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For Jewish Sabbath, Elevators That Do All the Work

By ELIZABETH A. HARRIS

“Don’t get in that one!” a woman cried, standing in front of an open elevator door, a quiet toddler in her arms.

But why? Was this elevator dangerous?

Well, no. But in a city where perhaps the dirtiest word of all is “wait,” it was close enough.

“It’ll stop on like every floor,” said the woman, Shira Stember, standing in the lobby of a Seward Park co-op building on the Lower East Side. That door, she explained, led into a Shabbos elevator.

From sundown on Friday until the sun sets on Saturday, Orthodox Jews refrain from certain activities, including pushing elevator buttons, following a restriction that comes from a [prohibition against igniting fires](#). So in some buildings, elevators are programmed to stop automatically on every floor during the Sabbath. That way, observant Jews can hop right in and, eventually, get where they are going.

These systems, long a fixture in hospitals as well, can be lifesavers for the elderly and the disabled, and they allow the observant to live on floors that are too high to hoof it. But they also slow down elevator traffic. A lot.

“It’s annoying!” one Seward Park resident howled.

“They take forever!” said Michael Bolla, a managing director at Prudential Douglas Elliman and an observant Jew who prefers to take the stairs. “For-e-ver!”

So in recent years, some buildings have adopted speedier versions: an express Sabbath elevator, stopping only at specific floors requested in advance by observant families.

“It speeds things up,” said Jeff Katz, a sixth-floor resident who was riding one of the elevators in Seward Park on a recent Friday evening, his hands folded in front of him and a smile on his face. “It’s one of the attractions of living in these buildings.”

In addition to Seward Park, a four-building co-op with a high concentration of Orthodox Jewish

residents, different versions of such express elevators, which Jacob Goldman, a prominent broker on the Lower East Side with LoHo Realty, refers to as smart elevators, can be found in a few new buildings around Manhattan, even some of the most high-end.

At 535 West End Avenue, for example, a building where the cheapest apartment available at the moment is a five-bedroom listed at \$8.5 million, one of its two elevators switches to Shabbos mode on Friday evening. But instead of creeping up from the lobby one floor at a time, it shoots up to the penthouse and then works its way down.

This arrangement gives the shortest ride up to those on the highest floors, who would have the toughest trek on the stairs. Not necessarily coincidental, it also gives the speediest trip to those who have paid the most.

Another Upper West Side building, the Heritage at Trump Place, at 240 Riverside Boulevard, employs a still snazzier express service. On the Sabbath, one of its six passenger elevators stops at prerequested floors, but then it goes into regular service mode for five minutes before doing another round of Shabbos stops.

“They want the view,” Gilad Azaria, a Prudential Douglas Elliman broker who has sold apartments at 240 Riverside, said of the residents. “But 15 floors is a lot of steps.”

While it is impossible to know how many New York City buildings have a Shabbos elevator, brokers say they are not common. And Rabbi Elie Weinstock, who lives on the 11th floor of his building, says most people make do without — sometimes by jumping into a regular elevator and hoping their fellow passengers are heading to a floor near their own destination.

“I have hitched before, and I have seen it done,” Rabbi Weinstock said. “Wherever they take you is going to be closer than you were before.”

More reliably, said Rabbi Weinstock, an associate rabbi at Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun, many doormen know where the observant people live and will push the appropriate button for them. But it is not acceptable, he said, to walk up to the doormen on a Saturday morning and ask them to do so. (Some rabbis also do not consider Shabbos elevators to be acceptable.)

“The worst thing in the world is when someone new starts” as a doorman, Rabbi Weinstock said. “Someone will say, ‘I’m going up to 27,’ and they’ll hear, ‘that’s nice.’ ”

If finding a Shabbos elevator is a priority, however, the listings on a real estate Web site are not much help.

Many brokers say they leave Shabbos elevators off their advertisements because they are concerned about violating the Fair Housing Act, which prohibits discrimination against buyers and renters based on race, religion, disability or having children. Apartments must be marketed to the

general public, and saying there is such an elevator could likely be interpreted as targeting a single group and excluding others. But primarily, brokers say, not many people use these elevators, and their speed, like kosher molasses, might turn people off — even some of the folks for whom they are intended.

“It’s still slow,” said Juda Engelmayer, an 11th-floor resident and Sabbath observer who was on the Seward Park board when the shift was made to smart elevators, about 10 years ago. “Even I sit there and get impatient.”

In his complex, Mr. Engelmayer said, the change to express service came in response to a growing proportion of secular residents. According to building management, the number of stops the 12 Shabbos elevators made dropped to 114 floors, down from 240.

Two of Seward’s neighboring co-ops, Hillman Housing and East River Housing, also have Shabbos elevators, but they still stop on every floor.

Heshey Jacob, the general manager for those buildings, responded like a protective parent when queried about the relative smarts of his elevators, saying, “People like to make recommendations, but when you tell them it costs a million dollars, there’s nobody home.”

Seward Park switched to express during an overhaul of its elevator systems, and Mr. Jacob said he expected his buildings to follow suit in the next few years.

But despite the occasional anxious toe-tapping, Mr. Engelmayer said he was glad his building kept the Shabbos option for those who needed it, including some members of his own family.

“The dog likes the Shabbos elevator, too, because she ain’t walking up the stairs,” Mr. Engelmayer said of his 9-year-old black Labrador mix, Jessie. “Back in 2004 when we had the blackout, she did it, though she didn’t appreciate it. Today,” he added, a tinge of sadness in his voice, “she probably couldn’t do it.”