

## Talmud Brachot Top Ten Teachings, Daf 34:

- 1. Does G-d have a *chavruta*?** If someone says modim twice we silence him, because it sounds like he is acknowledging two separate powers. Rabbi Zeira says that saying Shema twice is like saying modim twice. The gemara says that saying Shema twice is disgusting, but we don't silence someone who does it. We only silence him if he says the whole verse twice. But isn't it possible he said the verse twice only because he didn't have the proper intention the first time? Abaye says, "Is there a partner to G-d?" If someone says the Shema without intention, we teach him a lesson with a hammer until he learns to have intention the first time. This seems like a very extreme lesson. Is it truly warranted? The problem is that declaring G-d's Oneness twice can be interpreted as suggesting that G-d is One, and another being is also One. It's like suggesting that G-d has a partner, and that perhaps we, too, could be His partners. Scholars like Rachel Elijior teach us about a sectarian debate between the rabbis and the authors of the Dead Sea Scrolls. There is a cryptic verse in Bereshit about Enoch (Chanoch) that says he was good, he walked with G-d, and then he was no more. The Dead Sea Scrolls see Enoch as the founder of the written word, and say that when he was "no more" he actually transformed into the angel Matat (Matatron). They do not consider him an equal to G-d but more like a *chavruta*, a partner. There is a story about Elisha ben Avuya, who saw somebody sitting above and writing, and it was the angel Matat. Elisha ben Avuya had heard that no one was supposed to sit above. So he theorized that there are two jurisdictions; G-d's and Matat's. This is an extremely dangerous view, and antithetical to our belief in G-d's unity. Why is it so terrible to say the Shema twice? Because it suggests that you might believe in this other power that is a partner to G-d and a challenge to His Oneness. Maybe you don't believe in Matat and you only said the Shema twice because you didn't have proper intention the first time. But this is something that we can't be casual about. It's too important. You can't imply that G-d has a partner and then say, "Oops, I just wasn't paying enough attention." So if need be, we teach that lesson with a hammer. There's a concept that G-d is like a hammer: like the hammer makes sparks fly, G-d makes things happen only through His own power. We must not make the mistake of thinking that things He gave power to have become independent, but realize they are just tools in G-d's hand.
- 2. Etiquette of the chazzan.** The Mishna details some of the laws of the chazzan: If the one leading the congregation makes a mistake we replace him, and the person who is chosen to be the replacement chazzan shouldn't refuse. The replacement chazzan should start from the beginning of the blessing in which the mistake was made. The chazzan should not say amen when the priests make their blessing. The gemara says that a person shouldn't run to be a chazzan. In a way, running to be the chazzan is arrogant. After all, who are you to represent the congregation? It is proper to be humble and say no when asked. However, a person also shouldn't refuse too much. After all, if the congregation really wants you to be its representative, who are you to say no? A balance must be struck between humility and over-protecting. So the first time a person is asked to be the chazzan, he should refuse. The second time, he should hesitate but consider it more seriously. And the third time, he should agree. Note that this is only meant for non-professional chazzanim. If a shul specifically hires a chazzan, he doesn't need to refuse.
- 3. The order of the Shemonah Esrei blessings.** If you're meeting with a politician, you don't begin the conversation with a list of demands. Instead you start off with some compliments, acknowledging the things they have already done. Then you can ask for things that are in their power to grant. And once you've done that, you take your leave with gratitude and grace. This is the formula that we follow in the Shemonah Esrei. Rabbi Chanina says that the first three blessings are like a servant praising his master, the middle 12 (now 13) are like the servant

asking his master for something, and the last three are like the servant taking leave of his master after getting something from him. Tosfot points out that the rabbis added a number of additional prayers at the end of the Shemonah Esrei. How can requests be added to the ending section? This is acceptable because the requests are not individual but are very broad in nature. Ben Yehoyada has a different understanding of the three sections: The first three blessings represent the three forefathers, the middle 12 represent the 12 tribes, and the last three represent Moses, Aaron, and Joseph. The Mei Hashiloach adds another dimension to the ending section, saying it's about more than just gratitude. When you've gotten something from G-d, that's not the end of the story. You don't just say thanks and leave. You need a whole new kind of prayer, as you explore the proper way to deal with the blessing you just received and the impact it has on your relationship with G-d.

4. **How long should prayer take?** A student was leading the service and he took an exceedingly long time. So the other students complained to the rabbi. The rabbi said, "Could anybody be longer than Moses?" When Moses prayed at Mount Sinai on behalf of the Jewish people, he prayed for 40 days and 40 nights. Another time, a student led the service and was very quick. The other students again complained, and the rabbi said to them, "Could anybody be quicker than Moses?" When Miriam was stricken with tzara'at, Moses's prayer was only five words: *Kel na refah na la* - G-d, please heal her now. The point is that there are different ways to pray and different situations that call for different types of prayer. Some people take a long time to pray and others don't; one isn't better than the other. Different shuls go at different speeds, and even within a single shul there needs to be room for individuals to pray as they need. Sometimes something is happening in the world that calls for longer prayers. Other times what is happening in the world requires shorter prayers. You shouldn't always daven like a robot; you should be aware of the world around you and what kind of prayer is called for at any given time.
5. **Bowing and the power of modim.** During these blessings, one should bow the knees at "baruch" and the waist at "atah," then straighten up at "Hashem": in the first blessing at the beginning and at the end, and in modim at the beginning and at the end. A Kohen Gadol should bow at the end of each bracha, and a king should bow at the beginning and end of each bracha. Another opinion is that once the king bows he should not straighten until the end. Rashi explains that the Kohen Gadol and the king bow more than the regular person because the more powerful a person is, the more he needs to work to have humility. If a regular person wants to bow for every blessing, we teach him not to. This is because there are times when we are required to bow, and if we add optional bows we might come to think that all bows are optional and then we might not bow when required to. Sometimes being "stricter" is not better, and in fact can make us lose things that are truly important. The gemara contrasts the *hoda'ah* (thanks) of modim with other prayers of thanks, like *nodeh lecha* in *bircat hamazon*. Some commentaries say that modim doesn't just mean to acknowledge or thank G-d but actually means to bow. Chassidut and kabbalah offer an explanation of this gemara: modim, more than any other prayer of thanks, is the epitome of gratitude in our prayers. It sums up a key element of our spiritual service. Modim is understanding and acknowledging that absolutely everything comes from G-d. It's not about a specific blessing, like when we thank G-d for a food that we're eating; it's about how everything comes from Him and we give everything back to Him. When we say modim we shut off every individual sensation and perception and recognize that they're all one, and they're all from G-d.
6. **Nefilat apayim.** After Shemonah Esrei we say tachanun, and as part of tachanun we sit down and lean over with our heads on our upper arms. Why? Kabbalistically, all through davening we have been climbing up through the four spiritual worlds: *birchot hashachar* are the first world (Asiyah), *psukei d'zimrah* is the second (Yetzirah), the Shema and its blessings are the third

(Bri'ah), and Shemonah Esrei is the fourth and highest (Atzilut). Upon reaching the highest level, we cannot just jump back down to the bottom and go about our day. According to the Ari, we need to descend properly, from the highest level back to the lowest. We begin this process with *nefillat apayim*, in which we return to the world of Bri'ah. One can't always stay at the pinnacle of achievement. Descent is necessary, but there is a methodology to follow, and part of that is the humility of sitting down and putting one's head on one's forearm. In fact, in earlier times people would do *nefillat apayim* not just by sitting but rather by falling on their faces.

7. **The need for kavanah in the first bracha.** If somebody makes a mistake in prayer, it is a bad sign. If it's the chazzan who makes the mistake, that's a bad sign for the whole congregation. It was said that Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa, when he prayed for the sick, knew which of the people he was praying for would live and which would die. When asked how he knew, he explained, "If the prayer flows from my mouth, I know it will be accepted and the person will live. If it does not flow, I know the prayer is rejected and the person will die." Rav Chiya says in the name of Rav Safra that it is only in the first bracha of Shemonah Esrei that a mistake is a bad sign. A *beraita* says that one should have kavanah for the whole Shemonah Esrei, but if that is impossible then one should at least have kavanah for the first blessing.
8. **Mashiach and olam haba, Gan and Eden.** Torah scholars are on a higher level than prophets. Rabbi Yochanan says all the prophets who foresaw good things prophesied only to the level of someone whose daughter marries a Torah scholar or someone who helps a scholar in business. They did not prophesy about the scholars themselves, because a prophet can't even imagine what a Torah scholar can achieve. On top of that, the prophets prophesied only about the days of Mashiach, not about olam haba. Are the two not synonymous? "A river flows out of Eden to nourish the Garden (Gan)" - this verse implies that Gan and Eden are in fact two separate places. Shmuel says the time of Mashiach will be no different from the current times, except that we won't be subjugated by the nations. Rambam, similarly, says that when Mashiach comes the only thing that will change will be the leadership. We will have a government that is in tune with the values of Torah. It will be a time of peace and prosperity, but the main difference will be the Divine consciousness. Note that it is possible to read the Rambam differently, as suggesting further changes that will come in the time of Mashiach. But it is clear in the Rambam that there will be a period of time that is the days of Mashiach, followed by *techiyat hameitim*, and then there will come a point at which we no longer live in the physical world. He says that there are two different olam habas. There is one that exists now, where people go when they die, and there is another, the ultimate olam haba, where everyone will go at the end of days after *techiyat hameitim*. True olam haba is for souls only, but it is possible to attain some olam haba consciousness even while we live, such as on Shabbos or when we daven. The Ramban says that the ultimate goal is to have souls in bodies, but the bodies will be different. We will have a *guf zach*, a refined body, something between the physical and spiritual, without the physical desires, struggles, and obstacles that we have today. We will still be in this world, but the world will be different.
9. **Who is greater, the baal teshuva or the tzaddik who has never sinned?** The Alter Rebbe of Chabad says that committing a sin creates a blockade between the spiritual being in this world and the Divine. At all times the Divine is flowing down to this world, but sins block that flow. When someone does teshuva, the blockade is removed and the dam opens, allowing everything that has been blocked to suddenly come gushing in. Someone who has never sinned will never experience the gush of Divinity that a baal teshuva experiences. But on the other hand, there is something truly incredible about a person who has never even tasted sin and who has never blocked that G-dly connection.

10. **Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa's special ability.** When Rabban Gamliel's son fell ill, he sent two scholars to Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa to ask him to pray for the boy. As soon as Rabbi Chanina saw the scholars he knew why they had come, and he went to his attic to beg mercy for Rabban Gamliel's son. When he came down from the attic, he told the scholars that the fever had broken and they could return. They asked him, "Are you a prophet?" He said that he was not, but that he could tell from the way that the prayer flowed from his mouth that it was accepted. The scholars returned to Rabban Gamliel and found that his son's fever had indeed broken at the exact time that Rabbi Chanina told them it had. Another time, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai's son got sick. He, too, asked Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa to pray. Rabbi Chanina put his head between his feet and prayed for mercy, and the son lived. Rabbi Yochanan said, "I could have prayed all day, but they wouldn't have listened to me." His wife asked him, "Is Rabbi Chanina greater than you?" He explained that Rabbi Chanina was like a servant who serves in the king's bedroom, while he, Rabbi Yochanan, was like nobility. Nobles are on a higher level than servants, but there is always formality attached to their meetings with the king. They cannot just walk into the throne room whenever they want and start chatting. A servant has greater access and can get into restricted places whenever he wants. Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa was not as learned as other scholars, but he was a servant of G-d. The ability to argue with G-d and change His mind requires devotion beyond one's social standing, and Rabbi Chanina had that. Most of us need the formalities of prayer. We connect to the service and ask G-d for the things we need, He gives us whatever He deems appropriate, and from that we learn more about ourselves and what we really need. Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa was on a different level. He could pray for what he wanted and know that his prayer would be answered, because of the special relationship he had with G-d.