

Splitting Ventilators

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PHYSICIANS IN NEW YORK have asked about the halachic permissibility of splitting ventilators. This is a technique that has been done in New York hospitals whereby, due to a lack of ventilators, in some circumstances, two patients who require a ventilator may be attached to a single ventilator, but in so doing, one patient may cause harm to the other.

Since there is no other option, and we must save as many lives as possible, this is permissible. In medicine, there are many times when caring for one patient negatively impacts another, but as long as this impact is unintentional, and not direct or definite, one may continue providing such care.

For example, we know that the more monitoring and medical attention paid to a given patient, especially the critically ill, the more likely they are to survive. Should we therefore refuse to accept more patients to the intensive care unit, because in so doing, the newly arrived patient will divert medical attention from patients already there? Every day, recovering patients are sent out of

the intensive care unit to make room for more critically ill patients.

The *Chazon Ish*¹ goes further and says that if an arrow is headed towards a group of people and it will likely kill several of them, and one can deflect the arrow towards a smaller group where fewer will die, one is obligated to do so, even though he is causing the death of people who were initially in no danger at all, since his intention and action is one of **saving** and not **killing**. It is an act of mercy, not cruelty. (According to Rav Dovid Frankel, a student of the *Chazon Ish*, the question arose after an incident in which a driver lost control of his brakes and was headed towards a group of people, and quickly swerved to avoid them but accidentally killed a bystander, and he came asking how to do *teshuvah*).

Certainly, in our case, where in the majority of cases both patients will survive and be cured, one should split ventilators, hoping that neither of them is harmed, even though added harm is possible.

1 *Yoreh Deiah, siman 69,1.*

These essays were written during various stages of the coronavirus pandemic. Facts and knowledge about this virus change daily. Torah is forever.