

EATING BEFORE DAVENING

by Rabbi Doniel Neustadt

A discussion of Halachic topics related to the Parsha of the week. For final rulings, consult your Rav.

It is strictly forbidden to eat before reciting Kerias Shema and davening Shacharis, both on weekdays and on Shabbos and Yom Tov. There are two separate reasons for this prohibition:

Eating before reciting Kerias Shema is considered "haughty behavior". By tending to one's physical well-being before discharging one's daily obligation to declare malachus shamayim, Hashems sovereignty, it is as if one is Hashem's sovereignty over the world is a matter of secondary importance.

Even if one recited Kerias Shema, it is still strictly forbidden to eat before davening. While this is no longer considered "haughty behavior"(1), it is still prohibited based on the verse in Parashas Kedoshim 19:26 which states, "You shall not eat over the blood" which is expounded upon at length in the Talmud(2). One of the interpretations given is that it is forbidden to eat before one davens "for his blood"(3).

It is, therefore, strictly forbidden to eat anything at all, even a morsel of food(4), before davening(5). Drinking, however, is not considered "haughty behavior" nor does it transgress the prohibition of "eating" before davening. Accordingly, it is permitted to drink(6) coffee, tea [with sugar and a drop of milk] or soda before davening(7). It is prohibited, however, to drink beer or any other intoxicating beverage before davening(8).

The prohibition of eating before davening begins at alos amud ha-shachar, which is generally accepted to be 72 minutes before sunrise(9). But even if one began eating before then, he must stop eating as soon as alos ha-shachar arrives(10). [Note that according to the Zohar(11), one who wakes up at any time during the night [after midnight] may not eat before davening ??even if the time for davening is several hours off. Although there are certain individuals who abide by the Zohar(12), the basic halachah is as stated above(13).]

QUESTION: Under what circumstances is it permitted to eat before davening?

A ill, weak or elderly person who needs to eat immediately upon rising and cannot daven unless he

eats first, may eat before davening(14). Included in this category is a person who is neither weak nor ill but finds himself so hungry that he cannot properly focus on davening. The following rules apply(15):

If he can daven immediately at home without a minyan, he should do so and then eat, even though this will cause him to miss tefillah b'tzibbur. After he has eaten, he should go to shul to listen to kadish, kedushah and kerias ha-Torah, etc(16).

If he cannot wait to eat even if he will daven at home, he may eat before davening but should first recite Birchos ha-Torah and Kerias Shema(17). He should limit his intake of food to as little as he needs in order to be able to daven; the rest of his meal should be eaten after davening(18).

Taking vitamins or medications, even for a minor ailment, is permitted before davening. Even if the medication itself is a good-tasting food, it is permitted. Taking medication before davening is permitted even if the medication or vitamin can just as easily be taken after davening(19).

Women, also, may not eat before davening. But many women eat after reciting Birchos ha-shachar since some poskim rule that they fulfill their minimum obligation of davening by reciting any supplication(20). They may rely on this leniency even though they are planning to daven the entire davening later on(21).

Children, even those who have reached the age of chinuch, are allowed to eat before davening(22).

There is another issue, similar but unrelated, that has a bearing on the prohibition against eating before davening. There is a general ruling concerning all positive commandments, such as shaking the lulav on Sukkos and reading the megilah on Purim, that one may not partake of a meal within a half hour of the time at which the mitzvah can be performed. This rabbinical edict was enacted since it was feared that one might become distracted while eating and forget about performing the mitzvah. Kerias Shema and davening Shacharis are no different from any other mitzvah; it is, therefore, prohibited to eat a meal starting one half hour before alos amud ha-shachar(23).

One who began to eat a meal before the half hour point may continue eating until alos amud ha-shachar. But one who did not begin to eat until he was within half an hour of alos amud ha-shachar must do one of the following: Limit his food intake: Eat fruit (any amount)(24), eat any shehakol type of food but without being kovei'a seudah (eating a regular, scheduled meal)(25), or eat less than a k'beitzah (estimated to be anywhere between 2.2 and 3.5 fl. oz.) of bread, cake, cereal, etc.(26) All drinks, except intoxicating beverages, are permitted in any amount(27). Eat any kind and any amount of food, but appoint another person(28) who is not eating or sleeping(29) to remind him to recite Kerias Shema and Shemoneh Esrei(30). It is also permitted to set a timer that will ring at the proper time to remind him to stop eating(31).

In summary, it is important to realize that prior to permitting eating in the morning before davening one must deal with at least two separate possible prohibitions: 1) The general prohibition against eating before fulfilling any mitzvah; 2) The specific prohibition against eating in the morning before davening. As explained earlier, each one of these prohibitions has its own sets of rules, and both must be satisfied before a clear leniency to eat is granted.

FOOTNOTES:

1 Beir Halachah 89:3 (s.v. v'lo); Torah Temimah, Kedoshim 19:26.

2 Berachos 10a; Sanhedrin 63a.

3 Most poskim maintain that while this prohibition is derived from a verse in the Torah, it is still a Rabbinical prohibition; see Bais Yosef O.C. 89:3 and Pri Megadim, Mishbetzos 4. A minority view holds that eating before davening is Biblically forbidden; see Minchas Chinuch, 248:5, Mor u'Ketziyah O.C. 89. See also Yabia Omer 4:11.

4 O.C. 89:3 and Mishnah Berurah 21. [Chewing, however, may be permitted; see Mishnah Berurah 90:45.]

5 It makes no difference whether or not one is planning to daven immediately upon rising or to delay his davening till later; either way it is prohibited to eat before davening. Even one who was unable to daven Shacharis and is going to daven Minchah twice may not eat before davening; Tehilah l'Dovid 108:2.

6 Privately, not with a group of friends; Mishnah Berurah 89:22.

7 Aruch ha-Shulchan 89:23; Da'as Torah 89:3; K'tzos ha-Shulchan 11:2; Orchos Rabbeinu 1, pg. 57 quoting Harav Y.Y. Kanievsky; Hilchos Shelomo 2:2 quoting Harav S.Z. Auerbach; Tefillah K'hilchasah 10:13 quoting Harav Y.S. Elyashiv; Az Nidberu 12:27. While several poskim, including the Mishnah Berurah, hold that one should not add milk or sugar to the beverage, all of the poskim quoted above agree that nowadays, when adding sugar and milk is standard practice, it is no longer considered "haughty" to do so and is permitted. This is the prevailing custom.

8 Mishnah Berurah 89:22. Drinking a cup of milk should be avoided since milk nourishes the body like food; Kaf ha-Chayim 89:30.

9 Beir Halachah 89:1 (s.v. v'im). According to some opinions, amud ha-shachar is when the center of the sun is 16.1 degrees below the horizon.

10 Mishnah Berurah 89:29.

11 Quoted by the Magen Avraham 89:14 and by all of the latter poskim.

12 Aruch ha-Shulchan 89:26.

- 13** Consensus of all the poskim; see Mishnah Berurah 89:28; Aruch ha-Shulchan 89:26; Yalkut Yosef, pg. 147.
- 14** O.C. 89:4. But if he could daven sitting down without eating and needs to eat only in order to be able to stand up during Shemoneh Esrei, it is better that he daven sitting down and not eat before davening; Harav Y. Kamenetsky, Emes L'Yaakov O.C. 89:4.
- 15** On Shabbos, when there is an additional requirement of Kiddush, there is a separate set of rules which will be discussed in the following column.
- 16** Be'air Heitev 89:11 quoted by Beiur Halachah 89:3 (s.v. v'chein). This applies most often on Shabbos, when the davening in shul is long; *ibid*.
- 17** Beiur Halachah 89:3 (s.v. v'lo). [Birchos ha-Torah are recited since it is correct to recite them before Kerias Shema.] It is advisable to have specific intent not to be yotzei the obligation of Kerias Shema with this recitation, since it is being said without Birchos Kerias Shema and without Tefilin; Siyach Halachah 89:20; Beis Baruch 16:24.
- 18** Harav S.Z. Auerbach, quoted in Nishmas Avraham, vol. 4, pg. 74 and Siyach Halachah 89:23.
- 19** Mishnah Berurah 89:24; Beiur Halachah 89:3 (s.v. v'chein); Aruch ha-Shulchan 89:24. [When taking medication before davening, there is no need to first recite Kerias Shema; Siyach Halachah 89:21.]
- 20** See The Weekly Halachah Discussion, vol. 1, pg. 116 for an elaboration.
- 21** Based on Igros Moshe O.C. 4:104-4, Minchas Yitzchak 4:28-3 and ruling of Harav S.Z. Auerbach (written responsum quoted in Halichos Bas Yisrael 2, note 3.)
- 22** Mishnah Berurah 106:5. See Kaf ha-Chayim 11 who disagrees.
- 23** Mishnah Berurah 89:27. This prohibition does not apply to women; Harav S.Z. Auerbach, written responsum published in Lev Avraham, vol. 2, pg. 20.
- 24** Based on Mishnah Berurah 232:34 and 286:9.
- 25** Based on Mishnah Berurah 639:15.
- 26** Mishnah Berurah 89:27. If it is a type of a cereal upon which one is not kovei'a seudah, it is permitted to eat without a limit; see Mishnah Berurah 232:34.
- 27** Based on Mishnah Berurah 232:35.
- 28** Even a responsible minor; Harav C. Kanievsky (Ishei Yisrael 27:19).
- 29** Harav S.Z. Auerbach and Harav Y.S. Elyashiv (quoted in Avnei Yashfei, Tefillah, 11:16) based on Mishnah Berurah 235:17.
- 30** Based on Mishnah Berurah 89:34 and 235:18.

31 Harav Y. Kamenetsky (oral ruling published in Emes L'Yaakov O.C. 232:2, note 242); Harav S.Z. Auerbach (Halichos Shelomo 2:12).

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