

Talmud Brachot Top Ten Teachings, Daf 22:

1. **A *baal keri* was forbidden by the institution of Ezra to study Torah: Rashi vs. Rambam.** A *baal keri* is a man who had a seminal emission and has not yet been to the mikvah. Ezra instituted a decree that a *baal keri* cannot study Torah, though this decree was eventually nullified. Why should a *baal keri* not study Torah? A certain level of decorum is required for Torah study. The Talmud says that just like when we received the Torah it was with trembling, fear, and trepidation, so too on a daily basis when one embarks on a pursuit of Torah knowledge it has to be with a sense of awe and grandeur. One who is ritually impure can study Torah; only a *baal keri* cannot. According to Rashi, that is because ritually impure people can still be in a state of awe, but a *baal keri* is coming from a state of levity and therefore is in the wrong state of mind for Torah study. To make himself ready for Torah, he must immerse in a mikvah. There are different opinions about what exactly is forbidden to the *baal keri*; it's probably not the entirety of Torah. According to the Talmud, some rabbis would whisper to their students that they didn't really need to go to the mikvah, they just needed to have nine *kavim* of water poured over themselves (a shower, basically). Why was this whispered? They didn't want to encourage their students to be with their wives like chickens (or, in today's terms, like rabbits). The Rambam quotes this as the reason a *baal keri* needs to go to the mikvah. But how can this be the source for that rule, when the rabbis were specifically saying a mikvah was not necessary? Perhaps because even though the rabbis were blunting the teeth of the decree, they were agreeing with the purpose of it, which was to prevent a man from being with his wife too much. The Rambam says that it's important not to overindulge even in permitted relationships.
2. **Like standing before Sinai.** When we stood at Mount Sinai to receive the Torah, there was a boundary around the mountain. The boundary was not just physical. Husbands and wives separated before the Torah was given. Indulging in sensuality would have blunted their spiritual senses and prevented them from properly experiencing the most intense, mind-blowing spiritual awakening the universe has ever seen. Today, when we study Torah we still want to experience that same closeness with G-d. Therefore, there must be a separation after relations, in order to bring oneself back into the proper frame of mind for learning.
3. **Rabbi Yehuda ben Besaira: The words of the Torah don't become impure.** When a student was reading the words quickly, not enunciating them properly, he told the student to open his mouth and say the words in an illuminated and clear way, because the words do not become impure. People were getting the mistaken perception that Torah somehow becomes impure if someone with a ritual impurity studies it. Rabbi Yehuda ben Besaira said that Torah is like fire; it can't become impure.
4. **Zeiri said Ezra's decree was nullified.** Today a *baal keri* does not need to go to mikvah before learning. How could they just nullify a decree of Ezra? In general, a *beis din* can't overturn a ruling from a prior *beis din* unless it's greater than that earlier *beis din*, both in number and in wisdom. However, though these rabbis did not claim to be greater than the *beis din* of Ezra, they claimed that Ezra's decree had never spread enough to the majority of Israel. If a Rabbinic ruling never catches on enough to be followed by the majority of the nation, at some point the rabbis can consider that ruling void because it was never followed. A lot of rabbis are very book-oriented. They know the rules as written and want to follow them to the letter. But minhag is also important. You have to keep an eye on what the community is actually doing. In this case, while there were obviously people who did follow Ezra's ruling, it had never really become majority practice. That, combined with the fact that it's a difficult thing to require, for people to go to a mikvah every time they have relations, convinced the rabbis to undo the decree. There are actually many halachot recorded in the Talmud that we don't follow today, because they

never became accepted. It is possible that the rabbis made certain decrees with the hope that they would be broadly practiced, but in cases where that didn't happen, the rabbis, often many generations later, would walk back the decree or at least note that it isn't practiced. That is why it's important to observe actual practices of a religious community and have a Rav who's fluent with actual customs and laws, and not just rely on books.

5. **Going to mikvah to sanctify G-d's name.** There is a book called *Sefer Hapardes*, which is attributed to Rashi. This book says that a *baal keri* should go to the mikvah before learning Torah, because this sanctifies G-d's name. How? Idolaters who have seminal emissions always shower before going into their houses of worship. If Jews don't take at least the same care, it looks bad. This does not mean that we are following an idolatrous practice, going to the mikvah because it's what the non-Jews do. We have a precedent from Ezra. This is simply allowing us to continue to follow a practice based on that old decree. If even the idol worshippers do it, then certainly we should not stop. The Mei Hashiloach points out that there are certain stringencies we've taken on because we don't want our non-Jewish neighbors to see us as lax. For example, polygamy is actually permitted in the Torah. But when it became forbidden in the outside world, our rabbis also decreed it forbidden.
6. **The value of having a buffer.** A man was seducing a woman (Rashi says the woman was single, other commentators disagree), and she said, "Lowlife! Do you have 40 *sa'ah* that you can immerse in?" Immediately he stopped. She was reminding him that he would have to go to the mikvah before learning, and he realized he would not be able to. For some reason, this was enough to get him to stop what he was doing. He was about to commit a sin, but the realization that he would not be able to go to the mikvah afterwards, even though that might have just been a *chumra*, stopped him. Sometimes a *chumra* can act as a buffer, preventing you from committing a more serious sin when you don't otherwise have enough strength to stop yourself.
7. **Nine *kavim* vs 40 *sa'ah*; pouring vs. immersing.** Immersion in a mikvah can purify a *baal keri*, but the rabbis also introduced the idea of pouring nine *kavim* of water to accomplish the same goal. This is the equivalent of standing in the shower for a few minutes. However, it should be noted that the nine *kavim* must specifically be poured. A bath in nine *kavim* of water will not suffice. You need either nine *kavim* poured over you, or full immersion in a mikvah of 40 *sa'ah*.
8. **Today Chassidim and some misnagdim go to the mikvah.** Why? At least for Chabad Chassidim, it's not because of Ezra's decree. Once I asked an elder Chabad Chassid the value of going to mikvah. He responded "a mikvah ez doch elokus" – a mikvah is Divine. The mikvah purifies. It is the closest a person can get to Divine communion. Tosfot says the halacha follows Rabbi Yehuda ben Besaira, who said you don't have to go to the mikvah after a seminal emission. Some say that applies only for learning, but you would still need to go to a mikvah before tefillah. However, almost no one holds that way today. Nonetheless, going to the mikvah regularly is still a good minhag. While it's possible that some today have in mind *tevilas Ezra*, most see going to mikvah as an extra level of spiritual sensitivity and purity.
9. **Forbidden to pray when there's excrement in the vicinity that you can see or smell.** A *beraita* says that if you're praying and then realize there's excrement nearby, you've sinned, but your prayer still counts. Rabbah in the gemara challenges this: But the offering of a wicked person is a *toeva*, so if you were wicked enough to pray where there was excrement, your prayer is a *toeva* (and thus not acceptable). Some suggest that we can reconcile this seeming contradiction as follows: In some places, there is often excrement and you should know better than to try praying there. If you pray in those places, it just means you didn't care enough and your prayer is a *toeva*. But if you're somewhere that there's no reason to expect excrement and it happens anyway, your prayer is still good. There is actually a debate regarding a prayer that is considered a *toeva*. Some say it would not actually need to be repeated, because at least you did the act.

10. **Finding an appropriate place to pray.** You shouldn't pray near a baby in a diaper, because the baby could fill the diaper any time and it would be inappropriate to pray near that. You should always be aware of your surroundings and find a place to pray that you're not near anything inappropriate. A story is told of a rabbi who was immersed in prayer while one of his kids was crying. The rabbi didn't notice the crying, so the child's grandfather (the Alter Rebbe) comforted him. When the rabbi finished praying, the Alter Rebbe scolded him and said that it's important to have kavanah when praying, but not so much that we don't even hear a crying baby.