

Top Ten Teachings from Berachot 2A

1. **What is the Oral Law?** I once heard Moshe Idell quote someone, saying the Bible is the book of “what,” the Oral Torah is the book of “how,” and Kabbalah is the book of “why.” So, appropriately, the Mishna begins with the word “when.” The Torah tells us that we must recite some part of the text of the Torah in the evening and in the morning, but does not define this obligation. The Talmud comes to tell us exactly how it must be done, starting with the proper time.
2. **How does a rabbi talk to his children**, especially when he disagrees with his contemporaries? There is a debate in the Talmud about when one can recite the evening Shema. The Mishna does not have a dispute about the earliest time, but the rabbis debate the latest time. Rabbi Eliezer says you must recite the Shema in the first third of the night. The majority of the rabbis rule that you have until chatzot (Halachic midnight). Rabban Gamliel has a different opinion, saying you can recite the Shema until dawn. Then the Talmud relates a story: Rabban Gamliel’s children were at a wedding and came home after chatzot, having not yet recited the Shema. They knew that their father thought even until dawn was fine but that the majority of rabbis disagreed with him, so they asked him what they should do. He told them they were obligated to say Shema, not just because of his personal ruling, but because even the other rabbis agreed with him. They ruled that Shema must be said before chatzot not because that’s the absolute halacha, but as an extra protection so that people would not wait too long and then forget. We see from this story how important it is for children to talk to their parents, even when they feel that their parents’ opinion are not necessarily correct, and for parents to explain alternate viewpoints to their children and not feel threatened if the children look up to other rabbis.
3. **Rabbis are protectors of the Law.** They often create safeguards to prevent us from violating Biblical law. There is extended discussion about how the rabbis are allowed to create additional restrictions when the Torah has a specific prohibition against adding or subtracting laws. The main answer is that as long as one doesn’t claim that the safeguard is Biblically mandated, then it’s not really adding. The Ishbitzer Rebbe explains that the safeguards are just that – a fence, not the thing itself. That’s why it’s possible for a later Beit Din greater in numbers and in wisdom to undo an earlier decree. Safeguards are needed because of the challenges that history and life present us, and the rabbis should be aware in each generation what these challenges are.
4. **Rashi vs. Tosfot.** Rashi was born in 1040 and died in 1104 in the Champagne region of what is now France. His three daughters all married rabbis and his grandchildren were great scholars. Several of his grandchildren were among the Baalei Hatosfot, a group of rabbis who lived over a period of hundreds of years who offered their own commentary on the Talmud. The most famous of the Tosfot was Rashi’s grandson Rabbeinu Tam. Rashi and the Tosfot had many differing opinions, and the first one recorded in the Talmud is here on this first page. Rashi says that what we’re talking about in this Mishna is the Shema that we say before we go to bed, not the Shema that we say during Maariv. He believes the actual Biblical requirement is to say Shema before going to bed, and the only reason we also say it during Maariv is that the Shemonah Esrei is Rabbinic and it would be inappropriate to stand up to pray without first saying words of Torah. Tosfot disagrees strongly with Rashi, believing the main Shema to be the one recited in the Maariv prayer.
5. **The concept of time.** R’ Tzadok Hakohen of Lublin, a disciple of the Ishbitzer Rebbe, explains that time represents the essence of change. Every minute is a new moment; the sun sets and

the stars come out. Beyond the halachic qualifications of what defines something like “evening,” the heart of it is that it’s a new time. Evening and morning represent changes in the world, and each of those times asks us to reorganize ourselves with our relationship with the Divine. Morning represents light, when things are going well. Evening represents struggle and hardship, but is also a time when the stars are shining and the seeds of salvation are growing. Time is just not about the physical state of the world, but about our spiritual and emotional relationship to it.

6. **Where does the Mishna jump out from?** The author of the Mishna asks a question about when to say Shema. Why is he asking this question? Because there is a Biblical verse, “when you lie down [in the evening] and when you get up [in the morning],” and that verse needs to be explained. The goal of the Mishna is to define how to do what the Bible requires, and so it begins with a Biblical statement and then delves into the details and parameters of the obligation introduced by that statement. The rabbis considered it very important to connect the Rabbinic law to the Biblical, so the Mishna has to be based on a Biblical precept, a commentary on the Bible, or an analysis of how to practice the Biblical precepts and their safeguards. Though sometimes tenuous, that connection to Biblical law is always there throughout the Mishna.
7. **We begin with night.** Though it is mostly the book of “how,” the Talmud is also concerned somewhat with “why.” So why do we start in the evening and not the morning? First, because of the verse, “when you lie down and when you get up.” But also because that’s how the world was created. “And it was evening and it was morning, day one.” The Zohar on Lech Lecha, when Avraham leaves his homeland, says that the framework for every answer has to be a question, and the framework for every journey has to be something that is missing in you. Avraham had to leave home because there was something he needed to find. An answer cannot be found before a question is asked. Light can only follow from darkness. The Torah could only be given only after the dark night of the Egyptian enslavement. Therefore, we begin with the evening, the time of question, and then proceed to morning, the time of answer.
8. **Most authorities hold that it is a Biblical mitzvah to recite the Shema twice a day.** But is that one mitzvah to say the Shema twice or two distinct mitzvot? Maimonides sees it all as one mitzvah. Nachmanides, among others, sees it as two. Perhaps Maimonides sees the need to fill in a cycle of night and day to fully relate to G-d’s unity, both in good times and in bad.
9. **We start off with a Biblical requirement to say the Shema, and the rabbis immediately start talking about the blessings** that they instituted to go before and after it. Why? This is the nature of the Talmud and our tradition. We take a Biblical law and we bracket it with Rabbinic requirements, such as blessings. The Talmud wants to make a link between Biblical and Rabbinic law. So it’s important to anchor the whole tractate in a Biblical requirement, reciting the Shema, and then extend that, first to the blessings surrounding the Shema and then to blessings in general.
10. **What is the first mitzvah for a boy who becomes a bar mitzvah?** The evening Shema. Because the day begins in the evening, and therefore the evening Shema is the first mitzvah you do on any day.