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From the Chaburah
By: Adam Friedmann

Piecemeal Mitzvot: Shema, Shofar, Megillah, and Hallel

Are we allowed to pause in the middle of doing a mitzvah? If we are allowed, how long can those pauses be? Many discussions in the Gemara revolve around these questions. In one of them (*Rosh Hashanah* 34a-b), we learn the following:

> If one **heard nine** shofar **blasts at nine** different **times of the day, he has fulfilled** his obligation... **And** this is true **even** if one heard the blasts from the different individuals **at intervals, and even** if it took the course of **the entire day**. (Koren translation)

The Gemara applies the same rule to the mitzvot of reading Hallel and reading Megillat Esther on Purim. Finally, it includes this story that applies this principle to the Shema:

> **Rabbi Abbahu** was once **walking after Rabbi Yoḥanan, and** Rabbi Abbahu **was reciting Shema** as he walked. **When he reached alleyways** that were **filthy** with human excrement, where it is prohibited to utter words of Torah, **he fell silent** and stopped reciting Shema. **After he passed** through, Rabbi Abbahu **said to** Rabbi Yoḥanan: **What is** the halakha with regard t**o completing** Shema from where I left off? Rabbi Yoḥanan **said to him: If you remained** in the alleyway for an interval **sufficient to complete the entire** Shema, **return to the beginning** and start again. (Koren translation)

The Gemara goes on to explain that Rabbi Yochanan only answered Rabbi Abbahu according to the latter's halachic position. Rabbi Abbahu held that taking an extended break means having to start the Shema again, he just didn't know how long of a break was a problem. But according to Rabbi Yochanan's own view, the Shema is the same as the other mitzvot mentioned above. The halachah that emerges from this Gemara is that the mitzvot of shofar, Hallel, Megillah, and Shema can be fulfilled even with very long breaks in the middle (see *Shulchan Aruch*, *Orach Chayim* 65:1, 588:2).

This halachah begs a question. Many, if not most, mitzvot can't be fulfilled this way. For example, one

cannot fulfill eating matzah by taking one bite and then taking the next one several hours later. The same is true even for other mitzvot that involve reciting a text such as *mikra bikurim*. What differentiates the 4 mitzvot mentioned above? At a technical level, the distinction seems to be about what constitutes a "mitzvah unit". In most cases, the basic unit of a mitzvah is the whole thing: eating the required amount of matzah, shaking all of the *arba'at haminim*, reciting the complete text for the *bikurim*. However, in the case of these 4 mitzvot, the fulfillment of the mitzvah can be broken down into "subunits". One of these subunits alone does not count as a whole a mitzvah. But each is individually meaningful such that a break before and after it does not break up the flow of fulfilling the mitzvah. Doing all the subunits constitutes a complete fulfillment of the mitzvah (for a similar argument regarding the Shema specifically, see Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, *Shiurim Lezecher Aba Mori*, vol. 1 pp 32-37).

This is an interesting technical description, but it doesn't explain *why* these mitzvot should be different. Why is it that for these particular mitzvot "subunits" are relevant? We should note that the reason need not be the same for all of them. The Gemara may have grouped them together because of technical, not philosophical, similarity.

The Shema and the Megillah seem to be the easiest to explain. Both of these mitzvot involve a cognitive process. The goal of reading the Megillah is to review the story. The story can be broken up into many smaller pieces. The cumulative effect of reading each smaller piece is to read the story overall. As we've seen in earlier discussions in this newsletter, the goal of the Shema is to constantly review the fundamentals of our beliefs such as the existence and unity of Hashem, and the mitzvot. This is also something that can be accomplished in small pieces. Hallel isn't a process. It's a set of praises of Hashem. In this case we can say that there isn't too much compelling us to look at Hallel as a single unit in the first place. (Though, there is a certain thematic progression throughout the passages of Hallel, see *Talmud Yerushalmi*, *Berachot* 2:4.) Therefore, it makes sense to say that reciting Hallel can be accomplished in smaller chunks.

The most difficult mitzvah to explain is the shofar. Hearing all the sounds of the shofar would seem to be one large unit like matzah or the *arba'at haminim*. Why can it be broken up? Perhaps we can argue that hearing the shofar is also a process. The Rambam (*Mishneh Torah*, *Hilchot Teshuvah* 3:4) argues that one way to understand the shofar is as a wake up call. Hearing the shofar is supposed to disrupt our complacent, routine lives so that we can refocus ourselves on the right goals. Perhaps this is not something that can happen in an instant. Ideally, it requires the alternation between hearing the shofar and time for self-reflection. Today, we include this time in the Musaf prayer that's interwoven with the sounds of the shofar.

Mishnah: A Philosophy of Life
By: Dovid Campbell

Berachot 6:6 — Miscellaneous Tables and the Socially Ambiguous

This week's mishnah continues our discussion of the *berachot* relevant to a structured meal. As we have seen, meals in the time of Chazal generally followed a pattern, and the halachah takes this pattern into consideration when determining which *berachot* should be said when. Understanding how Chazal conceptualized the dynamics of a simple sitdown meal offers us some surprising insights into human sociology.

I went to a large public high school where the regularity of the class periods stood in sharp contrast to the absolute chaos of the lunch hour. Especially during the first week of the school year, students roamed the length and breadth of the campus, looking for an ideal place to sit and enjoy the break. Over time, people found their places and social groups formed, but I noticed a peculiar phenomenon at certain large tables.

These were the "miscellaneous" tables—places where students sat shoulder to shoulder but with no particular connection to the other students around them. There was some socializing, but mostly they just needed a place to sit before they hurried off to the library or some extracurricular activity. They were eating together, but separately.

Our mishnah highlights exactly this social phenomenon in its first line: "If they were sitting to eat, each blesses [hamotzi] to himself. If they reclined, then one blesses for them all." The difference, explains the Bartenura, is that group meals were generally eaten in a state of reclining. If they did not bother to recline, it was an indication that they were not truly eating together, even if they were in close proximity.

The idea of being alone together might seem strange, but it characterizes a large part of our daily experience. Whether we're sharing an elevator or waiting at a crowded bus stop, we often not only avoid social contact but actively repel it by checking our phones or whatever else we have handy. In many ways, this is our default state. We have to make an active effort to initiate a group activity, as did the sages with their reclining.

Today we no longer recline on pillows to eat. What would be considered a modern indication of a group meal? *Tiferet Yisrael* claims that eating together at one table would do the trick, even if everyone was eating from their own loaf of bread. This raises a fascinating question regarding my high school experience. To me, it seemed obvious that these individuals were eating separately, despite their proximity. I'm sure that many of them didn't even know each other's names. But would the halachah still consider them a group? Weren't they, after all, choosing to share a table?

Questions like these get to the very heart of our social dynamics. In an age when social media introduces further ambiguity into our relationships and communities, it is worth contemplating this core message of our mishnah: Solitude is by default; togetherness requires a choice.

Eilu v'Eilu
By: Dovid Campbell

The *Shotrim* — Violent Enforcers or Gentle Educators?

"Judges and officers you shall appoint for yourself in all your gates which Hashem your God grants you, according to your tribes; and they shall judge the nation with a righteous judgment" (*Devarim* 16:18).

Our parashah begins with the Torah's famous instruction to establish a legal system of courts and enforcers. While the term *shoftim*, judges, refers unambiguously to the rabbinic judges who operate the nation's *batei din*, the term *shotrim* is less clear. Who were these officers of the courts, and what exactly was their function?

Rashi explains that the *shotrim* essentially functioned as bailiffs or enforcers, chastising the populace to obey the rulings of the judges and even using physical violence when necessary. As Rashi writes, these enforcers would use "a stick and a strap" to encourage compliance.

Ibn Ezra also understands the *shotrim* to be enforcers of the law but perhaps in a different sense. He does not mention the use of physical force and even equates the term *shotrim* with *moshlim*, rulers. In Ibn Ezra's view, these enforcers may have functioned through more political means, compelling obedience from a position of social influence.

R' Yosef ibn Kaspi offers an even less violent interpretation, comparing the *shotrim* to "runners," presumably a type of messenger. It seems that these runners were more involved in disseminating the law than strictly enforcing it.

The furthest departure from Rashi's interpretation is found in R' Yehudah ibn Balaam, one of our earliest Rishonim. He believes that the purpose of the *shotrim* was to explain the judgments of the judges. This could also be considered a method of enforcing or upholding the law, through educational rather than physical means.

These explanations suggest markedly different approaches to social governance. Ultimately, all societies must find ways of disseminating, clarifying, and enforcing their laws. But which of these does the Torah consider most essential? We have seen that Ibn Kaspi emphasizes dissemination, Ibn Balaam clarification, and Rashi/Ibn Ezra enforcement. It could be that they agree that the *shotrim* fulfilled all of these roles to some extent. Alternatively, it could be that Ibn Kaspi and Ibn Balaam wished to downplay the notion that the judges' laws were upheld through coercion.

How does the Torah's system of legal enforcement differ from modern systems, both in secular and religious communities? How does the disagreement among these Rishonim affect our understanding of the type of relationship that Hashem wants us to have with His laws?