

## Talmud Brachot Top Ten Teachings, Daf 36:

- 1. *Ikar* and *tafel* - primary and secondary.** Olive oil and wine are singled out by the Torah as having value equal to or even greater than the fruit they came from. That is why for other fruit juices we make the *shehakol* bracha, while wine gets a special *hagefen* bracha. But despite this, olive oil does not get a special bracha, because it is not typically eaten by itself. According to the Talmud, olive oil is not considered healthy or meant to be eaten on its own. We don't drink it plain; we mix it with other things. And when we do that, the olive oil becomes secondary to the food it is mixed in with. If, for example, you dip a cracker in olive oil, the cracker is primary, which we call *ikar*, and the olive oil is secondary, which we call *tafel*. Only the food that is the *ikar* requires a bracha. So you would make a *mezonos* on the cracker, and that covers the olive oil as well. There are two types of *ikar* and *tafel*: either it is very clear that one food is only there to improve the other, or one food is just not an important part of the meal. If you're having brisket with a side of cabbage, you might think you would need to make a *ha'adama* on the cabbage before making a *shehakol* on the meat, because *ha'adama* comes first in the hierarchy of brachot. But in fact, you do not need to make a *ha'adama* at all, because the cabbage is just a side dish that is insignificant to the meal. If you're having a very large portion of cabbage to fill up with, then you do make a *ha'adama*. When you're having a meal with bread, the bread is the *ikar*. Even if you have another course that does not include bread, you do not need an additional bracha. And just as bread is the king of foods, wine is the king of drinks. Once you've made a *hagefen* on wine, you do not need to make another bracha for other drinks during the meal. What if the primary food is something you don't actually enjoy? Maybe you put strawberries in your yogurt because the plain yogurt doesn't taste like much. Are the strawberries primary because they provide the flavor? No, the halacha is that we make a *shehakol* on yogurt with strawberries. Even if you hate yogurt and the strawberries are the only way to make it palatable, you still make a *shehakol*. Personal intentions and preferences generally do not matter. Liking one thing more than another does not make it primary. A child in school might enjoy recess more than sitting in a classroom, but recess isn't the reason a child goes to school. It is the classroom that is primary. The society that we live in dictates what is considered *ikar* and what is *tafel*, and they are not always what we think. In fact, that is what went wrong with Yaakov and Esav. Esav, representing this world, was supposed to be secondary to Yaakov, representing the ideal world – the spiritual and ethical world. They were meant to have a partnership like Yissachar and Zevulun. But Esav thought he should be the primary, and that was why he was so upset about losing out on the blessings.
- 2. Taking medicine on Shabbos.** We learned in a *beraita* that a person with a sore throat shouldn't gargle oil, or let it rest in the back of his mouth, on Shabbos. Rashi says this means letting the oil sit in the back of the throat and not swallowing it, for the sake of healing. Why can't this be done on Shabbos? Because the rabbis forbade recognizably medicinal things on Shabbos, out of fear that people would come to grind herbs, which is forbidden. Does this mean one can never take medicine on Shabbos? No. If a life is in danger, or even if there is only a possibility that a life is in danger, we can do whatever is necessary for *pikuach nefesh* (saving a life). Not only is one allowed to violate Shabbos in this case, but it would be required. Someone who is sick but not in mortal danger (by Rav Moshe's standards, this means sick enough to stay home from work) can also take medicine on Shabbos. But if someone is feeling a bit of discomfort or pain but is otherwise fine, he should not take medicine on Shabbos. Does this still apply today? It's highly unlikely that taking medicine on Shabbos would lead to grinding herbs, because we have pharmacies now. In theory one could violate Shabbos by going to a pharmacy to pick up medicine, but that's not what the rabbis were worried about when they made this decree.

Therefore, some say that we can be more lenient in this area. Most notably, Rabbi Avraham Chaim Nae in the notes on his Ketzos Hashulchan says that since there is already a logical reason to be lenient today because of how medicine is made, we can combine that with additional reason to be lenient when they apply. Rav Moshe found many ways to allow people to take medicine on Shabbos, but did not actually advocate abandoning the decree or taking advantage of Rabbi Nae's reasoning (see *Igros Moshe*, OC 3:53).

3. **Brachot for medicine.** If someone with a sore throat is having a beet broth with a lot of olive oil mixed in, for healing purposes, he should make a *ha'eitz* on it. You might think that since the food is meant for healing and not really for eating, you wouldn't need to make a bracha on it. In fact, you don't make a bracha when you take a pill, because pills aren't food. Even liquid children's medicine does not require a blessing, because it's gross and not something a person would normally eat. Some argue that it is food, since it's sweet, but most authorities don't consider that to be the case. On the other hand something like beet broth, even if its purpose is healing, is still food. If it has some semblance of food, it requires a bracha.
4. **The bracha for flour.** What bracha do we make on wheat flour? Tosfot says the gemara is talking about parched flour, but other rishonim say it's about raw flour. Rabbi Yehuda says the bracha is *ha'adama*. After all, it comes from grain. But Rabbi Nachman says the bracha is *shehakol*, because it's been changed and ground and turned into something completely different. Is flour something that is important and enjoyable enough to retain the bracha of the food it originated from? There are people who know bread so well that they can taste the quality of the flour that was used to make it. For these people, maybe flour should require a *ha'adama*. But for most people, who don't have that sensitivity, the bracha should probably be *shehakol*. Keep that in mind the next time you have raw cookie dough – make a *shehakol*.
5. **Textual emendations of Talmud.** There is a statement in the text of the gemara that decisively states the halacha: the bracha on palm shoots is *shehakol*. According to Tosfot, this statement is not part of the gemara text but came from the Baal Halachot Gedolot. The Baal Halachot Gedolot sometimes wrote notes in the Talmud, and it could be that some of his notes got included in later editions as if they were part of the text. Tosfot feels that this is what happened here, and we should therefore adjust the text to remove the note. This is not an unusual occurrence; based on their studies of various manuscripts and attempts to find correct versions, Rashi, Tosfot, and other Rishonim and Acharonim often suggest adjustments to the text. Some contemporary scholars have attempted to follow their lead but have ventured much further, recommending such extreme emendations as to make the current text almost unrecognizable. The validity of their methods is beyond the scope of this conversation, but what are the halachic ramifications of such changes? Rav Moshe says that our halacha doesn't have power only because it is written down in the mishna or gemara. Its power comes from *mesorah*, our received tradition. The text of the gemara that we have today is the text that's been passed down to us, and that makes it sacred even if it doesn't exactly match the original text. Therefore if we were to change the text today, even if the change is technically accurate, the halacha would not change. Certain changes introduced by the Rishonim and Acharonim are now part of our *mesorah* and therefore have halachic validity, but a broader reevaluation of our sacred texts based on modern theories cannot be considered a valid way to learn halacha. Rav Soloveitchik says that looking at the gemara through this kind of historical lens can be interesting and can teach us some things, but we need to limit ourselves or else we'll never be able to learn any real halacha. Could there ever be a situation in which a contemporary scholar introducing a textual emendation could influence halacha? Possibly, if there is already an established disagreement between the major *poskim* and different communities follow different opinions. If a Gadol

Hador discovers a new way to read the text that supports one of the existing opinions, this might help a *posek* decide which opinion to follow.

6. **Palm shoots and hearts of palm.** Though palm shoots and hearts of palm come from palm trees, the gemara says they get a *shehakol*. Why? One suggestion is that it's because they will become hard and inedible if not eaten in a timely manner, though the gemara rejects that suggestion. The real reason is that they are not the point of the trees they come from. However, that is not the case today. We have palm trees that are specifically grown for the hearts. Now they are not just a byproduct but are actually the reason for the trees' existence. Therefore, today we make a *ha'adama* on hearts of palm. We do not make a *ha'eitz* because *ha'eitz* is reserved for fruit and not for things like the heart of the palm.
7. **The amazing caper bush.** Capers, which look like mini olives and taste great on bagels, grow on bushes. They are buds on the bush, and if not picked they will bloom into flowers. Caper bushes also grow berries in husks and leaves that are sometimes used for salad. The gemara argues that the berries and husks get a *ha'eitz* and the capers and leaves get a *ha'adama*. Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak says that the bushes are planted for the capers just as much as for the berries, and that is why we can make a *ha'adama* on the capers. But still, the berries are the main fruit of the bush and the capers are like a bonus. Does that affect how other halachot are applied? Rabbi Eliezer says that *ma'aser* is needed for all edible parts of the caper bush, but Rabbi Akiva says *ma'aser* is needed only for the berries. We have a principle in certain situations that if there is a lenient opinion in Israel, the halacha can follow that opinion outside Israel but not necessarily in Israel. That would mean the halacha outside Israel would follow Rabbi Akiva, who is more lenient.
8. **Beit Shammai now and in the future.** When a lenient opinion in the gemara is rejected, can we rely on that opinion in certain situations when a *heter* is needed? In general we cannot, unless there is a logical reason to be able to rely on the rejected opinion. Following rejected opinions would undermine the entire halachic process. This is especially true when the rejected opinion is that of Beit Shammai. When we have a debate between Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai and the halacha is ruled according to Beit Hillel, the opinion of Beit Shammai is considered completely irrelevant. It doesn't count. There is an opinion, often attributed to the Arizal but not written down until well after his time (so it may not have been his idea), that when Mashiach comes we will start following Beit Shammai instead of Beit Hillel. But that doesn't make much sense. Beit Shammai's opinion is often stricter - why would we start following stricter rules after the arrival of Mashiach? Perhaps what it means is that while today one isn't allowed to cite Beit Shammai in a case where the ruling is already in favor of Beit Hillel, when Mashiach comes the Sanhedrin will be able to (occasionally) use Beit Shammai as a source for halachic decisions more than today. Mashiach will allow for this openness even to the school of Shammai.
9. **The peel.** When does the peel share the status of the fruit? The gemara suggests three things that it might depend on: whether or not the peel is attached, whether or not the peel remains until the fruit is completed, or whether or not the fruit dies when the peel is removed.
10. **The bracha for licorice.** When you have a food mixture that contains a lot of honey and also a bit of flour, what bracha should you make? Rabbi Yehuda says you should make a *shehakol*, because it's mostly honey. Rav Kana says you should make a *mezonos*, because the flour is the main part. The commentaries explain that when flour is used purely as a binding agent, we can ignore it and make a *shehakol*. But when a food has many ingredients and the flour is important, the correct bracha is *mezonos*. When I was in 5th or 6th grade I was in a brachos bee and I was asked about licorice. I said the bracha was *shehakol*, and I was ruled incorrect. There is flour in licorice, so the rabbi in charge said the bracha was *mezonos*. But licorice is just candy; most

people don't even know there's flour in it. Some people will make a *mezonos* on it, but most, including me, will make a *shehakol*.