

Talmud Brachot Top Ten Teachings, Daf 16:

1. **The wedding of Rabbi Elazar and the lesson of the Shema.** Rav Ami and Rav Assi were building a chuppah for their friend Rabbi Elazar on his wedding day, and Rabbi Elazar decided to take a little break and go learn. So he went to the beis midrash of Rabbi Yochanan. There, he heard a tanna (a reciter of Mishnayot or *beraitot*) telling over the following *tosefta* in the presence of Rabbi Yochanan: If someone is saying the Shema, and he realizes he made a mistake but doesn't know where he made it, he should return to the last point where he knows he was right and go from there. Rabbi Yochanan added that this is only if the person hasn't yet reached "*lema'an yirbu*." From there, he doesn't need to go back. Why? The first paragraph and the second paragraph have some identical phrases, so if you're not paying close attention it can be easy to lose track of which paragraph you're up to. If you're not sure, you should go back to the earlier point, Rabbi Yochanan explained. But after "*lema'an yirbu*," the similar phrasing ends. If you've gotten all the way to that point, we assume you said everything until then correctly, because of habit and memory that comes from routine. Rabbi Elazar went back to his wedding preparation and related what he'd learned to his friends, who said, "If we'd only come and heard this teaching, that would have been enough." What's going on here? They were there for a wedding; why would this teaching have been enough? In fact, this law of the Shema teaches a deep lesson about marriage. The beginning of a marriage is usually beautiful and exciting, but after a number of years the excitement dies down. Much like the Shema, it can become routine, as if you're barely paying attention. You might make mistakes and not realize where they happened. You might find that communication has broken down. If that happens, learn from the Shema. Go back to the last point you were paying attention and communicating properly, and start again from there. But on the bright side, habits can work in your favor. Just like you might say the entire Shema correctly even without paying attention, you might find that you're doing the right thing in your marriage just out of habit, even without realizing it.
2. **Reading the Shema from the top of a tree.** The Mishna says workers who are on a tree or a high platform can read the Shema where they are, but they cannot say the tefillah there. The Gemara clarifies: one can read the Shema from the top of a tree, but one can only daven on top of olive trees or fig trees. One who is on top of a different kind of tree would need to climb down before davening. Most Rishonim understand that a tree is not an ideal place to say Shema or daven, but the Mishna is simply discussing whether or not it's permissible at all. The Shema, with the exception of the first verse, can be said pretty much anywhere. Tefillah, on the other hand, requires more kavanah (intention) than the Shema. It should be said while standing and ideally facing the site of the Beit Hamikdash. You can't really do that from the top of a tree.
3. **Tefillah requires more kavanah than Shema.** Rashi says that tefillah is a call for mercy, and therefore it needs kavanah. As Rabbi Soloveitchik points out, you need to know Whom you are standing in front of if you wish to speak to Him and beg for His help. You need to be present in the moment, trying to establish a connection with Him. The Shema, while it is about G-d's existence and Oneness, is not a direct plea to Him the way that tefillah is. When you say the Shema, you are talking about G-d rather than to Him. Therefore, while knowing Whom you're standing in front of is always good, it is not required for the Shema. That is why the Shema can be said from the top of a tree and tefillah cannot.
4. **Workplace davening and bentsching.** Workers can say the Shema with its blessings, eat their lunch, make the blessings before and after it, and say the full Shemonah Esrei, but they should not have a chazzan or do any of the extras, like kedushah and tachanun. This opinion seems to contradict another *beraita*, which says workers should do an abbreviated version of the Shemonah Esrei. Rav Sheshet explains that this isn't a contradiction, but a debate between

Rabban Gamliel and Rabbi Yehoshua. However, Rabbi Yehoshua never specifically spoke about workers. His opinion is that anyone who is busy can say the shortened Shemonah Esrei. The gemara concludes that both the opinion in our gemara and the opinion in the *beraita* come from Rabban Gamliel, who is talking about two different types of workers. Those who are paid with wages must abbreviate the Shemonah Esrei. Those who are only paid in meals can take the time for a full Shemonah Esrei. However, over time the relationship between workers and bosses has changed in the workers' favor. Most bosses today would allow their employees to pause their work long enough to say the full Shemonah Esrei, so the idea of using an abbreviated version while at work is not that relevant today.

5. **A chassan isn't required to say the Shema in the beginning.** This is because of the principle we learned earlier: *osek bemitzvah patur min hamitzvah*. The gemara asks, why does the mishna give the specific example of a man who marries a virgin? Even one who marries a widow has a mitzvah to be with her, so shouldn't he also be patur from the Shema? And the gemara answers: in the case of a virgin, the groom is preoccupied, and with a widow he isn't. But if it is preoccupation that exempts you from the Shema, what about a businessman who hears his ships are sinking? He would be preoccupied and anxious, but he is not patur from Shema. A mourner is required to do all the mitzvot, other than tefillin on the first day - isn't a mourner preoccupied? But in the case of the mourner, his preoccupation is permissible but not required, while in the case of a chassan married to a virgin, his preoccupation is a mitzvah. Is mourning not a mitzvah? There is actually a machloket about whether *aveilut* is *de'orayta* or *d'rabanan*. There are definitely mitzvot involved in the mourning process, but mourning itself might not be a mitzvah. Still, why is the gemara dismissing mourning completely as if there is no mitzvah involved? Rabbi Hershel Reichman says part of the reason we mourn is that we want to reflect the feelings of the deceased. They are distressed, so we are distressed. During the period of *onein*, before the burial, the deceased wants us to focus on taking care of the burial and doesn't want to see us saying Shema. But during shiva, the deceased wants us to daven and say the Shema. They want us to be sad, but not so much that we can't daven anymore. They want us to be able to accept a little bit of comfort.
6. **Showering during shiva.** Rabban Gamliel bathed himself the first night after his wife died. His students said to him, "But didn't our master teach us that a mourner is forbidden to bathe?" He responded, "I'm not like other people. I'm very finicky." Rashi explains that Rabban Gamliel's wife had been buried already that day, and he was very uncomfortable and felt a need to bathe. Tosfot further clarifies that he would have been in a state of discomfort if he didn't bathe himself. The reason mourners are forbidden to bathe is that bathing normally gives people pleasure, and mourners should avoid certain things that give them pleasure. But the halacha does not mean to torture mourners. If not bathing would truly be torture for someone, then that person would be permitted to bathe. Of course, the gemara does not specifically mention showering, but we can certainly find room for leniency. Most people today would feel a very strong level of discomfort if unable to shower for a long period of time. There would therefore be nothing wrong with a quick shower, just to get clean and not feel dirty. But perhaps mourners should avoid long, luxurious showers, and should not use hot water. At the very least, a person should use bathing wipes to take away sweat and dirt.
7. **Onein vs. aveil.** There is a debate between Maimonides and Nachmanides about whether an *onein* has all the laws of a mourner during shiva. In certain respects, the *onein* period has its own set of laws, and according to Maimonides some of these laws are less strict than the laws of the *aveilut* period while others are more strict. For example, an *onein* should not eat meat or drink wine, which are permitted during shiva, but can wear leather shoes and bathe, which are forbidden during shiva. Nachmanides, on the other hand, says that most laws of *aveilut* apply

even before the burial, with few exceptions. Rabbi Soloveitchik explains that there are two ways of understanding Maimonides's opinion. The first is that the shiva period begins only when the deceased is buried, and the *onein* period before has a separate set of laws. The second is that in theory, the laws of mourning begin as soon as the person dies and apply even during the *onein* period, but most of the laws are held back during that period because the *onein* is *osek bemitzvah* - they are preoccupied with preparing for the burial. The mitzvot of *aveilut*, such as sitting in a low chair and not bathing, technically apply, but the *onein* is patur from these mitzvot until after the burial.

8. **Two competing attitudes towards servants in the gemara.** When Rabban Gamliel's servant died, he sat shiva. His students said to him, "But you taught us that you don't accept comfort for a servant." He responded, "My servant was not like any other servant. He was kosher." When Rabbi Eliezer's maidservant died, his students wanted to comfort him, but he tried to avoid them or push them away. He said to them, "Didn't I teach you that we don't do this for servants?" His students obviously thought that his maidservant had been an important part of his life and that they should try to comfort him. Maimonides says when a kosher person dies, there should be a shiva. If the person had no relatives, the community should send ten representatives to sit shiva in their home. The ten representatives should sit in low chairs, make minyanim, and in general act like real mourners. So we do have a concept of mourning for someone you're not related to. And if the person was someone you were close to, why would you not sit shiva? Obviously, Rabban Gamliel accepted that kind of relationship with his servant but Rabbi Eliezer did not.
9. **Three avot and four imahot.** Why are Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov the only people we call our avot, and why are Sarah, Rivka, Rachel, and Leah the only people we call our imahot? We don't even know if we're all descended from these imahot, as some of Bnei Yisrael came from Bilhah and Zilpah. However, these three fathers and four mothers were the most important. They each embodied an important attribute, and each of us has those attributes, pieces of our fathers and mothers, inside us. For example, Avraham embodied the attribute of chesed. No one else perfected that quality the way he did. And we all have the attribute of chesed inside us, because we came from Avraham.
10. **Rav's daily prayer and how we use it.** The Talmud records a number of personal prayers that different rabbis would regularly add on at the end of the Amidah. One of these prayers was said by Rav, and this prayer was eventually adopted into *bircat hachodesh*, the blessing of the new month. This was Rav's prayer: "G-d should give us long life, a life of peace, a life of goodness, a life of blessing, a life with sustenance, a life of physical health, a life that has fear of Heaven and fear of sin, a life that has no shame or humiliation, a life of wealth and honor, a life that has love of Torah and fear of Heaven, and G-d should fulfill the desires of our hearts for good." When we say the *bircat hachodesh*, we add an introduction: "May it be Your will G-d, G-d of our forebears, that the new month should be renewed for us for goodness and for blessing." Rav used to say his prayer every day, so why do we say it only once a month? Perhaps because it is on such a high level that a regular person cannot say it every day and truly mean it. Rav dedicated his life to the goals of this prayer, and we can see from his work that he truly embodied it. So he was able to say it, and mean it, every day. But we, who are not anywhere near Rav's level, can at the very most aspire to say this prayer with meaning once a month. When we want to have a good month, when we want to ask for meaning, value, holiness, and honor, we say Rav's prayer and we try to say it with the same fervor Rav had every day. May it be for good.