

I. Introduction.

As the summer months approach and the days become longer, many Jews have the custom to begin Shabbat considerably before nightfall. The motivation in doing so is mostly practical in nature, as accepting Shabbat at nightfall would cause the Friday night meal to go very late and people would be too tired to enjoy it properly. In this essay we will, *im yirtzah Hashem*, discuss the various halachic issues pertaining to this custom. As we will see there are many halachot to be aware of in order to avoid any wrongdoing when accepting Shabbat early.

II. The Two Types of Early Shabbat.

In order to speak intelligently about this topic, it is crucial that we make a fundamental distinction between two types of early Shabbat. Some have the custom to accept the Shabbat at a different time every week. They adjust the time that they daven *minchah* based on the *zman* of *p'lag hamincha*¹ that particular Friday. Those who have this custom always daven *minchah* prior to *p'lag haminchah* and always daven *ma'ariv* before sunset but after *p'lag haminchah*. Others, however, have the custom to begin Shabbat the same time (usually 7:00) every week throughout the summer months. As a result they often daven *minchah* after *p'lag haminchah* and daven *ma'ariv* before sunset.

The major problem that arises when starting Shabbat early, is only problematic when one starts Shabbat at the same time every week throughout the summer, while many other (more minor) issues prove to be problematic regardless of the timing of the early Shabbat. We will first discuss the issue uniquely relevant to starting Shabbat at the same time every week, and we will then discuss the issues relating to any early Shabbat.

III. Starting Shabbat at the Same Time Throughout the Summer.

A. Davening *ma'ariv* too early. There is a dispute amongst the *Tannaim*² as to what the earliest possible time to daven *ma'ariv*, and the latest possible time to daven *minchah* is. Rabbi Yehudah opines that one may only daven *minchah* until *p'lag haminchah* (1 ¼ hours before sunset) and may only daven *ma'ariv* after *p'lag haminchah*. The Rabanan, however, believe that one may daven *minchah* until nightfall and may only daven *ma'ariv* after nightfall³. The gemara concludes (rather unusually⁴) that one may choose to follow whichever approach he prefers, provided that he is consistent in his approach. *Shulchan Aruch* 233:1 points out that, unless faced with extenuating circumstances (*sha'at hadchak*), one who lives in a community where they always daven *minchah* before *plag* should be careful never to daven *minchah* after *plag*. Similarly, one who lives in a community where they always daven *minchah* after *plag* should be careful to never daven *ma'ariv* before nightfall. *Mishna Berura* 233:11 adds that even under extenuating circumstances one may not daven *minchah* after *plag* and daven *ma'ariv* before nightfall (sunset) on the same day. Stated simply, while one may (in a *sha'at hadchak*) choose to follow either the opinion of Rabbi Yehudah or the Rabanan on any given day, he may not follow one opinion for *minchah* and another for *ma'ariv* on the same day.

1. The stringent approach. Based on the above information it would seem clear that beginning *Shabbat* with a minyan that sometimes begins with *minchah* after *plag haminchah* and ends with *ma'ariv* before *sheki'ah* (sunset) is very problematic. This occurs regularly in shuls that have a 7:00 *minchah* and *kabalat Shabbat* minyan throughout the summer.
2. The lenient approach. While the *Mishna Berura* 267:3 takes a stringent approach to this matter, he does cite the opinion of Rabbi Yakov from Lissa who states that if the congregation has the custom to pray at this most inopportune time, one may pray with them. There does not seem to be any compelling logic to back up this approach other than the fact that many communities have had this custom for many years. *Aruch Hashulchan* suggests that even the Rabanan who allow one to daven *minchah* until nightfall, would allow one to daven *ma'ariv* before nightfall. He explains that the *ma'ariv* prayer was instituted to correspond to the burning of the limbs on the altar, which occurred all night. Just as the burning of the limbs actually began before nightfall, *ma'ariv* may also begin before nightfall⁵. Furthermore, Rav Itzele Peterburger (*Sefer Pri Yitzchak*) suggests that there is no set *zman* when one must daven *ma'ariv*. Rather, the time for *ma'ariv* is defined by the time that one may not daven *shacharit* or *mincha*. On a normal day one may daven *mincha* until *shekiah* and therefore may not daven *ma'ariv* until after *shekiah*. On Friday night, however, once one recites *kabalat Shabbat* he is no longer allowed to daven *mincha*, and therefore by definition may already daven *ma'ariv*, regardless of the early hour.
3. The practical halacha. It seems that one should avoid davening *ma'ariv* before nightfall on a day that he has davened *minchah* after *plag*. If one must make an early *Shabbat* with a minyan that starts *minchah* after *plag*, he should see to it that he davens *minchah*, even privately if he can't find a *minyan*, before *plag*. However, if one davens *minchah*

¹ One and one quarter hours prior to sunset. It is important to note that for the purpose of this discussion, the hour that we speak of is not a sixty minute hour. Rather, we will speak of *sha'ot zmaniyot* which are calculated based on one twelfth of the day. The day is considered to start at sunrise and end at sunset according to the Vilna Gaon, and is considered to start at dawn and end when three stars appear according to *Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim* 233.

² *Barachot* 27a.

³ See *Mishnah Berurah* 233:2 and 14 who explains that the term "nightfall" is not to be taken literally over here. Even in the view of the Rabanan one may not daven *minchah* until *tzeit ha'kochavim* (the time that three medium size stars appear in the sky). Rather one should preferably daven before sunset, and at the very latest daven until 15 minutes before *tzeit hakochavim*.

⁴ See *Aruch Hashulchan* 233 who develops an innovative approach to this *gemara*.

⁵ *Aruch Hashulchan* notes further that even those who say that *ma'ariv* corresponds to the prayer of *Yakov Avinu* would agree that one may pray before nightfall. as the gemara in *Chullin* 91b clearly states that *Yakov* prayed during the day.

early in the day he should still come to shul at the time that the congregation begins davening *minchah*⁶ and he should pretend to daven along with them⁷.

IV. Starting Shabbat with P'lag Haminchah.

- A. Davening *ma'ariv* early. We have already pointed out that one who has the custom to daven *ma'ariv* after nightfall on most nights, may not follow the opinion of Rabbu Yehudah on any given night and daven *ma'ariv* early, unless it is a *sha'at hadchak*.
1. The stringent approach. Based on the above information it would seem that under normal circumstances one may not daven *ma'ariv* before nightfall (and certainly not before sunset) unless there is a bona fide *sha'at hadchak*. Being able to start your *Shabbat* meal early does not seem to be enough of a consideration to constitute a *sha'at hadchak*.
 2. The lenient approach. *Mishna Berura* (267:2) cites the *Magen Avraham* who maintains that while one may not daven *ma'ariv* early during the week, he may daven early on *Shabbat* in fulfillment of the *mitzvah* of *tosefet Shabbat*.
- B. Reciting *Keri'at Shema* early.
1. The stringent approach. *Shulchan Aruch* 235:1 states that one should recite *keri'at shema* after the appearance of three small stars. *Biur Halacha* *ibid.* cites *Ma'ase Rav* that it is better to daven *ma'ariv* at the proper time without a *minyan* than to recite *keri'at shema* early.
 2. The lenient approach. *Shulchan Aruch* (*ibid.*) states that if one finds himself in a community where they daven *ma'ariv* before three stars come out, he may daven with the congregation and be careful to recite *keri'at shema* again later in the evening. Indeed, *Iggerot Moshe* (2:60) suggests that most people should not follow the opinion of the Vilna Gaon.
- C. Lighting candles before *plag haminchah*. The gemara in Rosh Hashana 9a establishes that there is a biblical obligation⁸ to sanctify *Shabbat* by extending it both beforehand and afterwards. While the *rishonim* dispute how much time one must add to *Shabbat* to satisfy this obligation, the Rama (261:2) writes that one may not begin *Shabbat* prior to *plag haminchah*.
1. The stringent approach. When one starts *Shabbat* immediately after *plag* and davens *minchah* immediately before *plag* he usually leaves to shul at least 15 minutes before *plag*. In many households the woman lights the *Shabbat* candles as her husband goes to shul. If she lights the candles before *plag haminchah* she has effectively not accepted the *Shabbat*. For this reason (among others) Rav Eliyahu Schlesinger *Shlit"i*⁹ suggests that it may be best to avoid making *Shabbat* early altogether.
 2. The lenient approach. Most poskim maintain that while a woman may not light *Shabbat* candles before *plag hamincha*, the concern that she may do so is not sufficient grounds to abolish the early *Shabbat*. It is imperative that every household be aware of the time of *plag hamincha* and to ensure that the woman not light candles until after that time. Even though the husband may accept *Shabbat* early, *Iggerot Moshe* 3:38 rules that the wife is not bound to accept *Shabbat* at the same time as her husband, provided that she does not continue to do work for her husband after he has accepted *Shabbat*.
- D. Counting the omer.
1. The stringent view. *Shulchan Aruch* 489:2 paskens that while one may fulfill his obligation of counting the omer before nightfall, it is preferable to always count the omer after *tzeit hakochavim*. Obviously, if one makes *Shabbat* early he cannot count the omer in shul, and is in danger of forgetting to count later in the evening. Furthermore, even if one does remember to count later in the evening, many sources indicate that it is best to count the omer with a *tzibbur*¹⁰. Many people have the custom not to start making early *Shabbat* until after *Shavuot* for this reason.
 2. The lenient view. While the concern raised is certainly a valid one, most poskim do not view this as sufficient grounds to prevent starting *Shabbat* early. One should certainly be careful to count later in the evening, and should probably ask somebody to remind him to count.
- E. Davening *minchah* in a shul where an earlier *minyan* has already davened *ma'ariv*.
1. The stringent view. *Responsa Minchat Yitzchak*¹¹ points out that according to the Ra'avan (*Berachot* #165) one may not daven *minchah* in a shul where most of the community has already davened *ma'ariv*. During the summer months when most people make early *Shabbat*, it would seem to be problematic for a smaller *minyan* to then come in and begin *minchah* at the normal time.
 2. The lenient view. *Minchat Yitzchak* points out that none of the classical poskim cite the ruling of Ra'avan as binding in this area. Furthermore, Rav Moshe Feinstein *zt"l* (3:38) states that the ruling of the Ra'avan would only apply in a place that they make *Shabbat* early for the purpose of fulfilling the *mitzvah* of *tosefet Shabbat*. In such a community, one may not veer from the accepted custom. However, in most of our communities, where those who make *Shabbat* early do it for practical reasons (the kids are tired etc.), the ruling of Ra'avan would not apply. Rav

⁶ Rabbi Dovid Weinberger *Shlit"i* quotes this ruling from Harav Moshe Feinstein *zt"l*. The logic for this ruling is that members of the congregation who aren't aware that he has already davened *minchah* should not think that the *ben torah* is prone to arriving late to davening.

⁷ Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik *zt"l* would recommend that people do this in order not to express *yuhara* (religious arrogance) by showing that he is too religious to follow the practice of the shul.

⁸ See Magid Mishna Hilchot Shecitat Asor 1:6, Kesef Mishna Hilchot Shabbat 5:3 and *Biur Halacha* 261 "*yesh omrim*".

⁹ *Techumin* volume 10 page 393.

¹⁰ *Shelah* to *Pesachim* 3b cited in *Chok Yakov* 489:16 and *Be'er Hetev* 489:20.

¹¹ 1:24.

Feinstein proves that our motivations are purely practical in nature from the fact that we do not have the practice of making early Shabbat during the winter months when the days are shorter.

F. Making kiddush and eating the meal before nightfall.

1. The stringent view. The Rashba (Berachot 27b) cites an opinion that one may not recite kiddush or eat the Shabbat meal before nightfall. The Tur 293 cites a Ritz Geut who held a similar view. Furthermore, the Magid Mishna (hilchot Shabbat 29:11) implies that according to Rambam one may recite kiddush before nightfall but may not begin the meal until nightfall. Based on these poskim it would seem that one should avoid making Shabbat early because doing so leads you to recite kiddush and eat the meal before nightfall.
2. The lenient view. The overwhelming majority of poskim, including Shulchan Aruch 267:2, reject the stringent approach and maintain that once you accept Shabbat you may recite kiddush and eat your normal Shabbat meal regardless of whether nightfall has arrived or not.

G. Having a meal before reciting Shema.

1. The stringent view. Shulchan Aruch 267 and Mishna Berura 267:6 point out that one may not begin a new meal within half an hour of nightfall, because we are concerned that he will become so engrossed in his meal he will forget to say keriat shema (or count sefira). Very often, when people make Shabbat early they begin their meals during this half hour time slot.
2. The lenient view. While ideally one who makes Shabbat early should see to it that he does not begin his meal within half an hour of nightfall, the Mishna Berura (ibid.) points out that one who does so has what to rely on. Specifically, the Beit Yosef 267 writes that since one recites keriat shema during ma'ariv (after plag but before nightfall), although he must repeat keriat shema again later, he may begin a meal before the second recitation of shema.

V. Conclusion. The custom to begin Shabbat early seems to be an old and well grounded custom. We have discussed the various potential pitfalls of making Shabbat early. It is important to note, however, that one fulfills a mitzvah of tosefet Shabbat when making Shabbat early. A discussion of the details of the mitzvah of tosefet Shabbat is beyond the scope of this essay. Suffice it to say, it seems that one who is aware of the issues involved with making Shabbat early can avoid almost all halachic compromises in this area and may fulfill the mitzvah of tosefet Shabbat in its entirety.