

Talmud Brachot Top Ten Teachings, Daf 31:

- 1. The first chosson to break glass.** Mar, the son of Ravina, was making a wedding party for his son. At the party he saw that the rabbis were getting too happy. Of course it's good to be happy at a wedding, but when you get too happy you can become frivolous and lose sight of right and wrong. Mar sensed that the rabbis were so happy that they were losing perspective. So he took an expensive cup and broke it in their presence. That snapped them out of their frivolity, and they became serious. Rav Ashi did the same thing with an expensive white cup. Tosfot says that we learn from these stories about the custom, which we still have today, to break a glass at a wedding. Usually when we do it today, someone sings "*im eshkachech Yerushalayim* - if I forget thee, o Jerusalem." It is a solemn moment which generally explodes into joyousness amid a chorus of "mazal tov"s. Why do we do it? Perhaps, based on this gemara, we assume there is always a possibility of guests at a wedding becoming too happy and frivolous. A wedding is a happy occasion, but at the same time there is something very serious and solemn about it. A person's wedding day is like their personal Yom Kippur. Marriage is not simple. A successful marriage requires an almost herculean effort. In a sense, you must change who you are to become someone who can live with this other person. It's as if your old life dies and you begin a new one. Breaking the glass reminds us that something serious is happening.
How does this connect to what the gemara was discussing previously, about the seriousness of prayer? The union between G-d and His people is like a wedding. When we pray and we feel that our prayers will be answered, we can become joyful. But we are still in exile, and so our union with G-d is not truly complete. Therefore our joy must always be tempered with seriousness. This also explains why we remember Jerusalem during this part of the wedding.
- 2. Prohibiting laughter.** Rabbi Yochanan says in the name of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai: It's forbidden for a person to fill his mouth with joy or laughter in this world, because the verse says "*az yimaleh s'chok pinu* - then, our mouths will be filled with laughter." When? At the time the non-Jews say, "*higdil Hashem la'asos im eleh* - how great G-d has been to them." This is referring to the time of Mashiach. At that time we will laugh, but until then we should not. It was said that when Reish Lakish heard this teaching, he became careful to always be stoic and never become full of laughter and joy. This gemara is very troubling for Chassidim, who believe joy and laughter have a vital place in the service of G-d. But there are different ways of looking at the world and different ways of understanding the psychological aspects of the gemara. In fact, the gemara cites other opinions that focus on feeling joy in the lead-up to davening, the wearing of tefillin, and the performance of mitzvot. Not every approach will resonate with every person, and there's nothing wrong with that. If you find that a particular rabbi has a psychological approach that does not appeal to you, there are always other rabbis with different ways of looking at the world whom you can turn to. You don't need to completely give up on the rabbi whose teaching you didn't like; perhaps that rabbi has other teachings that do speak to you. You can simply supplement the teaching you don't like from that rabbi with insights from another source.
- 3. "Straightforward" laws.** Before beginning to daven, you must get yourself into the right mindset. Strangely enough, learning Torah is often not a good way to get into the proper mindset, because when learning Torah you often can't stop thinking about what you're learning enough to focus on something else. So the rabbis recommend studying laws that are straightforward and don't require extra analysis. However, the examples that the gemara gives of straightforward laws don't actually seem all that straightforward. The first example is the stringency that Jewish women took upon themselves, that if they see a drop of blood even the size of a mustard seed they wait five full days and then seven clean days before going to the

mikvah. Is this really so straightforward? Certainly there are questions that can be asked. For example, if a woman is having trouble conceiving can she cut this time by a day or two? The second example the gemara gives relates to *ma'aser*, the tithe. If someone wants to get away with not giving the full *ma'aser*, he can bring in his produce without taking off the husks and feed it to his animals. This, too, seems much more complicated than the gemara suggests. So what is really going on here? In our davening, we are looking for a couple of things. We're looking for clarity on the nature of our relationships and the work of our hands. The halacha about niddah represents relationships. The seven clean days represent the seven days of the week as well as the seven sephirot, and they are days when a woman can deeply examine her heart. The halacha about *ma'aser* represents money. Money is necessary but can often cloud our morality. This halacha teaches us that there's nothing wrong with feeding our animals, but we should not take food for ourselves without first giving the required tithe.

4. **The right way to prepare for davening.** There is a *beraita* that says we should not pray out of depression, sadness, laziness, laughter, small talk, lightheadedness, or frivolous conversation, but only out of the joy of the mitzvah. Rashi explains that this means we should use comforting words of Torah, such as the passage about G-d taking us out of Egypt, or Ashrei, or the prayers from maariv about G-d not forsaking us. We want to focus on the positive, on what G-d is capable of doing for us and what He already has done for us. Without joy, you will be distracted and not willing to truly talk to G-d. After all, if you're talking to someone and they're clearly not paying attention, are you likely to share heavy, important thoughts? Of course not. While we shouldn't feel like G-d owes us the things we're praying for, there should be a certain optimism in our prayers, because we know that G-d is listening. So now we've seen three different suggestions for how to prepare for davening: with seriousness, with straightforward halacha, and with joy. The rabbis ruled like the mishna, that seriousness is required. Rav Ashi ruled like the *beraita* (this might refer either to the *beraita* about straightforward halacha or the *beraita* about joy. Tosfot says that in fact, the halacha follows both the mishna and the *beraita*. The two are not in conflict, but rather we need both the seriousness and the joy. We say *psukei dezimrah* to evoke the joy of mitzvot, but we must be careful not to get too happy.
5. **How to be remembered.** One should not take leave of a friend except from a halachic discussion. Rav Kanna and Rav Simi were once walking from Pumbedra to somewhere in Bavel, to a place with palm trees. When they arrived at their destination, one said to the other, "these palm trees have been here from the time of Adam." The other rabbi responded with words of Torah: Rav Yosi taught in the name of Rabbi Chanina, what is the meaning of the verse, "in the land that nobody has worked in and that man has not sat there"? This comes to teach us that any land that was settled by Adam is still settled today, and any land that Adam did not settle, or intend to settle, is not. Was he trying to say that Adam himself planted those palm trees? Of course not. Adam represents eternity. If we want to be remembered, we must become part of that eternity. How? By joining the chain of transmission of Torah. By making a spiritual contribution to the world. When you teach a halacha, or share a spiritual insight, or elucidate something that might otherwise have been forgotten, you create a new link in an unbreakable chain. That chain started with Adam and continues in each generation as we pass our learning and our values down to our children. From this continuity, we can achieve eternity.
6. **Learning proper prayer from Chana.** Rav Hamnuna says we can learn many important laws from the story of Chana's prayer. This famous story, about Chana praying for a child, is at the beginning of Sefer Shmuel (1:12-17). What does Chana teach us? She prayed *al liba* - from her heart. From this we learn that someone who's praying must focus their heart. Her lips were moving but her voice wasn't heard. From this we learn that we must enunciate the words with our lips, but we should not say the Shemonah Esrei loud enough for people to hear. Eli thought

she was drunk and rebuked her. From this we learn that a drunk person should not pray, and that if we see our friend doing something improper we must rebuke them. Chana responded that she was not drunk, but only heartbroken and bitter and praying desperately for a child. From this we learn that it is ok to pray for yourself. However, praying only for our own needs can be selfish, and it can be difficult to find the right line to draw. On a lower level, our desires and G-d's will are completely separate things. We know what we want but we do not know what G-d wants. But Chana reached a higher level, at which her desires were not distinct from G-d's. What she was praying for was the same as what G-d wanted.

7. **Another lesson from Chana.** Eli rebuked Chana because he thought she was drunk, but his assumption was incorrect. So she said to him, "in this matter you are not my master, because you did not give me the benefit of the doubt." We learn from this that if somebody accuses you of something that you did not do, you need to let them know.
8. **Following nature or overturning it.** In her prayer, Chana called G-d "Hashem Tzevaot" - the Lord of Hosts. This was the first time anyone used that name for G-d. She was saying, "Master of the World, from all of the Hosts of Heaven, is it so hard for You to give me a son?" In one sense, Chana prayed for G-d to let nature take its course. Every part of the body has its purpose, she said, and the purpose of breasts is to nurse children. Why give me breasts and not give me a child to nurse? By nature I'm built to be a mother, so please let me follow my nature and be a mother. But on the other hand, Rabbi Elazar teaches that Chana prayed for a miracle. She said that if G-d did not grant her a son, she would put herself into a position that would cause her to be suspected of being a *sota* (an unfaithful wife). They would make her drink the water of the *sota*, and G-d has decreed that an innocent woman who drinks the water of the *sota* will be blessed with children. That promise of children is miraculous, but it's built into the laws of the *sota*. And Chana decided that if G-d could build that miracle into His laws, she could build the request for that miracle into her prayers. Perhaps she was also saying, "G-d, You promised a miracle for an innocent woman accused of being a *sota*, so why can't You do a miracle for me?" In general it is better for us to get things through natural means, rather than relying on miracles. But there are definitely times when we need miracles, and we know that G-d is capable of creating them.
9. **Wishing for an ordinary child.** Chana prayed for a child who would be *zera anashim* - a man among men. This could be interpreted as "extraordinary," and we know that Chana's son Samuel was extraordinary. But the rabbis say it means the opposite. A *zera anashim* is a child who doesn't stick out. Rav Dimi says it means that he won't be too tall, too stout, too short, too white, too red, too wise, or too dumb. Some of these make sense, but why would someone pray for a child who isn't extra wise? Why would someone pray for a child who is nothing special? Because sticking out from a young age, or being too smart for their own good, is dangerous for a child. The Rambam in Moreh Nevuchim says that there are certain ideas that are so deep that if a person tries to learn them too early that person will lose their faith. Intellect is important, but true knowledge also requires a certain level of maturity. If a child sticks out so much that they can't make friends and be part of a community, they will not be able to develop that level of maturity. It's better for a child to start out ordinary and just be part of the crowd. With the right foundation, they can grow to be extraordinary.
10. **Blaming G-d for our problems.** Rabbi Elazar says that Eliyahu spoke with *chutzpah* to G-d after the tremendous public victory over the prophets of Baal. He said to G-d, "You caused their hearts to go away from you." Can we really blame G-d for our problems or our mistakes? What about free will? In fact, there are times that we do not have to take full responsibility for our actions. Some things are really G-d's "fault." We will explore this further on the next daf.