**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**Halakha and Jewish History**

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**Shiur #16:**

**Coffee (16th century)**

There are many legends regarding the discovery of the properties of the coffee bean. However, coffee was probably invented and manufactured as a beverage in Yemen during the 15th century, using beans from Ethiopia. Its name originates in the Arabic *qahwah,* whichoriginally referred to a wine which suppresses one’s appetite. It first spread through the Middle East, Africa and Turkey, finally arriving in Europe through the port of Venice somewhere during the middle of the 16th century.

The beverage became very popular, as it helped people concentrate and stay awake.

Coffeehouses were quick to follow. These attracted many people to them who used these new establishments as a platform for discussing politics and religion. This phenomenon, amongst other reasons, led some religious authorities to ban the patronizing of such establishments.

Still, coffee drinking was not considered anathema for Jews. On the contrary, there is evidence that the spread of coffee amongst the Jewish communities led directly to the widespread practice of religious customs which involve staying up late and even staying awake all night. Such practices include the following:

* *Tikkun leil Shavuot —* staying up through the night of Shavuot studying Torah, in order to rectify the Jewish people’s tardiness on the morning of the Giving of the Torah
* *Tikkun leil Hoshana Raba —* staying up through the night (until midnight or until dawn) of Hoshana Rabba, the last day of Sukkot, in order to study Torah and/ or pray
* *Tikkun chatzot*[[1]](#footnote-1) — rising at midnight (*chatzot ha-laila)* daily to say a set order of prayer

While all of these practices predate the introduction of coffee to Europe, the natural caffeine in the brew certainly made it more feasible to follow them.

In today’s *shiur,* we will discuss the many different halakhic questions that have been raised during the past few centuries regarding this “magical” beverage.[[2]](#footnote-2) Although some of the issues are not necessarily unique to coffee and may apply to similar beverages like tea, we will see that coffee stands out from all other drinks and receives a special status.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**Patronizing coffeehouses**

As mentioned above, the coffeehouses hosted diverse social gatherings. Besides the threat of heretical ideas being discussed, the rabbis were concerned about the potential of intermarriage.

A similar fear led the rabbis of Talmudic Babylonia to limit drinking alcoholic beverages in bars and pubs. The Gemara mentions that both Rav Papa and Rav Achai refrained from drinking beer in a non-Jewish tavern and would either drink it outside or take it home.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Accordingly, Rav Yosef Karo rules that Jews should not drink beer in non-Jewish bars. However, he argues that if the drinking is done as a one-off, it is permitted.[[5]](#footnote-5)

What about entering and drinking coffee in a coffeehouse? Theoretically, there should be no difference! Regarding this matter, there seems to be a dispute.

Rav Moshe Isserles (Rema) comments on the above ruling in *Shulchan Arukh*. It his opinion that beer made of grain may be drunk at non-Jewish establishments.

Rav Chizkiya da Silva (1659–1698) argues with this statement (of the Rema) as his opinion is that the decree applies to all types of beer; however, he agrees that all other drinks are permitted. He explicitly lists coffee as a beverage that may be drunk in a non-Jewish coffeehouse.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Rav Ya’akov Emden (Ya’avetz, Germany, 1697-1776) was once seen drinking coffee in a non-Jewish tavern. In his response to those who accused him of breaking the law, he admitted his wrongdoing and asked that his students not follow his example.

Nevertheless, at one point he suggests that the decree might not apply to coffee, as its effect is the exact opposite of wine:

Though one could distinguish slightly between [beer and coffee], as alcohol intoxicates... and one could say that it was because of this that [the rabbis] were worried, as it relates to the decrees [meant to dissuade marrying] the daughters [of non-Jews]. However, this is not the case with coffee. On the contrary, it is made to counteract the effects of wine!

However, he concludes that one should not differentiate between the beverages.[[7]](#footnote-7)

A moderate stand is taken by Rav Avraham Danzig (1748-1820), who explains that in his time

the custom is to be lenient with grain beers in a non-Jew’s house, and we can’t protest because there are those who are lenient…

This is all for beer, but apple or other fruit wines are permitted because we don’t make decrees about uncommon things. Coffee and hot chocolate are permitted to be drunk in a non-Jew’s house.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Although he seems to agree with the *Peri Chadash*, he rules that:

Nowadays many sins have come from this… aside from the fact that it is leads to promiscuity, as is known. Therefore, anyone imbued with the aura of Torah should distance himself from going into their houses to drink anything.[[9]](#footnote-9)

***Bishul Akum***

The Mishna (*Avoda Zara* 2:6) lists foodstuffs produced by non-Jews which are not to be eaten, though one may derive benefit from them: milk, bread, oil, pickled and cooked foods. The Gemara (ibid. 38a) concludes that these prohibitions are rabbinical decrees made to separate Jews from their non-Jewish neighbors and prevent intermarriage.

Rather, then, it is a rabbinical ordinance and the biblical verse is merely a support.

Rav Shemuel bar Rav Yitzchak said in the name of Rav: Whatever is eaten raw does not come within [the law of what is prohibited] on account of having been cooked by non-Jews.

Thus, it was taught in Sura; but in Pumbedita they taught this version: Rav Shemuel bar Rav Yitzchak said in the name of Rav: Whatever is not brought upon the table of kings to serve as a relish with bread does not come within [the law of what is prohibited] on account of having been cooked by non-Jews.

Both the prohibition and the two exceptions are codified in *Shulchan Arukh*.[[10]](#footnote-10)

What about coffee? Can a Jew drink it if it is prepared by a non-Jew?[[11]](#footnote-11)

As mentioned above, the *Peri Chadash* connects this question to the prior question regarding drinking in a non-Jewish establishment. His claim is that it is allowed because the main ingredient of coffee is water. The proof for this claim is the custom to recite *She-hakol* on this drink (there is room to claim that the *berakha* on the roasted coffee bean should be *Ha-etz* or *Ha-adama,* see below). Since water is usually consumed in its raw form, the law of *bishul akum* doesn’t apply to it.

Similarly, Rav David ibn Zimra (Radbaz, 1479-1573) permits it, but for other reasons:

I researched the fruit and I saw that it was not eaten raw and the seeds are hard as stones and cannot be eaten at all; rather they roast them in unique vessels, and they soften a bit. Ministers and kings eat them as they say it dries out the stomach from fluids and they drink the drink, which they make from the peel of the outside of the bean, and for this reason it should be prohibited. But the truth of the matter is that **it is not used on the king’s table to dip bread in it, and as a result it is not prohibited if a non-Jew cooks it.** [[12]](#footnote-12)

Rav Avraham Hirsch ben Ya’akov Eisenstadt (1812–1868) disagrees. He prohibits coffee brewed by a non-Jew:

…we have seen with our own eyes that coffee is served upon kings’ tables and people invite others for it, so a careful person should avoid coffee and tea in non-Jewish stores.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Rav Chayim Benveniste (Turkey,1603-1673) testifies that he stopped drinking coffee after he studied the issue and could not find a *heter* (allowance) for himself. At the same time, he admits that the custom had spread amongst the Jewish community to drink coffee![[14]](#footnote-14)

**Drinking coffee before *tefilla***

The Gemara rules that it is prohibited to eat and drink and eat before morning prayers..:

What is the meaning of the verse, “You shall not eat upon the blood” (*Vayikra* 19:26)?

Do not eat before you have prayed for your blood.

Furthermore, the Gemara explains the reason for this prohibition, cited in the name of Rabbi Eliezer ben Ya’akov:

If one eats and drinks and then says his prayers, of him the verse says (*I Melakhim* 14:9): “And you have cast Me behind your back” — read not *gavekha* (your back), but *gei’ekha* (your pride). The Holy One, blessed be He, says: After this one has exalted himself; he comes and accepts the Kingdom of Heaven![[15]](#footnote-15)

However, even without these sources it seems that it is prohibited to eat before praying *Shacharit*. The Mishna rules that one should not engage in any activities (including eating) prior to praying *Mincha*.[[16]](#footnote-16)

The reasons for this are two:

1. There is a concern that one might forget to pray.
2. This type of behavior suggests that prayer is secondary in its importance to one’s personal activities.[[17]](#footnote-17)

What does the Gemara in *Berakhot* add? The answer is that the prohibition mentioned in the Mishna relates to any activities prior to **any** mitzva and not only to prayer. “You shall not eat upon the blood” is unique to *Shacharit*. Here the main reason for the prohibition is the need for man to begin his day with accepting upon himself the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven*.* Eating or drinking prior to praying contains an act of arrogance, claiming one’s bodily needs are more important. Furthermore, it is possible that this prohibition (unlike the one in *Shabbat*) is of a biblical nature.

Accordingly, the Posekim suggested that when consuming a given type of food or drink is not an act of arrogance, it may be permitted.

Rav Eliezer ben Yoel Ha-Levi **(**Ra'avya, Germany, 1140-1225) rules that the prohibition is limited to acholic beverages, as they symbolize arrogance. He explicitly permits water, while others disagree as to what types of drink are forbidden before prayer because their consumption connotes arrogance.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Rav Yosef Karo forbids drinking and eating prior to *Shacharit,* but permits consuming foods and beverages that are ingested for medical purposes.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Rav Moshe Zacuto (Venice,1625-1697) addresses a responsum to the following question:

Is it permissible to drink water or coffee before praying on Shabbat?

His answer:

In my opinion there is no concern, especially in the case of illness. We may cite as evidence the practice of the entire Land of Israel and the kingdom of Turkey, of drinking coffee after midnight because it is like a medicine to ward off sleep, as is well known. [[20]](#footnote-20)

His *heter* is based on his understanding that coffee is some type of “medicine”!

A similar position appears in Egypt in the same century. Rav Chizkiya da Silva testifies that drinking coffee before prayers in “needed.”

Especially in Egypt, where one cannot attain presence of mind without the aid of coffee [this is permissible], but with sugar it is forbidden. [[21]](#footnote-21)

Using sugar, it seems, connotes arrogance and thus is forbidden. The *Mishna Berura* (89:22) rules that adding milk is similar to adding sugar; neither may be added to the coffee or tea one drinks before prayer because this expresses arrogance. Nowadays, the practice of drinking coffee has changed, and because milk and sugar are common and accessible, modern Posekim permit adding them to coffee or tea prior to the morning prayers.[[22]](#footnote-22)

***Berakha* *Rishona* and *Acharona***

The proper blessing to recite before (*berakha rishona)* and after *(berakha acharona)* drinking coffee has been discussed by thePosekim*.* Three possible *berakhot* have been suggested before drinking coffee:

* *Borei peri ha-etz,* the blessing for the fruit of the tree
* *Borei peri ha-adama,* the blessing for other vegetable matter
* *She-hakol,* the all-encompassing blessing which includes most liquids produced from fruit and vegetables[[23]](#footnote-23)

The *berakha acharona* recited after drinking coffee is also a matter of debate — not the text to be said, but whether it should be said at all! A *berakha acharona* may be recited only after drinking a *revi’it* of liquid in the time it takes to eat half a loaf of bread (*kedei akhilat peras*), which according to Rav Chayim Naeh is eighty-six milliliters in as little as four minutes.

As (black) coffee is usually served in a boiling temperature, this measurement would suggest not reciting a *beracha acharona*. However, Rav Avraham ben Mordekhai Ha-Levi, (1650-1712) rules that as the nature of coffee is to be drunk this way, a *berakha acharona* ought to be recited.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Some suggested that if one leaves an amount of coffee to cool off and drinks it at the end, then a *berakha acharona* should be recited; however, Rav Chayim Yosef David Azulai (Chida, 1724-1806) argues that this is not the regular way to drink coffee and so one who does so would be dismissed as deviating from common practice (*battela dato eitzel kol adam.)*[[25]](#footnote-25)

After discussing this matter at great length, Rav Ovadya Yosef rules not to recite the *berakha acharona,* but he concedes that many Ashkenazic Posekim disagree, especially if one leaves some coffee for the end to cool off.[[26]](#footnote-26)

**Other issues**

Other questions regarding coffee include its status on Passover and whether or not it is considered *kitniyot*, which many have the custom not to consume on the holiday.[[27]](#footnote-27)

For *Havdala*, some argue that only alcoholic beverages may be used.[[28]](#footnote-28) Rav Eliezer Waldenberg rules that as coffee is considered an important drink (*chamar medina*), it may be used for *Havdala*.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Preparing coffee on Shabbat is, of course, a major topic, which will not be discussed here.

**Conclusion**

We have seen that coffee is considered by many of the rabbis as a “magical potion” that may help in religious observance as it gives energy and strength to those who drink it. This fact, together with its special status as an important beverage, leads the rabbis to discuss the halakhic applications of its standing

1. For a summary of these sources, see: Elliott Horowitz, “Coffee, Coffeehouses, and the Nocturnal Rituals of Early Modern Jewry,” *AJS Review,* [Vol. 14, No. 1 (Spring 1989)](https://www.jstor.org/stable/i265524) (Cambridge University Press), pp. 17-46. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This topic has become today quite common and popular. See Dr. Ari Greenspan, “The Halachic History of Coffee, Tea, Sugar and Chocolate,” Ḥakirah, t*he Flatbush Journal of Jewish Law and Thought*, Vol. 23 (2017), pp. 249-264. See as well Rav Jonathan Ziring’s article, available at: <https://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/863322/rabbi-jonathan-ziring/coffee-in-halacha/>. I would like to thank both authors for allowing me to use their English translations for some of the sources. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Recently, coffee-drinking in the USA has been discussed intensely by the *kashrut* originations, especially regarding Starbucks. The main issue there is the *kashrut* of the coffee, a topic which will not be discussed in our *shiur*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. BT *Avoda Zara* 31b. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *YD* 114:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Peri Chadash, YD* 114, *Ve-yesh matirin.* [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *She’elat Ya’avetz* 2:142. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Chokhmat Adam* 65:14. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Chokhmat Adam* 66:14 . [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *YD* 113:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For a summary of all the opinions, see Rav Ovadya Yosef’s responsum, *YD* 4:42. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Responsa Radbaz,* Part 3, Chap. 637. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Pitchei Teshuva, YD* 114:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Responsa *Ba’ei Chayei YD* 152. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. BT *Berakhot* 10b. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. BT *Shabbat* 9a. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See Rav Eli Lifshitz, *Torat Imekha*, Vol.1, p. 360 (Maale Adumim). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. *Beit Yosef,* *OC* 89:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *Shulchan Arukh,* *OC* 89:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. *Responsa Ramaz* 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *Peri Chadash, OC* 89:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Rav S. Z. Auerbach as quoted in *Halikhot Shelomo*, *Tefilla* 2:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. For a summary of this discussion see Rav Ovadya Yosef, *YD* 4, footnote on p. 221. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. *Ginat Veradim,* *OC* 1:17. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. *Birkei Yosef*, 204:6. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. *Yabia Omer* 5:19. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See Yitzchak Ze’ev Kahane, *Mechkarim Be-sifrut Ha-teshuvot (*Mossad HaRav Kook*)* pp. 433-434. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Rav Ovadya Yosef, *Yabia Omer* 3:19. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. *Tzitz Eliezer* 8:16. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)