

Talmud Brachot Top Ten Teachings, Daf 20:

1. **Can a kohen who loses a relative walk near other dead bodies?** In general a kohen is not allowed to be in the vicinity of a dead body. The exception is when one of the kohen's close relatives, as defined by halacha, dies. But on his way to the funeral of a relative, can the kohen walk through the cemetery past other dead bodies? Rashi says yes, because the law that a kohen cannot come near a dead body simply does not apply in this situation. A kohen is allowed to bury a relative, even if that entails entering a cemetery where there are other dead bodies. Rambam, however, says that a kohen's prohibition against impurity is only pushed off for a relative, not completely removed. The kohen can become impure, but only from his relative, not from any other dead bodies. In fact, the act of violating the general prohibition against becoming impure is a fulfillment of the requirement to mourn. The mitzvah of mourning is so serious that it pushes aside the prohibition against impurity, but only specifically for the dead relative. In practice, we try to follow the Rambam, so a kohen who needs to bury a relative should try to get a cemetery plot near the road, so that he doesn't need to step further into the cemetery. The Ishbitzer Rebbe gives a reason for the prohibition against kohanim becoming impure from dead bodies: a kohen's job is to serve G-d with love. Being directly involved with matters relating to death can inhibit that feeling of love, and so a kohen should distance himself from the sadness surrounding death.
2. **The difference between the generations.** Rav Papa asked Abaye the difference between their generation and earlier generations. In earlier generations more open miracles occurred. Was it because the earlier generations learned more? No, they did not. The difference was that in earlier generations, people were more likely to sacrifice their lives for the sanctity of G-d's name. Rav Ada bar Ahava once saw a woman wearing a cloak made of *shaatnez*, and he ripped it off of her. According to Daf 19, this was the right thing to do. But then Rav Ada found out that the woman wasn't Jewish and thus hadn't been doing anything wrong. Local authorities charged him a fine for embarrassing her. He asked the woman her name, and she replied Masun. He said, "Masun, you cost me 400 zuz." "Masun" could have been a play on words, as if he was saying that his lack of patience cost him 400 zuz. What is this story all about? The Ishbitzer Rebbe explains that it represents a shift between old and new. In earlier generations, zealotry was praiseworthy because it was guided by G-d, like in the story of Pinchas. But Rav Ada realized that the time for hasty zealotry had passed. That kind of behavior was no longer proper. Instead, patience is necessary. Although Rav Ada acted for the sake of Heaven, he received a Divine lesson that this was no longer the way.
3. **Rabbis sitting near the mikvah.** Rav Gidel used to sit near the entrance to the women's mikvah and give halachic advice to women on their way in regarding how to immerse themselves properly. Other rabbis told him this was inappropriate because it could arouse his yetzer hara, but he responded that he saw the women like white swans - he found them beautiful but had no sexual attraction to them. Rabbi Yochanan, who was known for being beautiful, would also sit near the mikvah. He said when the women came out they would look at him, and then they would have beautiful babies. Interestingly, no one scolded him. But both of these stories are very strange. They are not meant to teach us that it is acceptable for a rabbi to sit near a mikvah, because in truth this is not appropriate.
4. **Are women obligated to say the Shema?** The Mishna says women are exempt from Shema and tefillah but are obligated in tefillah, mezuzot, and *bircat hamazon*. The gemara says it's obvious that women are exempt from Shema, because women are exempt from all positive time-bound mitzvot. You might think Shema would be an exception because it is about accepting the kingship of Heaven, but that is not the case. However, most poskim rule differently, saying that

women are in fact obligated to say the Shema, or at least the first paragraph. The Rambam follows the gemara, but the Shulchan Aruch says that while women are exempt from the Shema, it is proper to teach them to accept the yoke of Heaven and to recite the Shema. Rama says women should say at least the first verse. The Beis Yosef, which was written by the author of the Shulchan Aruch, says in the name of earlier authorities that women are required to accept the unity of G-d by saying the first verse. Even though technically women are not obligated in the Shema, the gemara gives a very strong reason why they could be obligated, and therefore some rabbis do rule that it's required because of its importance. So women should at least say the first paragraph, and maybe even the whole thing.

5. **Women's obligation to pray.** Women do have an obligation to pray every day, but do not have an obligation to pray with a minyan. In theory they should be encouraged to do so anyway, if they can, but in practice this is mostly not done, at least not daily. Since women are obligated in prayer, it is fitting for them to say the Shema as well, because of the concept of connecting redemption to prayer and of accepting the yoke of Heaven. Today there is a huge difference between how we teach our boys to pray and how we teach our girls to pray, and perhaps we should be more careful in how we teach our girls, because prayer is a tremendously important part of our relationship with G-d.
6. **Women's obligation to make kiddush.** Kiddush on Shabbos is a positive time-bound mitzvah, and in general women are exempt from those. But women actually are obligated in kiddush, especially on Friday night. Abaye says this obligation is only rabbinic, but Rava disagrees. After all, why don't we say women have a rabbinic requirement for all positive time-bound mitzvot? In fact, women have a biblical obligation to make kiddush. But why? If you look at the two places that the Torah lists the Ten Commandments, there are several differences, and one of those differences relates to Shabbos. In one place the word *zachor* (remember) is used, and in the second the word *shamor* (guard) is used. We learn from this that everyone who is required to guard the Shabbos is also required to remember it. How do we guard the Shabbos? By keeping its negative commandments. How do we remember the Shabbos? With kiddush. Since women are required to guard the Shabbos, they must also remember it by making kiddush. In theory this actually means that a woman should be able to make kiddush for a man, and that is how the Shulchan Aruch rules. However, this is not commonly done because many people are uncomfortable with it, perhaps because they are not accustomed to women leading in religious obligations and therefore might come to the incorrect conclusion that kiddush is not so important.
7. **Women's obligation to say *bircat hamazon*.** Ravina asked if this obligation is Biblical or rabbinic. In theory it should be Biblical, because *bircat hamazon* is not time-bound and therefore there is no reason to assume that women would be exempt. Nonetheless, Rashi says perhaps women have only a rabbinic obligation in *bircat hamazon*, because it contains the phrase, "on the land that I have given you." Since the land was not directly given to women, this does not apply to them and therefore they don't have a Biblical obligation to say it. Tosfot says that can't be right, because kohanim and leviyim also were not given land but are still required to say *bircat hamazon*. Rather, says Tosfot, women are not obligated in *bircat hamazon* because it mentions circumcision and "the Torah that I've taught you," and these things do not apply to women. On a simple level, neither Rashi nor Tosfot make much sense. We understand the obligation to thank G-d after eating not strictly by the details of the verse involved. To follow the logic of Rashi and Tosfot, we would have to say that people who live outside the land of Israel are not Biblically obligated in *bircat hamazon*. But we don't say that. Perhaps a way to understand this is that the Biblical obligation is simply to bless G-d after eating food, and this obligation does apply to women. However, the rabbis created a specific text with which to fulfill this obligation, and

the text is based on a verse that mentions the land and contains inferences to circumcision and Torah study. These are all things that do not apply to women, and so we argue that there is no Biblical requirement for women to recite this specific text. Women do have an obligation to give thanks after eating, but that obligation does not need to be fulfilled using *bircat hamazon* the way it's been crafted by the Sages. Why is the same not true for people who live outside the land of Israel? Because in theory, they could live in Israel, and it is considered their inheritance, and so the verse that *bircat hamazon* is based on could apply to them. Even if in practice it does not apply, the obligation still holds. Practically speaking, the reason it matters whether a woman's obligation is Biblical or rabbinic is because that affects whether or not she can say it on behalf of a man.

8. **G-d doesn't play favorites, except for people who say *bircat hamazon*.** A story is told sometimes in the name of Rav Ami and sometimes in the name of Rav Asi: The angels said to G-d, "It is written in Your Torah that You don't play favorites and You don't take bribes. But you play favorites with Israel. Like it says, 'May You lift Your face favorably towards us.'" G-d replied, "But should I not play favorites with Israel? I told them to say *bircat hamazon* when they are satisfied, but they do it when they eat only a *kezayit*." A judge who is just cannot play favorites. So how does G-d lift His face and show us favor? There are two Torahs: the Torah of Moshe and the Torah of Aharon. Moshe was a judge, and his Torah rules by the letter of the law. A judge must maintain distance in order to be fair. Aharon was a mediator who helped people reconcile, working beyond the letter of the law. He was closer to the people than Moshe was. The Torah contains "cold and aloof" halachic requirements, but there are also elements that go above and beyond that. By choosing to expand *bircat hamazon* beyond the letter of the law and recite it even when we have not eaten enough to be satisfied, we have chosen to relate to G-d not on the carefully balanced scale of justice, but as friends. Because of this, He can sometimes look at us the same way, past the cold distance of justice, and favor us.
9. **The law of a *baal keri*.** The Mishna says that a *baal keri* (someone who had a seminal emission) should think certain parts of the Shema but should not say them, and should not say the blessings before or after. He should make the blessing after eating bread but not before. According to the Rambam, Ezra ruled that a *baal keri* should not study Torah, and a later *beis din* expanded the prohibition to include prayer. However, this was impossible to enforce and so it became nullified. A law being written in a book does not automatically become halacha; it needs to be accepted in practice. This ruling was considered too difficult for the majority of people to follow and was therefore not accepted in practice by the majority of people, and so a *baal keri* can learn Torah and say the Shema.
10. **Thought vs. action.** Ravina says that thinking something must count the same as saying it. Otherwise, what would be the point of a *baal keri* thinking parts of the Shema? But if thinking is the same as saying, then why is it permitted for a *baal keri* to think but not say? The bottom line is that it's important to articulate everything, but if for some reason you can't, you should think it and that will count as close enough. And even if it doesn't count, at least you are doing something in your mind to fit in with the other people reciting the Shema. Many consider the act of moving the lips and saying words to be an integral part of *tikkun olam*.