

Talmud Brachot Top Ten Teachings, Daf 15:

- 1. How to accept the yoke of Heaven.** Rabbi Yochanan says that if one wishes to accept the complete yoke of Heaven upon himself, when he wakes up in the morning he should turn aside (according to Rashi this means use the bathroom), wash his hands, put on tefillin, say the Shema, and daven. This is a complete acceptance of the Divine will. The Mei Hashiloach explains that in life, we're looking for a new day. We often don't notice the change and growth in the world or in Torah. But G-d is constantly renewing the world, and when we connect to G-d through the Shema we can see things with fresh eyes and notice beauty that we never did before. I used to walk with my young daughter in Manhattan, and she was always looking around in wonder and pointing at things on the roofs of buildings. I walked those same streets by myself every day and never noticed anything on a roof. When you're young, you pay more attention to things because everything is new and exciting. G-d is asking us to look at the Torah with young eyes. How do we do that? By plugging ourselves in to truth. G-d is a fountain of renewal, and when we accept the yoke of Heaven we can tap into that energy source where everything is renewable.
- 2. Debate between Rosh and Rashba about *al netilat yadayim*.** When you wake up in the morning you must wash your hands and make the bracha *al netilat yadayim*. The Rosh says the point is to wash your hands and make the bracha right before you daven. So you should go to the bathroom, wash your hands, make the bracha, put on your tefillin, and daven. The Rashba says the washing is more about purification. When we sleep our souls are not fully in our bodies, and that creates a kind of ritual impurity. So like Kohanim, we must wash our hands to cleanse ourselves of the impurity of the night. Therefore, when you wake up you should immediately wash your hands and make the bracha, even if you are not planning to daven right away. Rav Moshe Feinstein (Mesoras Moshe) would wash his hands without a bracha immediately upon waking up. A little later, when he was ready to daven, he would go to the bathroom and then wash his hands and make the bracha. If he didn't have to go to the bathroom he would touch his shoe, because touching your shoe also requires you to wash your hands before davening. According to Rav Moshe, you could in theory satisfy the opinions of both the Rosh and Rashba, by washing your hands immediately upon waking up and making the bracha up to an hour later when you are ready to daven, but you need to be careful with your hands for that hour. The Chazon Ish says that it's best to wash early without the bracha and then say the bracha in shul with *birchos hashachar*. Rav Moshe disagreed, saying that the *birchos hashachar* in shul are really for people who don't know the words. If you know the words, you should make the bracha at the more appropriate time.
- 3. Looking for water before Shema and tefillah.** Rav Chisda says you should not go looking for water to wash your hands. At least, not before saying the Shema. Before tefillah, you can travel up to a parsah (8,000 amos, or about 12,000 feet) to find water. However, you should only go in the same direction you're already traveling; there is no need to go backwards unless it's less than a mil. Why can you look for water before tefillah but not before Shema? Because Shema must be said in the first three hours of the day, and you don't want to miss that time while looking for water. Rashi says we are concerned only about the Shema, which has a set time, and not about tefillah, which can be said all day. But we know that's not really true. There is a zman tefillah as well - the first four hours of the day. Different answers have been given to defend Rashi. Technically though, you can still say the tefillah even after the correct time has passed. Tosfot, reading a version of the gemara that does not include this distinction at all, says the law of looking for water before tefillah is the same as the law of looking for water before Shema; it's not necessary if it's not easily available. The Rashba suggests there might be a difference

because the Shema is *de'orayta* and tefillah is *d'rabanan*, so it makes sense to worry more about the time for the Shema. According to Meiri, the halacha is the same for the Shema and tefillah but there is a practical difference. The Shema must be said earlier, so there is a greater chance that looking for water will make you miss the time. You have an extra hour for tefillah, which gives you more time to find water. However, even for tefillah, if looking for water will make you miss the time then you should not look.

4. **Three opinions about hearing the Shema.** Rabbi Yosi says if you don't hear the words you are saying, you don't fulfill your obligation. A second opinion says you should try to hear yourself say the words, but if you don't you still fulfill your obligation. A third opinion says there's absolutely no need to hear the words. Why would it be important to hear the words? There is an opinion that someone who can speak but cannot hear can't bring terumah, because he won't be able to hear himself say the bracha. But if this person does bring a terumah, the mitzvah counts and is not invalidated just because he didn't hear the bracha. In general, the halacha is that hearing is not really required. But perhaps the Shema is different, because the very first word is "Shema," which means listen. The verse itself says that it should be heard. According to Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah, hearing the words is not Biblically required but it is preferable, as seen from this word "Shema." In other words, hearing the words is a *chumra*, but one that comes directly from the words of the Torah rather than from the rabbis.
5. **Shomea ke'oneh - listening is like doing.** There is a concept that listening to something counts like doing it. For example, listening to someone blow the shofar counts like blowing the shofar yourself. The gemara quotes a mishna in Megillah (19b) that says everybody is kosher to read the megillah except a *cheresh* (a deaf person), a *shoteh* (someone whose mind is not developed enough to do mitzvot), or a *katan* (a child). This is because of the general concept that only someone who is obligated in a mitzvah can fulfill the obligation for someone else. However, Rabbi Yehuda permits a *katan* to read the Megillah. Even *bedieved* (after the fact; less than ideal circumstances), a deaf person cannot read the Megillah. Rav Matna says this opinion must be Rabbi Yosi's, because he's the one who says you must hear yourself say the words in order to fulfill your obligation.
6. **Tosfot on children.** The gemara says a *katan* cannot read the Megillah, and Rabbi Yehuda says he can. Tosfot says this must not be talking about a very young child, because someone who is not obligated in a mitzvah cannot fulfill it for others. But perhaps the gemara is talking about a child at the age of chinuch (learning). At around the age of 9 or 10, a child is old enough to learn to do mitzvot and therefore has a rabbinic obligation to fulfill certain mitzvot. A very interesting case is discussed later in the gemara regarding bentsching. The Biblical requirement is to bentsch when you've eaten enough to be satisfied. A rabbinic requirement was added to bentsch even after eating only a *kezayit* (something the size of an olive). If a child at the age of chinuch ate enough to be satisfied and his father ate a *kezayit*, the child can lead the zimun and fulfill the obligation for his father. The father's requirement is rabbinic, and though the son is technically fulfilling a Biblical requirement his obligation is only rabbinic, because he is at the age of chinuch. Therefore the levels of obligation are basically the same and the child can fulfill his father's obligation. In the same way, it makes sense that a child at the age of chinuch could fulfill the rabbinic obligation of reading the Megillah for adults.
7. **The law about deaf people today.** Deaf people are obligated in mitzvot, and it seems they can even fulfill obligations for other people. But what about someone who also can't speak? Halachically, with some exceptions, such a person is considered like a *shoteh*, someone who is not mentally competent. But Rabbi Herschel Schechter quotes the Rashash, who heard about a special school for deaf-mute people and all the advancements that have been made in teaching

them. He says today, thanks to these advances, deaf-mute people no longer have the status of *shoteh*. They have the status of full adults and are obligated in mitzvot like anyone else.

8. **The womb and the grave.** Mishlei 30:16 discusses a grave and a barren womb. The gemara asks, what is the connection between the two? And the gemara answers, just like a womb takes in and gives out (intimacy and birth), so too a grave takes in and gives out (burial and *techiyas hameisim*). This is a response to those who say that *techiyas hameisim* is not in the Torah. The Mei Hashiloach explains what this is all about: The gemara had been discussing the case of someone who says the Shema but does not hear it. This is not meant to be literal; it refers to someone who doesn't really listen to the Shema, someone who says the words but doesn't take them to heart. For many of us, saying the Shema is just a habit, with no intention or enthusiasm behind it. But if your davening is not perfect, if it hasn't caused you to grow, if you are not as spiritual as you wish to be - it's ok. Don't let this make you feel like a failure. The Torah that I want and the Torah that I have might feel very far apart, but G-d will show me that they are not as far as I fear, just as the womb and the grave are not as far apart as they seem. The womb represents the physical desire for intimacy. Intimacy is a private act, considered shameful to some, which is strongly connected to the yetzer hara. But from this act, a child can be created. Even giving in to our shameful desires can lead to a good outcome, showing us that there was always a part of our actions that was *l'sheim shamayim* (for the sake of Heaven). So don't be too hard on yourself.
9. **No *gezerah shavah* from *ukesavtem*.** A *gezerah shavah* is when there are two verses with similar words and the rabbis learn that something from one verse applies to the other. The Shema has the word "*ukesavtem*," which means you should write it down. There is another verse that mentions writing: for an *isha sota*, the section describing the curses is supposed to be written down on a piece of paper that is then put into water. However, in that case, the curses are written down and the commands are not. When it comes to the mezuzah and tefillin, the whole Shema is written, including the commands. You might think we would make a *gezerah shavah* connecting these two verses and learn that just as the commands are not written for the *isha sota* they are not written for the Shema. However, we do not learn such a *gezerah shavah*. This is actually a very strange discussion, because we can only make a *gezerah shavah* when there is a received tradition for it. But maybe the traditions received by the rabbis were only hints about where to find them, and the rabbis had to figure out exactly what they were. So they had to figure out whether or not a *gezerah shavah* applied in this specific case.
10. **Reading the words of the Shema carefully.** When reading the Shema, you should be careful to put a space between letters that tend to blur together. For example, it is easy to accidentally blend "*al levavecha*" into one word. But earlier, the gemara said that even if you don't pronounce the words correctly you still fulfill your obligation, so clearly blending the words together does not invalidate the Shema. What is this teaching us? There are 248 words in the Shema (counting the three repeated by the chazzan at the end), corresponding to 248 parts of the body. It's important to pronounce every word correctly because we want to fully embody the Torah, and every part of the body has a necessary function. Tefillin also embody the Torah, which is why they go together with the Shema.