



חבורת מהות היהדות

Weekly Newsletter

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פרשת קדושים
ג אייר תשפ"ד

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From the Chaburah
By: Adam Friedmann

Can Hypocrites Learn Torah?

The Mishnah in *Shabbat* (1:2) outlines an enactment of Chazal designed to prevent people from forgetting to pray Minchah: "A person may not sit before a barber close to the time for Minchah. [Similarly] a person may not enter a bathhouse, a tannery, begin a meal, or sit for judgment." The Rambam (*Perush Hamishnah*, *ibid.*) explains that all of these activities can unexpectedly take up a lot of time. Chazal were wary of something like this happening and preventing someone from praying, so they prohibited these activities just before the time for Minchah. Nevertheless, the mishnah continues, if someone begins doing one of these things, they do not need to stop. They can complete their activity and pray afterwards.

This would seem to have nothing to do with the Shema, except that at the end of the mishnah, we find the following cryptic statement: "One stops for the Shema but one does not stop for prayer (i.e., the Amidah)."

The Gemara (*Shabbat* 11a) identifies this final statement with a totally different case about learning Torah, based on the following *beraita*: "Torah scholars who are engaged in learning - they stop for reading the Shema, but they don't stop for prayer." In the Gemara, Rabbi Yochanan qualifies this statement. This halachah is only true for scholars whose "Torah is their vocation" (*toratan umanutan*), such as Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and his colleagues. Rabbi Yochanan argues that he and his contemporaries should interrupt their learning to pray.

The mishnah is telling us two rules about interrupting activities for the Shema and Amidah:

- 1.If someone is engaged in the activities mentioned in the mishnah, they do not need to stop to pray.
- 2.If someone is learning, they don't stop to pray but they do stop to read the Shema.

The Rishonim ask lots of different questions about this mishnah. Two are relevant for us:

Types of "stopping"

Are the kinds of "stopping" in both of the rules mentioned above the same?

According to the *Ba'al Hamaor* (*Rif, Shabbat* 9b), they aren't. The first rule is telling us that you don't need to stop one of the activities when the time for Minchah comes and pray right away. But if the time for Minchah is about to end you do need to stop to pray. In other words, the rule is not an exemption from Minchah. The second rule, however, is talking about an exemption. Someone engaged in learning doesn't need to stop to pray *at all*.

The Rambam (*Perush Hamishnah, Shabbat* 1:2; *Hilchot Keriat Shema* 2:5; *Hilchot Tefillah*, 6:8) agrees with the ruling of the *Ba'al Hamaor* that learning can exempt some people from prayer. However, he disagrees with the reading of the mishnah. The mishnah is only talking about the first kind of stopping, i.e. whether one must interrupt their activities when the time for a mitzvah arrives. According to the Rambam, the mishnah is telling us that someone who is learning when the time for the Shema begins must stop and read the Shema.

Interrupting other activities for the Shema

The second question about the mishnah is whether the first rule above applies to the Shema as well. If someone is in the bathhouse, court, tannery, etc., and the time for the Shema comes, do they need to stop and read the Shema? According to some Rishonim (*Ra'avad to Hilchot Keriat Shema* 2:6; *Ran to Rif, Shabbat* 9b), they do. If learning Torah is interrupted for the Shema, then certainly these other activities are as well. The Rambam emphatically disagrees. The activities mentioned in the mishnah, once started, are never interrupted, even for the Shema (*Hilchot Keriat Shema* 2:6).

What emerges is that, according to the Rambam, someone who is learning when the time to read the Shema comes needs to stop and read it immediately. However, someone who is taking a bath or eating a meal does not need to stop. How can we explain this?

The answer may come from Rabbi Yochanan's qualification, mentioned above. Rashi (*Shabbat* 11a s.v., *aval anu*), explains the reasoning. Since Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai and his colleagues didn't stop learning for anything, even to earn a livelihood, they did not need to stop learning to pray. But the rabbis of later generations *did* interrupt their learning to work. It would be hypocritical to hold that they can interrupt their learning to work, but not to pray for their needs. This is true even though fundamentally learning does override prayer. We see that learning Torah must be done in the context of radical religious and intellectual integrity. One's activities while learning Torah must reflect the ideals of the Torah.

Perhaps this explains the discrepancy about stopping to read the Shema. In the ideal world, we would all stop our daily activities the moment the time for a mitzvah arrives. In general, however, halachah doesn't demand this, as long as it can be done later. But when we're learning Torah, our behavior needs to reflect the highest spiritual ideals. That's why someone who is learning needs to stop to read the Shema.

Mishnah: A Philosophy of Life

By: Dovid Campbell

Berachot 4:3 — *Shemoneh Esrei* Isn't For Everyone

Our mishnah introduces a fascinating disagreement regarding the format of our daily prayers. According to Rabban Gamliel, one should pray the full *Shemoneh Esrei* every day. According to Rebbe Yehoshua, one's daily prayer should be “*me'ein Shemoneh Esrei*,” an abbreviated form that is considerably easier to recite. Rebbe Akiva, whom the halachah follows, offers a compromise position: One whose *tefillah* is “*shegurah b'fiv*” should recite the full prayer, while others should make do with the abbreviated version. There are many interesting questions to be asked here, but we should begin with a definition of *shegurah b'fiv*.

For Bartenura, the phrase means that one is well-accustomed to the prayer. He knows it fluently. Along the same lines, the *Aruch* interprets *shegurah* as “orderly.” The general sense seems to be that one who knows the *Shemoneh Esrei* fluently should recite the whole prayer, while those who are still somewhat unfamiliar with it should recite *me'ein Shemoneh Esrei*. We have to recall that at the time, written copies of the text were probably rare, and even if they had not been, most Jews were probably not fluent in Hebrew. Rambam writes in *Hilchot Tefillah* that the official language and format of prayer was established because Jews had lost the ability to pray fluently in any one language. Seen through this lens, our mishnah displays a profound sensitivity to the struggles of a nation still adapting itself to formalized prayer.

However, not everyone explains *shegurah b'fiv* in this sense. Rabbeinu Natan Av HaYeshivah, one of our earliest extant commentators on the Mishnah, interprets the phrase to mean that one is successful in his petition in prayer, i.e. that his prayer is well-received by Hashem. A likely source for Rabbeinu Natan is *Berachot* 5:5, which also uses this phrase. There we learn that Rebbe Chanina ben Dosa could foresee which sick people would live or die based on how fluently his prayer flowed when he prayed for them. According to Rashi, this fluency entailed not only a proper articulation of the words but also an experience of his supplications flowing directly from his heart to his mouth for as long as he desired to pray.

According to this approach, the meaning of our present mishnah is remarkably different. Bartenura and others seem to view the abridged *Shemoneh Esrei* as an accommodation for those less well-versed in prayer. Rabbeinu Natan, on the other hand, views it as an option for those less *successful* in prayer. Accordingly, when deciding whether one should pray a full or abridged *Shemoneh Esrei*, Rabbeinu Natan would ask us to consider much more than our basic familiarity with the standard text. It may be that the full *Shemoneh Esrei* is reserved for prayer that flows from the heart.

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When: Thursday nights at 8:45 (following Maariv)

Where: Kehillas Shivtei Yeshurun, Nachal Dolev 12, Bet Shemesh

Holiness as Separation — But From What?

“Speak to all the congregation of the Children of Israel, and tell them, ‘You shall be holy; for I, Hashem your God, am holy’” (*Vayikra* 19:2).

The Sifra explicitly links the concept of holiness in our verse with *perishut*, abstinence or restraint. In some sense, holiness entails separateness, and the classic commentators seem to universally develop this line of thought. What remains murky is the object and purpose of this separateness—from what and for what should we separate ourselves? We can identify at least three distinct approaches to these questions.

Rashi claims that this *perishut* refers primarily to forbidden sexual relations. Citing a number of verses, he shows that the concept of holiness is repeatedly associated with abstaining from such relations. In Rashi's view, this verse is essentially a conclusion of the various sexual prohibitions with which we ended *parashat Acharei Mot* (see *Mizrachi*).

Ramban cites Rashi's explanation but finds it insufficient. Throughout the Talmud, we find a special sect of pious Jews known as *perushim*, and it is their elevated lifestyle that the Torah discusses here. In a now-famous comment, Ramban explains that the prohibitions of the Torah do not necessarily prevent one from living a life of excess and debauchery. Our verse therefore commands us to separate ourselves from such excess. Even things which the Torah does not explicitly command us to avoid, such as ritual impurity or improper speech, should be avoided by those striving for *perishut*.

Ralbag's interpretation of this verse seems to push the concept of separation even further. According to him, this verse instructs us to separate ourselves from physicality in all respects and to the greatest extent possible. Ralbag seems to be encouraging a radical asceticism, but he finds support for this notion in the verse itself. In striving for holiness, our goal is to become like God, who is completely separate from any association with physicality.

Abarbanel similarly interprets our verse as advocating a separation from physicality, but he adds a caveat that seems aimed at counterbalancing extreme formulations like the Ralbag's. He notes that our goal in abstinence must not be “like the solitary philosophers who afflict their bodies in order to be drawn after their intellects.” Rather, we should pursue it because “it is sufficient for a slave to behave like his master.” We separate from physicality to emulate our Creator, not to exalt in our own intellects.

The concept of holiness is central to Judaism and religious philosophy in general. To what extent do the views surveyed here accurately reflect the different approaches to holiness that we find in modern Judaism and the world at large?