

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 haggadas (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.