

## Talmud Brachot Top Ten Teachings, Daf 33:

1. **Don't interrupt your davening for a snake.** The mishna on daf 30b says that if a snake is coiled around your foot, you should not interrupt your davening. The gemara questions this, because we are not supposed to risk our lives for prayer. In another place, we learn that if a man falls into a lion's den and we don't see what happened to him, we cannot assume that he is dead, but if he falls into a pit full of snakes or scorpions and we don't see what happened to him, we can assume he's dead. In other words, falling into a pit full of snakes is basically a death sentence. So how can the mishna say you should not pause your davening if there is a snake on you? The answer is that falling into a pit of snakes is different, because a person who falls into a pit will be moving, and so the snakes will bite him. If you are standing still and praying, even a snake coiled around your ankle might leave you alone. So the mishna isn't just saying you're not allowed to pause your prayer; it's actually giving survival advice. What should you do if there's a snake on you? Don't make any sudden moves. Just stay still and keep davening. The commentaries say that if there is apparent danger, like if the snake looks angry or threatened or appears to be preparing to attack, then of course you should interrupt your davening. Practically speaking, if you are ever in danger while saying the Amidah, you should do whatever is necessary for your safety.
2. **Chanina ben Dosa and the baby dragon.** There was once a baby dragon (Rashi says it was the offspring of a frog or toad and a snake) that was hurting people. They told Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa, and he told them to show him its burrow. When they got to the burrow Rabbi Chanina put his heel down, and the creature bit him and then died. He brought it to the study hall to show his students, and he said to them, "Look, my sons, it's not the baby dragon that kills; it's the sin that kills." They replied, "Woe is to a person who meets a baby dragon, and woe is to a baby dragon that meets Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa." In the Talmud Yerushalmi, this story is told a little bit differently: Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa was in the middle of praying when a baby dragon came towards his leg. He didn't move, either because he didn't notice it or he didn't care, and the creature bit him and then died. In context, since the gemara was just talking about not interrupting tefillah for a snake, the Yerushalmi version makes more sense. But we can learn something from the Bavli version as well. On daf 32 we learned about *iyyun* tefillah, an unsophisticated type of prayer that is not only ineffective but that can lead to depression. *Iyyun* tefillah means praying with concrete expectations. If you shop online and don't get everything that you ordered, you get upset. Some people treat prayer the same way, as if they're "ordering" things from G-d and expect Him to deliver them. In general, this is the wrong attitude. Prayer doesn't work that way. But for certain tzaddikim, like Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa, the restriction of *iyyun* tefillah does not apply. These tzaddikim can bend nature, and they can pray to G-d with the expectation that he will answer their prayers. Average people cannot do this, but people like Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa are exceptions. Chanina ben Dosa was allowed to put himself in danger because his level of connection to G-d bent both G-d's will and nature.
3. **No compassion for those without *da'at*.** The mishna says we make havdalah in the fourth blessing of Shemonah Esrei, *chonen hada'at*. Rabbi Akiva says havdalah should be its own blessing, before *chonen hada'at*. Rabbi Elazar says havdalah should be in the modim blessing. Rav Ami says, "Great is *da'at*, because it is given between two names of Hashem in the verse '*ki kel deyot Hashem* (G-d is a G-d of knowledge).' Whoever doesn't have *da'at*, it is forbidden to have compassion on them." How can we be forbidden to have compassion on somebody? *Da'at* is the discretion to understand the difference between right and wrong. There are people who cannot make the distinction, who think people shouldn't be judged or held responsible for evil

actions. This type of thinking is dangerous, because it empowers people to do evil. Therefore we cannot have compassion on people without *da'at*. Compassion will not teach them the difference between right and wrong, but rather will reinforce the mistaken notion that there is no difference. Compassion will only enable them to continue in their ignorance, which enables evil people to continue causing harm to others.

4. **The evolution of havdalah.** When the Anshei Knesset Hagedolah originally instituted havdalah, it was not done on a cup of wine. It was included in the maariv Shemonah Esrei. But then they became rich, and they began the practice of making havdalah on a cup of wine. Then they became impoverished again and returned to saying havdalah in maariv, though by then they had forgotten at what point in the Shemonah Esrei havdalah was recited and there was a debate regarding where to insert it. At some point it was decided that switching back and forth, sometimes making havdalah during davening and sometimes on a cup of wine, did not make sense, so they decided to do it both ways. Rav Chiya bar Abba says that even though you do say havdalah in maariv, you also need to do it on a cup of wine.
5. **Unnecessary blessings.** Someone who makes an unnecessary blessing is violating the prohibition from the Ten Commandments against taking G-d's name in vain. Almost all of the commentaries say that this is an *asmachta*, which means that it is rabbinic support from a Biblical verse but not actually a Biblical prohibition. Maimonides, however, takes the statement at face value. The rule is that if you're not sure whether or not you've made a blessing, you should not repeat it. Most assume that this is because of the principle of *safek derabanan l'kula* - if there is a doubt regarding a rabbinic law, we are lenient. Since blessings are rabbinic, we can be lenient and assume we did not forget. Maimonides, however, would say that if you're not sure you've made a blessing, you *cannot* repeat it, because making an unnecessary blessing is an actual violation of one of the Ten Commandments.
6. **Kiddush and havdalah: similar but different.** One should not eat on Saturday night before making havdalah. If you did not make havdalah but did eat, you must go back and daven maariv again, with havdalah. Rava says the law is like kiddush: we sanctify Shabbos during davening but then do it again on a cup of wine, and we say havdalah during maariv and then again on a cup of wine. Rabbi Soloveitchik says that kiddush and havdalah are very similar, but they are not the same, the same way a marriage is similar to a divorce but they are also very different. One sanctifies and one desanctifies. On Friday night, we eat a special meal and we want to distinguish it as a Shabbos meal. How do we do that? By making kiddush on a cup of wine. That is why kiddush, unlike havdalah, has since its institution required a cup of wine. The wine is part of the point of the mitzvah: we are sanctifying our meal. Havdalah is the opposite. We make a separation between the holy and the mundane, but we don't need to do that over a meal. There is nothing special about the meal we eat on Saturday night, except that we cannot eat it until we have officially ended Shabbos.
7. **Could rabbis be replaced by artificial intelligence?** The gemara describes a debate about havdalah when Shabbos is immediately followed by a holiday. The resolution to this debate is that we rule like a specific opinion. But what does it mean when the gemara makes such a statement? There are three ways to understand it. (A) This is the accepted opinion, which should be publicly announced in the study hall. (B) We do not announce this opinion to the public, but if specific individuals come to ask a question in this area the opinion could be shared with these individuals. (C) The ruling should not be shared even with someone who specifically asks a question. However, if after the fact it turns out that someone followed this opinion, it would be considered valid and they would not have to redo it.  
Halacha is not always so clear-cut. There is often a distinction between what we say is the law and what we do in specific situations. There are many laws that are recorded in books of

halacha but that we don't really follow. When making a halachic decision, one cannot simply point to the gemara or the Shulchan Aruch and think that his job is done. Other things must be taken into account, such as unwritten traditions, community practices, and personal circumstances. The job of a rabbi is to have a thorough understanding of the laws that we do and don't follow and the ways that we can apply halacha to different situations that arise. A rabbi must understand that sometimes the correct answer to a question is not the answer that's written. A rabbi must be able to help people who ask questions or who make mistakes, and sometimes that requires more than a basic analysis of facts. This is why the job of rabbi could never be done by a robot. A robot can be taught rules and facts, but cannot be programmed to examine individual situations with the level of nuance that is required in halachic decisions. For this, the human touch is required.

8. **Can a Jew be a vegan?** Three people should be silenced: someone who says modim twice, someone who says, "Thanks to G-d Who does good," and someone who says about the mitzvah of chasing a mother bird from her nest before taking the eggs, "G-d Who has mercy on the mother bird and baby birds should extend His mercy to us." The first two make sense. Saying modim twice sounds like you're thanking two separate gods, which of course we don't want to do. Someone who thanks the G-d Who does good is failing to acknowledge that all things, even the ones that seem bad, come from G-d. But why do we silence someone who talks about G-d having compassion on birds? Rabbi Yose bar Avin and Rabbi Yose bar Zvida suggest two answers. One says that by mentioning G-d's compassion on birds and ignoring other animals, you are creating enmity between creatures. The other says that we should not be assuming the mitzvah of chasing away the mother bird is about G-d's compassion; it is a *chok*, and keeping mitzvot that are *chukim* should only be about doing G-d's will, which is beyond our understanding. Trying to discern a reason for these mitzvot is putting G-d into human terms. In the *Guide to the Perplexed*, Maimonides says there are two opinions about whether we are allowed to ascribe reasons to mitzvot known to be *chukim*. There is an opinion that it is forbidden to ascribe human reasons to the Divine will. But Maimonides's opinion is that we can, because it is possible to come to have some understanding of the ways of G-d and His reasons. Following that opinion, we can say that the mitzvah of chasing away the mother bird is meant to teach us compassion. And if we see compassion on animals as a Torah value, then perhaps there is nothing wrong with going even further and becoming a vegetarian or a vegan. Nachmanides offers his own interpretation of the mother bird: we have a number of mitzvot that seem to limit consumption of animals. For example, there is a prohibition against slaughtering a calf on the same day as its mother. He suggests that perhaps the Torah is telling us that we must not harm a species so much that it becomes threatened with extinction. Today, there are many species at risk of extinction in the Amazon because the rainforests are being cleared, partly to make way for fields to feed cattle. Are we contributing to this problem by continuing to eat red meat? Would Nachmanides say that we have to stop eating red meat? Ask your favorite scientist.
9. **The pitfalls of personalized spiritual practice.** Somebody was praying in front of Rabbi Chanina and added on praises to the standard liturgy. Rabbi Chanina waited until the man was finished praying and then said to him, "Did you really finish all the praise of your Master?" G-d's praises are infinite. If we start trying to praise Him in our own words, we will never be able to say enough. It would be like standing in front of a king who has thousands of gold coins and praising him for a few silver coins. The only reason we are able to say the praises that we do is that those praises came from Moses and from the Anshei Knesset Hagedolah. Creativity in spiritual practice is important, but we can't veer too far from what the rabbis gave us.

10. **Fear of Heaven.** Rabbi Chanina says that all is in the hands of Heaven, except fear of Heaven, based on the verse, “Now Israel, what is G-d asking of you but to fear Him?” Is fear of G-d really such a small thing? That depends on what else you have. When you have a lot, small things are no big deal. But even small things become big when you don’t have them. Think about what happened when the COVID-19 pandemic started. So many small things that we’ve always taken for granted became scarce, and suddenly those small things became extremely important. Fear of Heaven, for a great person like Moses, is a small thing. But sometimes fear of Heaven is all a person has. That person is not very impressive compared to Moses, but he has an important foundation. Having fear of Heaven is like knowing how to save money. Someone who doesn’t make a lot of money can save wisely and end up in a better position than someone who makes the same salary and doesn’t save. But saving money won’t make you as rich as someone who starts out with a lot more money. For that, you need to invest. Real spiritual accomplishments are like investing. That’s the real substance, but it can’t be achieved without the foundation of the fear of Heaven. The foundation alone, without anything built on it, is important but not such a big deal. Nonetheless, we are not like the great Moses. For us, having fear of Heaven is a big deal.