

Talmud Brachot Top Ten Teachings, Daf 10

- 1. Rabbi Meir and his wife, Bruriah.** Rabbi Meir was a Tanna, a contemporary of Rabbi Akiva. The Talmud states that Rabbi Meir had to run to Bavel because of an incident with Bruriah, but never specifies what that incident was. Rashi says Bruriah objected to the statement by the rabbis that “*nashim da’atim kalos*,” women are easily influenced, and Rabbi Meir tested her by sending one of his students to try to seduce her. At first she rebuffed the student, but after many attempts she acquiesced. When she realized what she had done she killed herself, and Rabbi Meir had to leave out of shame. There are several variations of this story. It might have been Rabbi Meir pretending to be his student, and it might be that Bruriah didn’t actually kill herself but just became very depressed. Rav Elyashiv says that Rashi’s story didn’t actually come from Rashi but perhaps from one of his students or friends. The opinion of one of the Geonim was that the reason Rabbi Meir had to flee had something to do with the political situation with Rome. This actually makes more sense in context, because it says there were wanted signs with Rabbi Meir’s picture all over Rome, and Bruriah’s sister was captured and he rescued her. But later Rabbinic legend aside, it is clear in the Talmud that Bruriah was a scholar of great note who taught her husband and other scholars lessons. A story is told that some gang types in the neighborhood were giving Rabbi Meir a hard time. He prayed that they should die. Bruriah said to him, “What are you thinking? Is it because King David says in Psalms, ‘May the sinners perish’? It doesn’t say ‘sinners,’ but rather ‘sins.’ Also, the end of the verse says, ‘and the wicked are no longer.’ If the sinners were destroyed, this would be redundant. It must not mean the sinners should die, but that they should no longer sin. Instead of praying for their deaths, you should pray for mercy for them to repent and no longer be wicked.” Rabbi Meir accepted this and prayed for compassion for the people, and they did do teshuva. There are two ways of dealing with enemies. Rabbi Meir took the more masculine, aggressive approach, praying for the thugs to die. Bruriah took the softer, more feminine approach, believing that people could change and praying for their redemption rather than their deaths.
- 2. Five stages of gratitude, starting from the womb.** The verse in Mishlei says, “She opens her mouth in wisdom, and the words of Torah are upon her lips.” Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai explains: “Who was King Solomon referring to? His father, King David, who went through five stages and at each stage he sang the praise of G-d.” What five stages is Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai referring to? The first stage is a fetus in the womb. For a fetus, everything is an interior experience. A fetus’s mouth and nose do not even open, because everything it needs comes directly from its mother. In a way, many people are never really “born.” They remain forever in an environment that gives them everything they need to exist, and they never “cut the umbilical cord” to fully become themselves. In Kabbalah that’s called the *nefesh*, the state of just being alive. Even with just this kind of existence, one must praise G-d. The second stage: King David was born, and he looked at the stars and the constellations. The commentaries explain that this is referring to the zodiac signs of the date and time he was born. According to one opinion in the Talmud, there was a belief in astrology having some limited influence over personality. But even if your life is determined by the stars, at some early stage in your development you must still praise G-d just because you exist. The third stage: he nursed from his mother’s breast, and he looked at her and sang songs of gratitude. The breast is near the heart, and it is connected to the concept of *bina*, understanding. King David benefited from that understanding when he nursed from his mother. The fourth stage: he saw the downfall of the wicked. Unlike Bruriah, King David was a warrior who rejoiced at the downfall of his enemies. The fifth stage: he looked at the day of death and praised G-d. One commentary says that death reminds us that *techiyas hameisim* will come, and that’s what King David was singing about. These five stages of life correspond to five levels of

the soul: *nefesh*, just plain existence; *ruach*, the emotionality, which is influenced by astrology; *neshama*, understanding; *chaya*, free choice; and *yechida*, which doesn't actualize while you're alive.

3. **G-d is an artist, but not like a human artist.** A human artist can make a beautiful creation but cannot imbue it with a spirit or soul. But G-d can. He makes a painting within a painting. He creates an animal or a person with all its internal organs and gives it a spirit. When Chana, the mother of Shmuel, was singing her song of praise to G-d, she said, "and there is no rock like our G-d." What does that mean, no rock like our G-d? Read the word *tzur* (rock) as *tzayar* (artist). There is no artist like our G-d, because He puts a soul into everything He creates. Humanity is now developing and improving artificial intelligence. But can we create a soul? What is a soul? It is what makes us alive, but it's more than that. We have free will, the ability to make our own choices and become individuals. Is that something that we can program in AI? We'll just have to see as time goes on.
4. **Another interpretation of the five stages of life.** We praise G-d because of five attributes that we have in common. 1. Just like G-d fills the whole world, the soul fills the whole body. There are two elements to this: the soul fills all of the body equally, and there is a level of soul that particularly fits every part of the body. G-d fills the world the same way. He transcends everything, but also fits specifically into individual parts. 2. Just like G-d sees but isn't seen, the soul sees but isn't seen. Neither can be sensed or scientifically defined or tested (at least for now). 3. Just like G-d sustains the whole world, the soul sustains the body. The world would cease to exist without G-d constantly re-creating it, and the body would die without the soul. 4. Just like G-d is pure, the soul is pure. The soul can get blemished by our sins, but its essence is pure. 5. Just like G-d sits in a room within a room, the soul sits in a room within a room. The person who has these five attributes should praise G-d Who has the same five attributes. There's an idea that G-d gave us 248 positive commandments corresponding to the 248 parts of the body. Our bodies, which house our souls, are given the Torah, which somehow affects the body and soul and their Divine purpose in actualizing our spiritual selves.
5. **King Chizkiyahu used personal prophecy to make halachic decisions.** King Chizkiyahu fell ill, and the prophet Isaiah visited him. Isaiah told the king to get his affairs in order because he was going to die and not live - even in the next world. Chizkiyahu asked why, and Isaiah told him it was because he didn't have children. Chizkiyahu said he didn't have children because he'd had a prophecy that if he had children they would be wicked. Isaiah scolded him, "These secrets, what do you have to do with them? What you're commanded to do, do, and whatever G-d will do, He will do." The king had thought based on his prophecy that starting a family wouldn't be the right thing. But that's not how it works. We have commandments to follow, and it's not up to us to decide if following them is right or wrong.
6. **King Chizkiyahu did 6 things, and the rabbis agreed with three and disagreed with three.** What did they agree with? He hid the book of healing, ground up the copper snake from the time of Moses, and took out his father's corpse on a bed of rope instead of giving him a proper kingly burial (because his father was an idolater). What was the book of healing? The commentaries learn from this that there was an ancient book of healing, in which you could look up any ailment and find the cure. This book was so powerful that people stopped praying. There's no need to pray to G-d for healing when there's a book that can cure all your ills. It is also possible that the remedies in this book were too much like magic, and that people were putting their faith in the book instead of in G-d. But the rabbis wanted people to pray and have faith in G-d, so they were glad that the book was hidden.
7. **Elisha and the Shunamite woman.** The Shunamite woman wanted to create a special place for the prophet. What exactly did she give him? It might have been a loft that she divided into

sections, or perhaps she added a ceiling to an open rooftop to make it habitable. The point was just to make sure he had a comfortable place to stay. It was simple and functional. Some rabbis identify the description of the living quarters as a metaphor for contemplation and mitzvot.

8. **Gechazi; don't take advantage.** Elisha blessed the Shunamite woman that she should have a child, but he did not realize what would come of that blessing. The child died. The Shunamite woman went to Elisha for help but was intercepted by his attendant Gechazi. The gemara says Elisha was holy, but Gechazi was not because he went close to the woman to push her away. Rab Yosi said he took hold of her by her breast.
9. **Davening and eating - which comes first?** The gemara says one should daven before eating or drinking in the morning. About one who eats before davening, the verse says, "they throw Me after their own arrogance" - he glorifies himself first and then starts thinking about G-d. But Chabad Chassidim tend to ignore this rule. They say it is better to eat to daven than to daven to eat. According to the Ishbitzer, people like the Seer of Lublin saw that tefillah was becoming more mechanical than spiritual, and a change was needed. That type of tefillah couldn't possibly be what G-d intended, so it's better to relax the restriction on the time of davening in order to improve the quality of the davening. Likewise, Chabad Chassidim felt that if hunger would negatively affect a person's davening, it's ok to eat before davening.
10. **Rabbi Yehoshua says you have the first three hours of the day to say the morning Shema.** That is the halachic ruling. But what happens when that time passes? Most opinions say you've missed the Biblical requirement to say the morning Shema, though there is an opinion that the Biblical requirement lasts all day and saying Shema in the first three hours is only a Rabbinic requirement. Rabbi Soloveitchik brings down three opinions: Rav Hai Gaon says you can have one extra hour, until the fourth hour, to say the Shema with the brachot; Rashba says you have until midday (or maybe all day); Rambam says you have all day. All three opinions are seeing the blessings as an extension of tefillah. The Rambam allows for Shema to be said all day because these are not like the blessings you would say on a regular mitzvah. Rather, the Shema and its blessings are a way of serving G-d. We have a specific mitzvah to serve G-d on a daily basis. Perhaps that is the essence of the mitzvah of tefillah. It is the avodas Hashem that we perform every day. Another way of looking at this is the Rambam had what is now a Chabad approach to davening: all of the tefillah, the birchot Kriyat Shema, and the Amida are one unit of *avodas Hashem*. While there are mitzvot included in the davening, such as the Shema and the remembering of the Exodus, the unifying principles are the love, awe, and Oneness of G-d that are the aim of tefillah, and that continues the whole day.