

Talmud Brachot Top Ten Teachings, Daf 23:

- 1. What to do after an interruption.** If someone stops in the middle of the Shemonah Esrei to urinate, does he need to start Shemonah Esrei again from the beginning? Rav Chisda and Rav Hamnuna debate this. One says he would have to start again from the beginning, the other says he can resume from where he stopped. Initially the gemara understands this debate to be about a break that lasts at least as long as it would take to finish the Shemonah Esrei. But the gemara rejects this interpretation, explaining that a bathroom break, by its nature, makes a person unfit to pray, and therefore even if the break is short it might require the person to restart the Shemonah Esrei. But the other opinion says that a bathroom break counts only as a momentary inability to pray, and does not require starting from the beginning. Regarding a break that is lengthy, the Rambam and the Mechaber specify that this concept of interruptions that last as long as the prayer apply only to Shemonah Esrei. If you interrupt the Shema, even for a long break, you can resume from where you were. Rama, on the other hand, says the rule does apply to Shema, and possibly to other brachot as well – a lengthy interruption would require you to start from the beginning. I was once invited to a congregant's wedding and asked to do the last of the sheva brachot. As I was starting, the officiating rabbi leaned forward and whispered in my ear, "Please make sure the singing doesn't take any longer than the words." He was applying this ruling of the Rama to the sheva brachot, warning me that in his opinion singing counts as a pause and if it went on too long it would interrupt the bracha and possibly invalidate it. Although I listened to him, because he was the mesader kiddushin, I generally follow other poskim who bring down that singing in a bracha does not constitute an interruption and is ok.
- 2. The problem with a bathroom break.** Rashi says that the reason a urination break makes you unfit to daven is that if you need to pause in the middle like that, you would have known before you started that you needed a bathroom and you shouldn't have started in that state. Part of praying is being aware of Whom you are standing in front of, and if you truly have that awareness you would not begin praying knowing that you need to relieve yourself. Therefore, a urination break invalidates the whole prayer and you would need to start again. Rashba says it's not about the state in which you started davening; in fact, you might not have even needed the bathroom before you started, but you would still need to restart your Shemonah Esrei. It is simply that once you start urinating you are not in the right state to pray, and that necessitates a restart.
- 3. Knowing right from wrong.** Ecclesiastes 4:17 says, "Guard your feet when you go to the house of the Lord. Be ready to listen rather than offer a sacrifice of fools, for they do not know how to do evil." Rabbi Yonasan explains, "guard your feet" – so you don't sin. If you do sin, you should bring a sacrifice. Rava says, "listen to the sages" – when the sages sin, they bring offerings and repent. What is a "sacrifice of fools"? This is when someone brings an offering but doesn't repent. But then why does the verse say that these people "do not know how to do evil"? Wouldn't someone who doesn't know evil be a tzaddik? Rather, a fool doesn't even know if the korban he's bringing is for good or bad. He'll commit a sin and then bring an offering as a gift rather than an atonement. Some people don't want to know right from wrong; they prefer to pretend everything they're doing is fine, because then they'll never need to apologize. But it's important to know the difference. Ibn Ezra says the fool is one who doesn't have an evil inclination. Sometimes the evil inclination is what drives us to do certain necessary things, the way hunger drives you to eat and without an appetite you'd simply starve. The contemporary Shita Mekubetzes, quoting Hadrush Veba'iyun, uses this gemara to poke fun at the Rambam's view of korbanot. The Rambam believes that korbanot were given to us as a concession in an attempt to wean us away from idolatry. Hadrush Veba'iyun reads this gemara as, "Don't be like

the Rambam, who says we don't know the difference between a korban being for good or for bad."

4. **Go to the bathroom before you daven.** Rabbi Yonasan says if you need to go to the bathroom, you shouldn't pray. He bases this on a verse in Amos (4:12) that says, "Prepare to meet your Lord, Israel." In other words, you need to prepare yourself before meeting with G-d. When you're preparing yourself for an important meeting, one of the things you do is go to the bathroom, so that you won't need it during the meeting. Davening is another kind of important meeting. You must prepare yourself so that you can be in the right frame of mind when you speak to G-d. Another verse, in Ecclesiastes (4:17), says you should "guard your feet" when going to the house of the Lord. This can be understood as a metaphor, meaning that you should guard yourself so that you won't need to defecate while davening. In the worship of Baal Peor, which was a big threat to Judaism in Biblical times, worshippers would defecate in front of the idol. Perhaps because they were in such awe that they simply lost control of their bodies. Our davening should be the opposite of that. We clear our bodies out before we begin, and we maintain control over ourselves so that we can focus on G-d.
5. **A tragic death and the rabbinic response.** The custom used to be for people to wear their tefillin all day long, and when they went to the bathroom they would take them off. But one day, a student put his tefillin in the cracks in the outhouse wall to keep them safe. A prostitute came by and stole the tefillin, then went to the beit midrash and said, "Look what one of the students paid me for my services!" The student didn't deny her claim, maybe because he was too embarrassed or because he thought people wouldn't believe him. He went up to the roof and fell off, and he died. (The gemara uses sensitive language rather than say straight out that he killed himself.) The rabbis immediately reacted to make sure nothing like this would ever happen again. They ruled that it is permissible to hold the tefillin in your hand, or maybe in your garment, when in an outhouse. Our concern for people and their well-being is much more important than our wish to respect the tefillin.
6. **Rabbi Yochanan held on to his tefillin.** Even when his students were there, Rabbi Yochanan would hold onto his tefillin in the outhouse. Rabba bar Bar Chana said that according to one of his students, if Rabbi Yochanan was studying *aggadeta* when he went to the outhouse and his students were there he would give them the manuscript he was studying, but if he had his tefillin he would not relinquish them to his students. He said that since the rabbis permitted the holding of tefillin, he would not give them up because they would protect him. Rashi clarifies that he believed the tefillin would protect him from demons, which was a common belief in those days. This is problematic for the Rambam and his followers. It could be that Rabbi Yochanan was just showing his students that he was following the ruling of the rabbis, who permitted bringing tefillin into the outhouse, but the text of the gemara does not support this understanding. Obviously this ruling does not apply today, when our bathrooms are private and we have better places to store our tefillin.
7. **Holding things while davening.** You should not hold tefillin or a Sefer Torah while you pray, because you might drop them. You should also not urinate while holding these things, and you should not sleep with tefillin on. Shmuel says a knife, money, a plate, and a loaf of bread are all similar in that you should not hold them while davening. What about other things? A wallet is probably the same as money and should not be held. Holding a cell phone is probably inappropriate, and you certainly should not be looking through it while you daven. Davening from a cell phone is not ideal because it doesn't look like you're davening. The Rambam notes that a lulav and esrog can be held during davening on Sukkot because they are part of the holiday. In general, the custom of many rabbis is to hold only the siddur during the Shemonah Esrei.

8. **Facts over principles.** Someone who is urinating in an outhouse where he has to stand should not hold his tefillin, but someone who is defecating in an outhouse can hold his tefillin. You would think, based on the halachic principle of *kal vachomer*, that this makes no sense. Surely if it's permissible to hold the tefillin while defecating in an outhouse it must be permissible to hold them while urinating! But a real analysis of the two situations is more important than the halachic principle. When urinating, there is a possibility of droplets getting on the person, and that is something we don't want. Rashi explains why that is a problem. So in fact this ruling does make sense. One way of understanding this is that halachic principles like *kal vachomer* are generalizations and don't always hold up in the face of the facts. Halacha has many general principles, but it also requires attention to the instances when those principles come up short in addressing a specific situation. The job of a halachic authority is to balance these sometimes competing ideas. A good halachic ruling analyzes the specific situation and takes into account all the relevant facts.
9. **Eating and drinking while wearing tefillin.** Rabbi Yitzchak says you must take off your tefillin before going in to eat a meal. Rav Chiya says you can take them off at the table. Why can't you eat with tefillin on? Rashi explains that we don't want anybody getting drunk while wearing tefillin. What if you're just having a snack? Rashi says that's ok, but some Rishonim say you cannot eat any food while wearing tefillin. Most are lenient about drinking, except of course for alcohol. Avoid making a l'chaim in tefillin.
10. **Putting money in a tefillin bag.** Can you put money in the same cloth you use to wrap your tefillin? It depends. If you designated the cloth specifically to be your tefillin holder, then you cannot put money in it. If not, there is no problem. A story is told of a young man who went to Israel and used up his pocket money. He called his father and asked for money, and his father said sure and asked if he'd been putting on his tefillin. The son said he had, but he kept calling his father and saying he needed money. His father kept asking about his tefillin. He said he was wearing them, but if that had been true he would have found the envelope full of money that his father had put in his tefillin bag. It is best not to use your tefillin bag as a wallet, but in theory, if when you first get the bag you put something else in it and say it is not just designated for tefillin, then you would be able to put other things in it.