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Kosher scooters help Jews keep faith

Mich. company's device gets disabled Orthodox followers to synagogue

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Wixom --Michael Balkin observes traditional Jewish practices, but walking to services has been difficult for the past 20 years.

A worsening neurological disorder has made walking more than a few steps nearly impossible for the 59-year-old West Bloomfield resident. But in recent years, things have improved for Balkin, thanks to a motorized -- and perfectly kosher -- scooter.

"Now I'm able to do whatever and go to Shul and do whatever I want and how I want," said Balkin.

Orthodox Jews don't drive vehicles or use anything motorized during the Shabbat, or Sabbath, which lasts from sundown Friday to nightfall Saturday. But a Bridgeport company has rolled out specially designed scooters that allow Orthodox Jews to follow their beliefs and still make it to the synagogue.

Amigo Mobility International Inc. began making the Shabbat-approved scooters five years ago. It uses a module manufactured in Israel and certified by the Zomet Institute, an Israeli nonprofit that specializes in electronics that meet Halakha, or Jewish religious law.

The scooters, which cost \$2,500 to \$3,500, are sometimes covered by insurance. Amigo sells the scooters at a store in Wixom the company opened two years ago to meet the needs of the estimated 7,000 Orthodox Jews in Metro Detroit.

Scott Chappell, the manager of the Amigo Mobility Center on Wixom Road, said the company was approached by the local Orthodox Jewish community for a scooter model that could help homebound individuals to be able to get to the synagogue during Shabbat.

"It's designed in such a way that on Fridays and Saturdays, it's a special mode and during the week it is a standard mode," Chappell said.

The Shabbat-approved scooter carries a special black-and-white sticker that has to be displayed at all times so others know it meets Halakha law, said Chappell. "(Others) will see that it has been certified by Zomet."

Balkin said he has used the Shabbat-authorized scooters during his trips to Israel. He was happy that he was able to get one in the United States. Deborah Balkin says she's glad that the scooter has given her husband more mobility so that "he doesn't have to stay home on Shabbat."

"He can go to services," said a smiling Deborah Balkin. "We can walk to a friend's house on Shabbat. It keeps him from being isolated. One of the worst things for a person who is ill is to be isolated."

Iris Rosen, who is not Orthodox, but uses a scooter to get around, said she is happy to see the technology come to the United States.

"It's amazing. It's proven. It's approved by the Orthodox community. It's definitely, definitely a good thing," said Rosen, a Farmington Hills resident.

Rabbi Jason Miller, who has been studying the use of technology and Judaism, said the technology has allowed Balkin and others to be more physically comfortable and practice their faith "without violating the tradition."

"We should all see this as a benefit to our community no matter where you are on the observance spectrum," said Miller, also the rabbi of Oakland County-based Tamarack Camps and the spiritual leader of Congregation T'chayah in Oak Park.

"There are many rabbis out there who would give him permission to drive to synagogue on the Sabbath but on a psycho-spiritual level for someone with his observance patterns they would still be uncomfortable with this leniency," said Miller.

"His (scooter) allows him to be part of the community on the Sabbath and to feel comfortable in knowing that he hasn't compromised his observance.

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