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*.
- S*eder* 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.

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