

# **Eating Before Davening**

## **Rabbi Yehuda Balsam**

The pasuk in Parshas Kedoshim (19:26) offers us a cryptic message. It states "lo Tochlu al hadam" do not eat on the blood. This pasuk is virtually impossible to understand without the help of Chazal. Rashi references the gemara in Sanhedrin (63a) which offers a number of possibilities. Another interpretation, which is not found in Sanhedrin is suggested by the gemarah in Berachos (10b). The Torah is teaching us not to eat before we pray for our blood. This interpretation of the pasuk is not considered to be a full fledged drasha of the Torah Sheb'al Peh, which would render it a biblical law. Rather, it is an asmachta b'alma, (see beit yosef 89, Pri Megadim a.a. s.k.12, Minchas Chinuch mitzvah 248:5, as opposed to mor uk'tziah 89). Since it is a din d'rabanan, we must understand why the Rabanan felt the need to institute such a decree. For this, the gemara continues and quotes a passuk in Melachim 1 (14:9) which it explains as saying (rhetorically): after one eats drinks and engages in one's own personal aggrandizement (ga'avah) he then decides to accept upon himself the yoke of shamayim? Thus we see that the reason for not eating before davening is that one who awakens in the morning needs to first realize that he is a servant of Hashem and that Hashem is the one who gives him the ability to live life. This can certainly be accomplished though davening. It is therefore incumbent upon us to daven as early in our day as possible. One should certainly not eat or drink before davening as this is an ultimate sign of taking care of one's own physical needs before properly recognizing Hashem's role in his day.

## **Other Prohibitions**

The Shulchan Aruch (O.C. 89:3) also records an issur to engage in one's personal business before davening. This halacha is not overly specific and seems to relate to any leisure activities. This is based on the gemara (Berachos 14a) which is interpreted in two ways. The majority of Rishonim explain that it is taking care of personal business, but the Rif and the Rosh explain that it speaks of taking a trip; meaning, one should not begin a lengthy journey before davening. The Mishnah Berurah (s.k. 20 quoting the Derech Hachaim) adds that even if one intends to daven with a minyan at the place where he is going, he should not leave before he davens. However, if one is traveling with a group, and the other members will have to wait, he may daven on the way.

Concerning what constitutes one's personal business, the Rashba (quoted by the Beis Yosef 89) explains that one is not supposed to concentrate on any other matter before davening. Thus, it follows that only matters which will occupy one's thoughts are included in this prohibition. Based on this, the sefer Toras Chaim (47:2) writes (based on the Avudraham) that one may not write a letter (or email?) before davening. However, if this letter is related to a mitzvah, it is permitted. Furthermore, the Mishnah Berurah (s.k. 36) writes that one may buy food for shabbos before davening if the normal custom in this area is to do so, if he would be able to make the same purchases

after davening, he should wait. Rav Shlomo Zalman Aurbach is quoted (Tefilah K'hilchesah 6:36) as having permitted a man to run errands in order to help his wife, or to take care of the children, because these are acts of chesed and are considered m'leches shamayim, not one's own needs.

In additions to these issurim, the Shulchan Aruch (ibid:2) records (from the gemara ibid) a prohibition to greet his fellow man before davening. The Tur explains that this issur only applies when one goes out of his way to greet his friend (makdim l'pitcho), but if he simply meets him on the street, he may offer a greeting. However, one should not say the word Shalom to greet his friend, because Shalom is one of the names of Hashem. Rather, he should simply wish his friend a good morning (tzfra d'mari tav) and take heed not to allow the conversation to advance past that level. If one is afraid that refraining from saying 'shalom' will cause the other person to harbor ill feelings toward him, the Mishnah Berurah (s.k. 10) suggests that he offer his hand without saying shalom. If this will not suffice, he permits saying the word if he meets this person on the street. The sefer Chayei Moshe (p. 374) recommends that one avoid the issue by mispronouncing the word slightly (e.g. shalo or shalon). He adds that the same halachos apply to one who receives a telephone call. Certainly, one should not make personal calls before davening.

### **Which foods are permitted?**

The Shulchan Aruch quotes the Ravyiah who permits drinking water before davening. The simple explanation for this is that water is tasteless and therefore drinking it cannot be considered an act of self indulgence. The Mishnah Berurah (s.k. 21) adds that the same holds true for coffee or tea in a place where one's custom is to drink these simply to settle the stomach or clear the head. He limits this to the coffee or tea itself and prohibits the addition of milk or sugar. However, modern day poskim (Rav Ovadiah Yosef: shut Yabiah Omer chelek 4:11-12, Rav Aurbach: Halichos Shlomo p. 8) permit the addition of milk and sugar to these beverages. The reason for this is that nowadays almost everyone drinks these beverages in this fashion and there is no ga'avah in such a mode of consumption.

The Shulchan Aruch adds that a sick person, or one who experiences terrible hunger or thirst, to the point that he will be unable to concentrate on the davening, may eat and drink before praying. Rav Shlomo Zalman adds that one should not eat any more than is necessary to alleviate the situation. The Biur Halacha (s.v. v'chen) writes that one who cannot wait until the time when a minyan is being held should not eat first, rather he should daven alone, eat, and then attend the minyan to answer kadish kedusha and barchu.

It is important to note that this halacha which permits drinking water before davening proves very useful under certain circumstances. Often on shabbos or yom tov (and certainly on Rosh Hashana) one is faced with a problem of fasting past the time of chatzos. Many shuls begin davening so late that one has no opportunity to return home, say Kiddush and begin eating before violating the prohibition of fasting for more than half-a-day on a holiday. Therefore, one should try to drink a permissible beverage

before going to shul in preempt this dilemma, and then he may daven to his heart's content.

### **Women and girls**

Ashkenazik women generally subscribe to the position of the Ramban (Hasagos L'sefer Hamitzvos 5) who posits that women are just as obligated in tefilah (at least shacharis and mincha, see Mishnah Berurah 106: s.k.4) as men. Thus it seems obvious that women are also prohibited from eating before davening. However, Rav Shlomo Zalman is quoted (Halichos Bas Yisroel 2:10) as permitting girls who attend school, and daven together upon arrival, to eat before they daven. The reason for this is that because the tefila in school is part of their overall chinuch, perhaps one may rely upon the opinion of the Rambam and Shulchan Aruch, that women need only say one short tefilah in order to fulfill their obligation. Thus, if a girl must eat before davening, she should be sure to recite a prayer which contains shevach bakasha and hoda'ah to Hashem. This can probably be sufficed with modeh ani and the birchos hashachar. In addition, he recommends reciting kri'as shema in order to be m'kabel ol malchus shamayim.