

# CONCEPTS IN HALACHA

## COMMANDMENTS (MITZVOT)

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### Precedence of Mitzvot

A frequently performed commandment generally takes precedence over a less frequently performed commandment, but ONLY:

- Regarding the order in which they are to be performed, and
- If there is no specific reason to do the less frequent one.

If you are only able to do one of several commandments, do the most important one.

**EXAMPLE** If you can only put on either talit or tefilin, you would put on the tefilin since that is the more important commandment, even though putting on a talit is the more frequently performed one.

**ANOTHER EXAMPLE** Friday before sunset when Chanuka will be on Shabbat--lighting Shabbat candles is done more frequently, but we light the Chanuka candles first since if we lit the Shabbat candles first, it would already be Shabbat and we could not light the Chanuka candles at all.

### How Much Money to Spend on a Mitzva

You are never required to spend more than 1/5 of your liquid assets on any positive mitzva.

### How Far To Go To Do a Mitzva

There is no need to go to different town in order to fulfill a mitzva (a different town can be defined as out of your local business district).

### Follow National Law as Enforced

Follow national law as enforced. Halacha requires that national and secular law be obeyed. However:

- If a law exists but is not enforced, it is not considered by halacha to be a valid law.
- If a law states one condition but is enforced only in a different condition, the actual enforced law is the valid one.

**EXAMPLE** If a posted speed limit is 60 mph, but drivers are actually allowed to drive up to 70 mph, then 70 mph is the valid speed limit.

### Unintentional Violation; Receive No Benefit (Psik Reisha...)

Psik reisha d'la nicha lei (halacha whose violation you don't intend and from which you receive no benefit) is not permitted.

### EXAMPLE

You open the refrigerator door on Shabbat and the light comes on. This is forbidden on Shabbat and Jewish festivals, even if you don't want or need the light.

However, you may ask a non-Jew to do an action for you that will be psik reisha d'la nicha lei.

### EXAMPLE

You may ask a non-Jew to get your jacket from the car on Shabbat or a Jewish festival, even though a light will go on, but only during the daytime; if it is night and the light would be needed to find the jacket, you may not ask.

### Fence (Syag) around the Torah

Making a "fence" ("syag") around the Torah means to avoid activities and situations that might lead to actions that are improper or not allowed by Torah law.

# PREPARATION FOR DOING MITZVOT

## Intention/Kavana

Mitzvot that are from the Torah (tzitzit, tefilin, sukka, etc.) require having the intention (kavana) to fulfill that commandment. But with many such mitzvot, it is inherent in doing the mitzva that you are doing it for the mitzva and therefore you do not need to have a special intention (for example, you would not put on tefilin to keep yourself warm).

## VaYehi Noam, L'Shem Yichud, Yehi Ratzon

You do not need to say Va'yehi noam, L'Shem yichud, or Yehi ratzon before doing commandments.

## What Is a Mitzva/What Is Halacha

A mitzva is a commandment. A halacha is how to do the mitzva.

## Purposes of Commandments/Mitzvot

Commandments/mitzvot (plural of mitzva) have three main purposes:

- Most importantly, to do what we are commanded by God to do;
- To bring us close to God;
- To earn reward for us in the future world (olam ha'ba).

# HALACHIC DECISIONS (PSAK)

## HALACHIC DECISIONS (PSAK): CHOOSING A RABBI

### Asking Multiple Rabbis for Psak

You may not normally ask multiple rabbis for halachic decisions about different questions, but if you do not have a primary rabbi, you may do so.

### Shopping Around for Lenient Halachic Decision (Psak)

You may not generally ask different rabbis for their decisions of halacha in order to get the answer you want. You may also not ask a specific rabbi a question based on your expectation that he will give you the answer that you are seeking. But if someone asks you to recommend a rabbi, you may refer him or her to a rabbi who will give the answer that he or she would like to receive.

## HALACHIC DECISIONS (PSAK): WHEN YOU MUST FOLLOW

### Following a Halachic Decision (Psak) You Requested

You must follow the decision you are given if you asked for a psak if the psak is more stringent than what you want to do but if it is more lenient, you may still be more stringent than what you were told to do. If the decision affects anyone other than yourself, you may not be more lenient or more stringent but must follow what you were told.

### Following a Halachic Decision (Psak) You Overheard

If you didn't ask for a psak but just heard someone talking about a halachic decision, you may ignore it.

## HALACHIC DECISIONS (PSAK): DOUBT (SAFEK)

### Defining Doubt (Safek) in Halachic Decision

Doubt in halacha (safek) refers to when it is impossible to know or determine the situation.

### Halachic Stringencies in Doubt

We are stringent in applying laws if we are uncertain about Torah commandments.

We are lenient in applying laws if we are uncertain about rabbinic commandments.

# HALACHIC DECISIONS (PSAK): MITIGATING CIRCUMSTANCES

## Accidental or Intentional

The ideal and preferred means of observing or fulfilling a halacha is called l'chatchila. Sometimes the halacha's requirements may be fulfilled b'di'avad (after the fact) under less-than-ideal circumstances. You may not intentionally do an action at the b'diavad level if you are able to do it at the l'chatchila level.

## Shalom Bayit or Honoring One's Parents (Kibud Av Va'Eim)

The only type of laws that may sometimes be overridden to help with shalom bayit (promoting peaceful family relations) or kibud av va'eim (honoring parents) is rabbinic law, not Torah law. A rabbi should be consulted in these cases.

## Saving a Life (Pikuach Nefesh)

Human life is valued in Judaism, unlike in some other religions. The Talmud says that if someone saves one human life (pikuach nefesh), it is as if he or she saved an entire universe. Almost all halachot may be overridden in order to save a life; the main exceptions are for Adultery, Murder, and Idol Worship—see [Adultery, Murder, Idol Worship](#) .

**EXAMPLE** You may drive a car on Shabbat or even Yom Kippur in order to take a seriously injured or ill person to the hospital. This includes pregnant women who are about to give birth.

## Adultery, Murder, Idol Worship

The Talmud says that a person must allow himself to be killed rather than violate any of three commandments that may not be violated: adultery; murder; idol worship. Note that in Jewish law, not all types or conditions of killing a person are defined as murder.

## Human Dignity (Kavod HaBriot)

Although human dignity (kavod ha'briot) cannot override Torah commandments, kavod ha'briot allows violating some d'rabanan laws in order to avoid embarrassment.

### EXAMPLES

- Tearing Toilet Paper

**SITUATION** You need to use toilet paper on Shabbat but none is torn.

**WHAT TO DO** You may tear some toilet paper using any non-standard method or change from the normal way (shinu'i), such as not using your hand, or dropping something on the paper.

- Hearing Aid

**SITUATION** You may speak to someone who uses a hearing aid on Shabbat to avoid embarrassing him or her.

# HALACHIC DECISIONS (PSAK): NEW FACTS

## Changes in a Halachic Decision Due to New Facts

A halachic determination may be voided or changed if factual information is found that contradicts the information on which the halachic determination was made (such as incorrect science or incorrect statement of a condition or situation). **However**, you must check with the originator of the psak or the original source of information on which the halacha was based.

# HALACHIC PRACTICE

## CUSTOMS (MINHAG)

## CUSTOMS (MINHAG): HOW THEY BECOME HALACHA

## Observance of Customs (Minhag)

Any custom that has been accepted by the entire Jewish world or an entire Jewish community becomes halacha; it is then required to be observed by members of that community.

## CUSTOMS (MINHAG): ADOPTING

### Changing Your Customs (Minhag) in New Community

When moving to a community with customs different from your own, adopt the customs of your new community but ONLY:

- If you intend to stay in that new community, and
- If the entire community follows the same customs.

**NOTE** An Ashkenazi who moves to a Sefardi community could eat kitniyot on Passover but would have to wake up extremely early for selichot and say them for the month of Elul, so think carefully about the trade-off!

### Adopting Customs (Minhag) If You Are Newly Observant (Ba'al Teshuva)

A newly observant Jew (ba'al teshuva) may:

- Follow the customs of the person who teaches him to be religious, or
- Follow the dominant custom in the community, or
- Revert to the customs of his ancestors, if their customs are known.

## WEAKENING HALACHIC OBSERVANCE OR RESPECT FOR TORAH

### Lowering People's Respect for the Torah (Chilul Hashem)

You may not do any action that causes other people to lessen their observance of, or respect for, the Torah.

**EXAMPLE** When a person known to be otherwise observant of Jewish law seems to be dishonest in business.

### Appearing To Not Uphold the Torah (Mar'it Ayin)

You may not do any action that may cause religious Jews to do something wrong or cause people to think that an observant Jew is doing something forbidden (mar'it ayin). Mar'it ayin is doing something that might lead people to:

- Violate a Torah law by thinking that an observed action that is permissible under special circumstances may be applied to other cases, or
- Think that the person doing the action is violating Torah law (since the observer might not know that the action is actually permissible).

**EXAMPLE** When a Jew wears a yarmulke and eats raw, kosher vegetables in a non-kosher restaurant, someone who did not know that only kosher food was being eaten might think that:

- All of the food in that restaurant is kosher, or
- The Jew was doing something forbidden (and think badly of the Jew).

If no one can see you, you may do activities that might look like violations of rabbinic laws. If the action is forbidden by the Torah (d'oraita), you may not even do it in private (but you may not actually violate either type of law!).

## HIDUR MITZVA/MEHADRIN

### Hidur Mitzva/Mehadrin

Almost all mitzvot may be enhanced by:

- Making them beautiful (hidur mitzva), or
- Observing non-required stringencies (mehadrin).

## Hidur Mitzva

### EXAMPLES

- Women baking challa for Shabbat and Jewish festivals (and separating challa as a remembrance of the challa that was given to the priests/cohanim in the Temple).
- Wearing especially nice clothes and eating special foods on Shabbat and Jewish festivals.
- Using beautiful fragrances, tastes, textures, colors, and artistry in serving God.

## Beautiful

### EXAMPLES

- Shabbat/Jewish festival table (set with beautiful challa cover, silver, kiddush cups).
- Havdala set and pleasant-smelling spices for havdala.
- Sukka and putting your finest things in it.
- Etrog/etrog case.
- Shofar.
- Seder plate, matza holder, and matza cover.
- Illuminated hagadas (hagadot) and megilas (megilot).
- Chanuka candle-holder (menora, chanukiya).
- Torah scroll written with a fine pen and beautiful script and wrapped in beautiful silks.
- Mezuza covers.
- Ketuba.
- Wimple (to wrap baby in prior to brit mila; then donated to hold the two parts of the Torah together).
- Elijah's Chair/Kisei Eliyahu.
- Synagogues.
- Chuppa.

## Mehadrin

### EXAMPLES

- Chalav Yisrael--When consuming milk and milk products, eating or drinking only those items whose production was supervised by religious Jews;
- Pat Yisrael—When eating bread, only eating bread baked by Jews (not necessarily by religious Jews);
- Glatt meat—When eating meat, eating only meat that had no lesions on the animal's lungs;
- Lighting more than one Chanuka candle each night (beginning on the 2nd night) and having more than one person in each house light their own candles.

## PRIORITY: CHAVIV AND CHASHUV

### Priority: Chaviv and Chashuv

Opinions differ in whether you should give priority in eating to what you like the most (chaviv) or what is most important (chashuv).

## Examples

**SITUATION** You like mangoes. Someone serves a platter with mangoes and dates.

**QUESTION** Should you first eat a mango (chaviv) or first eat a date (chashuv—due to its being one of the *Five Special Fruits*)?

**WHAT TO DO** RMH usually recommends that people begin eating whichever fruit they prefer; that is, chaviv first.

**SITUATION** You want to eat both fruit and cake.

**WHAT TO DO** You may eat the fruit first if you prefer to eat it first, even though the cake is more important.

## DISTRACTION

### Preparing for an Upcoming Commandment

You should refrain from any activity that will prevent or distract you from doing a commandment (or make you forget to do it), from 30 minutes before the time at which you will need to do that commandment.

### Cessation of Intention (Hesech Da'at)

“Cessation of intention” (hesech da'at) can occur when you get involved in a different action or activity than what you were doing. It is not time dependent.