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Weekly Newsletter

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פרשת ויקהל
כ"ט אדר א' תשפ"ד

From the Chaburah
By: Adam Friedmann

Reading the Shema Perakdan

We're discussing the position of Beit Hillel (*Berachot* 11a) that the Shema can be read with any posture. This week we begin to look at the exceptions to this rule.

The Gemara (*Berachot* 13b, *Nidah* 14b) rules that a person shouldn't read the Shema while positioned *perakdan*. The Gemara draws a parallel to a similar halachah that forbids sleeping in this posture. However, there is a distinction between the two cases. One can correct sleeping *perakdan* by tilting slightly to one side. For the Shema, tilting slightly doesn't help unless one is unable to read the Shema in another position. The implication from the Gemara is that *perakdan* is some manner of lying down. This seems problematic because Beit Hillel's permissive ruling about reading the Shema in any position explicitly includes lying down. Given this we must ask:

1. What does perakdan mean?
2. Why is it prohibited while reading the Shema?

In answering the first question, the Rambam differentiates between the case of sleeping and the case of the Shema. When sleeping, the prohibition is for men to lie face up (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Issurei Biah*, 21:19). This is because of embarrassing or prohibited things that can occur after falling asleep like this. For the Shema, the Rambam interprets perakdan as either lying face up or lying face down with one's face pressed into the ground (*Hilchot Keriat Shema* 2:2). Clearly, the concern here isn't the same as it is for sleeping. This is true both because the subject is awake while reading the Shema, and because the Rambam adds an extra lying position. There's a parallel halachah on seder night. The Gemara (*Pesachim* 108a) rules that lying *perakdan* does not count as *heseibah* for drinking the four cups. Here too, the Rambam (*Hilchot Chametz uMatzah* 7:8) interprets *perakdan* as including both lying face up and face down.

What's wrong with lying this way while reading the Shema? There are slightly different formulations among the Rishonim and Acharonim. Rashi (*Berachot* 13b s.v. *ki matzlei*) and Tur (*Orach Chaim* 63) write that this is an issue of haughtiness. *Perakdan* is the way that a king might lounge on his throne to show his dominance. Meiri writes that this posture

demonstrates a lack of reverence. Aurch Hashulchan (*Orach Chaim* 63:2) writes that it's impolite. All of these formulations point toward the same idea: some ways of lying down are dignified and proper and others are undignified and disrespectful. Beit Hillel rules that we don't need to interrupt the regular flow of our lives to read the Shema. However, this does not entitle us to read the Shema in a way that reflects disgrace or disrespect. As a result, even when we read the Shema lying down, that posture must be dignified. This is why *perakdan* is excluded. We can easily imagine contemporary versions of this. Lying back in a La-Z-Boy or laying splayed across a couch likely do not reflect the dignity and respect that the Shema demands.

We can sharpen this message by considering another debate surrounding this halachah. As we saw, the Gemara says that in a case of duress one may read the Shema while tilted to one side. Does this mean that under normal circumstances one cannot read the Shema while lying on one's side? If one can't lie face up, face down, or to either side, this effectively excludes lying down while reading the Shema altogether. This is the view of some Rishonim (*Talmidei Rabeinu Yonah*, cited in *Beit Yosef Orach Chaim* 63; *Ra'avad, Hilchot Keriat Shema* 2:2 - according the textual variant cited in *Yad Peshutah* ad loc.). It's also cited by Rema as the practical halachah (*Orach Chaim* 63:1, see *Beur HaGra* and *Beur Halachah*). According to this view, it's always better to sit or stand while reading the Shema.

Another view is that the Gemara only prohibits tilting to one side, but lying completely on one's side is permitted even under normal circumstances. This is the view of the Rambam (*Hilchot Keriat Shema* 2:2), Tur (*Orach Chaim* 63) and Shulchan Aruch (*Orach Chaim* 63:1).

How can we explain this debate? One possibility is by drawing on the parallel to the laws of *heseibah*. In that context, Ra'aviah (*Pesachim* 525) and others note that in their native medieval Europe people no longer lay down while eating important meals. They therefore ruled that *heseibah* no longer demanded lying down and that people should sit at a table for the seder in accordance with the common etiquette. In medieval Muslim territories, however, lying down or sitting on cushions on the ground was still widely practiced. In these places the practice of *heseibah* did not change.

Perhaps a similar argument can be made for the Shema. Is it a good idea to lie down while reading the Shema? It depends. If one lives in a society that recognizes some kind of dignified lying down, then it makes sense to allow reading the Shema in this position. If one lives in a society like ours today where no dignified activities are done lying down, it seems much harder to allow reading the Shema in this posture.

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When: Thursday nights at 8:45 (following Maariv)
Where: Kehillas Shivtei Yeshurun, Nachal Dolev 12, Bet Shemesh

Mishnah: A Philosophy of Life
By: Dovid Campbell

Berachot 3:2 — Finding Your Place in Line

Our mishnah continues the discussion of the relationship between mourning and Shema, this time assessing the obligation of those who have come to console the mourners. At first glance, it is surprising that the mishnah finds it necessary to specify this case. We have already learned the principle that one who is involved with a mitzvah is exempt from performing another one. Why would we imagine that someone who is actively consoling a mourner (a mitzvah *deOraita* according to many) would be required to stop to recite Shema?

As Tosafot Yom Tov explains in a comment to last week's mishnah, the principle is not so simple. There is a difference between performing a mitzvah and being actively involved or preoccupied with it. This explains why those who escort a funeral procession (a fulfillment of the mitzvah *deOraita* of bestowing kindness) remain obligated in Shema if they are not actually required for transporting the deceased. Our mishnah is therefore raising a fundamental question: Is consoling a mourner considered an active involvement with a mitzvah?

The mishnah therefore makes a distinction between two groups of people who come to console a mourner. After the deceased is buried, it is customary for the attendees to form two lines, with the mourner passing between them. Some of the people in these lines, those close enough to actually see and converse with the mourner, will speak with him and offer condolences. They are exempt from Shema. Those farther back, however, remain obligated. After all, they're just standing there.

The mishnah's ruling seems to align with the principle outlined by Tosafot Yom Tov, but it also raises an interesting question about the actual funeral custom: What exactly is the value or purpose of the attendees who do not speak to the mourner? Why are they there? Tiferet Yisrael offers a straightforward and moving explanation – they are there simply for the honor of the mourner, so that he should see a large group of people gathered around him.

We often underestimate the value of just showing up, and it's easy to excuse ourselves from various gatherings or events with the rationalization that no one will notice our absence. Especially in our digital age, when so many of our social interactions occur at a distance, it feels reasonable to suffice with a quick message or a quasi-participation through Zoom. In all of this, we ignore the value of actually being somewhere, filling the space with our presence, and showing others that their experiences warrant our attendance. Our mishnah therefore addresses itself not only to those who are actively consoling the mourner, but even to those standing quietly at the back of the line, reciting the morning Shema.

Eilu v'Eilu
By: Dovid Campbell

The Copper Basin — Reflecting the Causes of Contribution

"And he made the copper basin and its copper base from the mirrors of the legions who gathered at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting" (*Shemot* 38:8).

Our verse is cryptic on multiple levels. What exactly were these mirrors, who were the legions who brought them, and why were they uniquely suited for making the *kior*? Answering these questions offers us valuable and surprisingly diverse understandings of the causes that motivate our spiritual contributions.

Drawing on a well-known midrash, Rashi explains that these mirrors were used by the Israelite women in Egypt to beautify themselves for their husbands and thereby rear large families. Since the *kior* would eventually be used for the Sotah waters, whose function was to restore marital harmony, it was only fitting that it be built from these mirrors, which served a similar purpose. According to this approach, the "legions" mentioned in the verse are the numerous women who came to contribute.

Ibn Ezra explains similarly, but he chooses to highlight the mindset of the women who donated. According to him, many Jewish women chose to "remove themselves from the pleasures of this world," and no longer had any need for a tool used to beautify themselves. Like Rashi, ibn Ezra explains that the "legions who gathered" refers to these women, but their gathering was not a one-time event. Rather, these pious women gathered daily to pray and hear words of Torah at the Tent of Meeting.

For Ralbag, these mirrors were indeed donated wholeheartedly by the women, but not necessarily as an act of ascetic piety. Ralbag explains that there was simply no other copper available for building the *kior*. Recognizing this, the women selflessly donated their own mirrors.

Baal HaTurim, in his long commentary, adds a fascinating and perhaps novel understanding of the *kior* which helps to explain its unique source. A kohen offering the sacrifice of a woman would find himself in a difficult situation. On the one hand, he was required to offer it for her sake and therefore had to recognize her. On the other hand, he was forbidden to gaze at her face. The kohen would therefore look at her reflection in the *kior*, which was uniquely reflective since it was made from the refined copper of the mirrors.

In all of these explanations, the tremendous devotion and selflessness of the women shines through. But each explanation offers a unique take on what exactly motivated these women. Was it a straightforward desire to donate to the Mishkan? An expression of personal piety? A necessity that they embraced? How do these alternatives shape our appreciation of the origin of this unique vessel, and what lessons can we take away for our own spiritual contributions?

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