does issuing the voice command itself create a Shabbos concern?
2. Even if the command itself is permitted, is the melacha subsequently performed by the device attributed to the person who gave the command?

Rav Moshe’s Ruling

Rav Moshe Feinstein, writing well before the development of artificial intelligence and voice-activated technology, notes that if such technology were ever created, its use on Shabbos would be prohibited (Yoreh De’ah I:173).

The precise basis of this ruling, however, requires clarification. Was Rav Moshe concerned only with the act of activating a microphone by voice, or also with the melacha ultimately performed by the device?

Concerns Regarding Microphone Use

Elsewhere (Orach Chaim IV:84), Rav Moshe prohibits microphones on Shabbos for several reasons:

- Creating amplified sound may constitute boneh—creating or building something new.
- Speaking into a microphone increases the electrical current drawn by the device.
- Even if the microphone was connected before Shabbos, its use may lead observers to assume that it was connected on Shabbos, creating a concern of maris ayin.
- Microphone use may fall within the prohibition associated with musical instruments, because a user may come to repair or adjust the device.

Of these concerns, only the increase in electrical current appears directly relevant to Alexa: the device presumably draws more power when activated than while idle. Yet Rav Moshe's ruling may possibly be based on a broader concern—not merely the operation of a microphone, but the melacha the device performs in response to the user's command.

The key question, then, is whether melacha triggered by a voice command is attributed to the person who issued it. Is the result too indirect to be considered his action? Is there a precedent in Divrei Chazal for treating an outcome produced by speech as the speaker's own act?

The Gemara in Bava Metzia 90b records a machlokes between Rav Yochanan and Reish Lakish concerning a person who prevents an animal from eating through his voice. The Torah prohibits muzzling a working animal; it must be allowed to eat from the grain with which it is working.

In the Gemara's case, the animal is not physically muzzled. Rather, whenever it bends down to eat, the person tending it shouts and frightens it away from the food.

Rav Yochanan holds the person culpable for 39 lashes because shouting/speech is considered a maaseh. (Malkos, or lashes, are only meted out for sins involving a physical act, or maaseh.)

Reish Lakish disagrees, maintaining that speech alone does not constitute an act.

The Rambam (Hilchos Sechirus 13:2) rules like Rav Yochanan and holds the individual culpable. The Maggid Mishneh asks how this accords with the Rambam's general view that speech is not a maaseh. He explains that speech alone ordinarily does not constitute an act warranting lashes. Here, however, the shouting produces a tangible result by preventing the animal from eating. Because that result is attributed to the speaker's words, the entire process is considered a maaseh.

Applying the Principle to Alexa

This discussion provides a compelling precedent for the Alexa shailah, where a spoken command causes the device to perform melacha on the user's behalf.

Because the user's words produce a direct, tangible result, the resulting melacha may be attributed to the speaker rather than treated as merely indirect. In this respect, asking Alexa to perform a melacha resembles the Gemara's case, in which shouting at the animal is considered equivalent to physically muzzling it.

From Alexa to Teshuva

This principle may help explain a perplexing halacha. In his introduction to Hilchos Teshuva, the Rambam writes that fulfilling the mitzvah of teshuva requires two elements:

1. Abandoning the aveira and resolving not to repeat it.
2. Verbally confessing through vidui.

The Pri Megadim (Introduction, section 3, no. 10) adds that one who does not recite vidui has not fulfilled the mitzvah of teshuva. Yet this requires explanation: if a person sincerely abandons the sin and resolves to avoid it in the future, why is verbal confession indispensable?

Vidui Gives Teshuva Tangible Form

Noble intentions remain thoughts until they are given expression. By confessing wrongdoing through vidui as part of teshuva, a person transforms an inner resolve into a concrete act and creates a new spiritual reality.

That resolve may later weaken, and the person may return to earlier behavior. Even so, the mitzvah of teshuva is not retroactively undone. Because the individual expressed it through vidui, which led to a concrete, albeit temporary, change of behavior, we consider this a true act of Teshuva.

Without vidui, teshuva would remain an internal thought that could simply be reversed. When words produce a tangible change, however, that change is attributed to the speaker as a maaseh Teshuva. Later events cannot erase the reality that was created.

May we all be zoche to perform the mitzvah of Teshuva on Yom Kippur in a
meaningful way.
Gmar Chasima Tova.

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