YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**TALMUDIC METHODOLOGY**

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**Shiur #:22:   
Eating and Personal Tasks Before *Davening***

The *gemara* in *Berakhot* (14a) mandates that *tefilla* should be the first event of the day; a person should not attend to personal duties or tasks before *tefilla*. The *gemara* cites a *pasuk* from *Tehilim* (85) forecasting a successful day for someone who *davens* prior to personal tasks, but the *pasuk* DOES NOT indicate the nature of the prohibition. Are personal tasks prohibited prior to *davening* for merely technical reasons – because a person may be distracted by those tasks and ultimately forget to pray? Or is the prohibition more symbolic, because attending to personal duties causes *tefila* to be “slighted?” Perhaps by not prioritizing *tefilla*, one acts dismissively toward the *mitzva*.

The Rif's version of the *gemara* suggests that only travel – and not GENERAL tasks – is forbidden prior to prayer. Evidently, he felt that the nature of the prohibition is merely TECHNICAL, due to fear of forgetting *tefilla*. Presumably, only involvement in an activity as distracting as travel would endanger *tefilla*.

An interesting Rashi (*Berakhot* 5b) implies the exact opposite of the Rif’s position. While the Rif claimed that ONLY travel is forbidden before *tefilla*, Rashi asserts that EVEN Torah study is forbidden! Ironically, the positions of Rashi and the Rif may be based upon the same logic. If tasks performed prior to *tefilla* are forbidden because they demonstrate disrespect for *tefilla*, Torah study should not be included in the prohibition, as it does not trivialize *tefilla* or religious interest. If the prohibition is based upon the fear of distraction, however, we may extend the fear even to Torah study, as Rashi does. While both the Rif and Rashi may have determined the *issur* to be technical, to the Rif this mandated a very LIMITED *issur* while to Rashi it mandated a very broad prohibition. It was based, however, upon similar definitions of the prohibition.

The majority of *Rishonim*, however, assume that ALL general tasks (not only travel) are forbidden prior to *tefilla*, but they did allow Torah study before *tefilla*. Do they view the prohibition as technical and based upon the fear of distraction, or did they sense a more fundamental problem with tasks performed prior to *davening*?

An interesting question raised by the *Terumat* *Ha-Deshen* (*siman* 18) highlights the different models of this prohibition. He questions whether personal tasks can be performed after the INIITAL part of *tefilla* has been recited (for example, after reciting *birkhot ha-shachar*). While he forbids this, the *Terumat Ha-Deshen* cites some opinions who allow this sequence. Presumably, this debate surrounds the two different manners of defining the prohibition. If the concern is SYMBOLIC, prioritizing even a segment of *davening* prior to task performance should be sufficient to avoid the problem. By *davening* part of *tefilla*, one has demonstrated *tefilla*’s supremacy. The fact that the *Terumat Ha-Deshen* was opposed to this practice probably indicates that he felt that the prohibition was (also) based upon technical concerns – namely, forgetting *tefilla*. Starting the first part of *davening* does not assure that the end of *davening* will be completed after the tasks are performed.

A potentially parallel prohibition is stipulated by the *gemara* in *Berakhot* (10b) regarding EATING before *davening*. The *gemara* provides two different sources as basis for this prohibition. Since the first source is a Biblical verse, many *Rishonim* maintain that the prohibition is *de-oraita* in nature. A similar question to the aforementioned issue can be raised about this *issur* as well. Does the *issur* stem solely from the practical concern of forgetting *davening* while becoming engrossed in eating? Or is there something more inherently wrong about eating before *davening*? The *gemara* cites a *pasuk* from *Melakhim* I:14 that *Chazal* interpret to mean that eating before *davening* is arrogant; it demonstrates inappropriate self-confidence, breeding a more complacent personality. Since the basis of *tefilla* is a sense of vulnerability and fragility, eating is antithetical to the entire mental and emotional basis of *tefilla*.

Several unique questions about the parameters of this *issur* may be based upon its nature. For example, must a person discontinue eating if he began prior to the onset of *zeman tefilla*? The Rosh claims that one must stop eating, but the Ritva claims that eating may continue. Perhaps they differ as to the true nature of the prohibition. If the *issur* stems from a technical concern that a person will become immersed in eating and neglect *davening*, eating should be forbidden even if initiated before *zeman tefilla*, as the Rosh claims. In contrast, the Ritva may have believed that commencing eating prior to *davening* is a display of arrogance, or at least a compromising of vulnerability. If eating began prior to *zeman tefilla*, no assertion of arrogance has occurred.

A second issue surrounds the TYPE of eating permissible prior to *tefilla*. The Rosh cites an early addressing the question of drinking non-alcoholic beverages prior to *tefilla*. The Ravya, a 13th century German *posek*, indeed defines the prohibition as "arrogance," and therefore only prohibits intoxicating beverages that induce boastfulness; water would certainly be permitted. From a halakhic standpoint, the gap between beer and water demands investigation and famous small controversies regarding tea and sugar evolved. Some fascinating compromises have been suggested (such as omitting the sugar!).

However, from an analytical standpoint, one thing is clear: the Ravya limited the prohibition to certain drinks based upon viewing the *issur* as an inappropriate display of arrogance. Had he viewed the *issur* as more technical (not to neglect *tefilla*) or even as more FORMAL prohibition against ANY food prior to *davening*, he probably would not have distinguished between intoxicating drinks and water.