

Multitasking Mitzvot

"העוסק במצוה פטור מן המצוה"

Our generation has been branded “Generation M” – M stands for Multitasking.

People seemingly manage to check their email and Facebook, follow a movie, eat dinner, and hold a conversation – all at the same time.

What about mitzvos? What does the Torah say about multitasking mitzvos?

What are we to do if we simultaneously encounter more than one mitzvah opportunity? Can we drop one commandment to do another? Must we stay on task? Should we try to multitask?

This session deals with these and other questions through exploring some of the Talmudic principles connected to making choices between different positive mitzvos.

Here are some of the key questions this session will deal with:

- If I am doing one mitzvah and another opportunity or obligation presents itself, how should I act?
- What are the principles and concepts underlying the prioritization of mitzvos?
- Does it make a difference which mitzvah I am doing and what other mitzvah comes up?

1 – The Basic Sources

Source 1. Sukkah 25a

<p>Mishna: Those traveling on a mitzvah mission are exempt from [the mitzvah of dwelling in a] Sukkah. The ill and their caretakers are exempt from Sukkah.</p>	<p>משנה שלוחי מצוה פטורין מן הסכה. חולין ומשמשיהן פטורין מן הסכה.</p>
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The Mishna is pretty straight-forward: someone who's involved in a mitzvah is 'off the hook' from fulfilling the mitzvah of sitting in a Sukkah. Later, we'll discuss the exact parameters of this (i.e. does this apply even while they're resting, for example? What if one could simultaneously do 2 mitzvos, at no expense to the 1st...should he? Is he allowed??), but the 1st job the Gemara takes care of is clarifying the source of this concept:

<p>Gemara: What is the biblical source for this halachah? We learn in a Baraisa: The verse in the Torah states [Devarim 6:7] that you should say the Shema “when you sit in your house” – This comes to exclude someone who is involved in doing a mitzvah [from the obligation to read the Shema]. The continuation of the verse, “when you go on the way” excludes a groom on his wedding night from reading Shema (because he is preoccupied with the mitzvah of consummating the marriage)...How is this principle derived from the verse? Rav Huna explained: [You are only obligated to read the Shema when you are in a situation that is] similar to “walking on the way,” i.e., where you are involved in a voluntary activity, thereby excluding when you're preoccupied with an obligatory activity.</p> <p>(The Gemara challenges) Aren't we dealing with someone who's on the way to do a mitzvah, and even still the Torah says 'say Shema!' (In other words, how does “walking on the way” exclusively indicate a voluntary activity, couldn't someone also be 'on the way' to do a mitzvah!?)</p> <p>(The Gemara answers) If that were the case, then the verse should say “when sitting” and “when walking”, why does it say “when you sit” and “when you walk”? Rather, when walking for <i>your</i> activities, only then must you say Shema, but, when you're walking to do a mitzvah you're exempt.</p>	<p>גמרא מנא הני מילי? דתנו רבנן "בשבתך בביתך" פרט לעוסק במצוה "ובלכתך בדרך" פרט לחתן ... מאי משמע? אמר רב הונא: כדרך מה דרך רשות אף כל רשות לאפוקי האי דבמצוה עוסק.</p> <p>מי לא עסקינן דקאזיל לדבר מצוה וקא אמר רחמנא ליקרי!?!)</p> <p>אם כן לימא קרא בשבת ובלכת מאי בשבתך ובלכתך בלכת דידך הוא דמיחייבת הא בלכת דמצוה פטירת</p>
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2 - CLARIFYING PARAMETERS

WHEN IS ONE EXEMPT FROM THE 2ND MITZVAH??

Granted, someone tending to or treating the sick might be involved 24-7 and will simply not be able to fulfill the mitzvah of Sukkah, but are mitzvah messengers – on the way to fulfill some necessary mitzvah – **entirely** exempt from Sukkah? If traveling is done primarily during daytime hours (see Taanis 10b), are travelers not obligated to set up a Sukkah and live (eat dinner and sleep) there at night?

Rashi addresses this question:

Source 2. Rashi, Sukkah 25a, “*Peturin Min Ha-Sukkah*”

They are exempt from the mitzvah of Sukkah – even while they are encamped.	פְּטוּרִין מִן הַסֻּכָּה - וְאֶפְּלוּ בַשַּׁעַת חֲנֻיָּתוֹ:
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Tosafos finds this ruling of Rashi very difficult:

Source 3. Tosafot Sukkah 25a “*Shluchei Mitzvah*”

This is surprising. If they are able to fulfill both mitzvos, why are they exempt? Is a man who has tzitzis on his clothing and tefillin on his head exempt from other mitzvos?!?	וְתִימָה אִם יְכוּלִין לְקַיֵּם שְׁנֵיהֶם אֲמַאי פְּטוּרִין דְּאִטוּ אָדָם שְׂיֵשׁ לוֹ צִיצִית בְּבִגְדוֹ וְתֵפִילִין בְּרֵאשׁוֹ מִי מִפְטָר בְּכָךְ מִשְׁאָר מִצְוֹת?
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Why, asks Tosafos, should messengers be exempt from Sukkah when they are not actively involved in the mission? Even though they are still in the middle of their mitzvah trip, shouldn't they do the 2nd mitzvah if they are able to? Someone wearing tefillin or tzitzis is fulfilling a mitzvah, yet who would ever think they are exempt from doing other mitzvos?!?

However, given that there are many sources affirming that these mitzvah travelers are, in fact, completely exempt from Sukkah even if they only travel during the day, Tosafos proposes an alternative explanation why the exemption would apply even in the evenings:

Source 3. Tosafot Sukkah 25a “*Shluchei Mitzvah*”

We must say that here we are dealing with a case in which their preoccupation with fulfilling the mitzvah of Sukkah [at night] would detract from their ability to fulfill the very mitzvah they are on route to fulfill [the following day].	וְצָרִיךְ לומר דְּהָכָא נְמִי אֵינְרִי בְּכִי הָאִי גְוֹנָא דְּאִי מִיטְרְדִי בְּקִיּוּם מִצְוֹת סוּכָּה הֵוּ מִבְטְלִי מִמִּצְוֹת:
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Tosafos understands that the mitzvah emissaries will only be exempt from Sukkah at night if sleeping in the Sukkah will compromise their mission the next day. (It goes without saying that they are exempt if they actually travel at night.) Tosafos' position is that one mitzvah only exempts you from another if you are **actively involved** in that mitzvah, so that the mitzvot are *mutually exclusive*. If, however, you are able to perform both mitzvos, you must push yourself to do so.

The Ran, however, differs with Tosafos (and, by doing so, seemingly provides us an answer for the challenge on Rashi), as follows:

Source 4. Ran, Commentary on the Rif, Sukkah

<p>Therefore, it seems to me that someone involved in a mitzvah is exempt from another mitzvah <u>even though he could fulfill both of them...</u> <i>The Torah exempted anybody involved in God's work from going to the trouble of fulfilling other mitzvos</i>, even when theoretically possible...</p> <p>However, I certainly agree that if someone does not need to expend any extra effort in order to fulfill both mitzvos, he should certainly do both. "If you can be 'good,' do not bring yourself to be called 'bad'" [a Talmudic expression (Berachos 30a) that encourages doing mitzvos in a superior fashion even if not obligatory, where no extra effort is required].</p>	<p>לפיכך נראה לי דהעוסק במצוה פטור מן המצוה אף על פי שיכול לקיים את שתייהן ... <i>כל שהוא עוסק במלאכתו של מקום לא חייבתו תורה לטרת ולקיים מצות אחרות אף על פי שאפשר ...</i></p> <p>ומיהו מודינא ודאי שקל שאינו צריך לטרוח קלל אלא פנדרכו במצוה ראשונה יכול לצאת ידי שניהם, דבקהאי גוונא ודאי יצא ידי שתייהן. ומקיות טוב אל יקרא רע (ברכות ל.):</p>
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According to the Ran someone involved in one mitzvah is exempt from doing another commandment even when he could theoretically perform both. In such a situation, in so far as he's preoccupied – albeit not entirely – with one mitzvah, G-d does not obligate him to do another. Rather, he should focus on the mitzvah he is doing and not attempt to multitask. This is seemingly the underlying logic which can be used to answer Tosafos' challenge on Rashi from earlier.

The Ran agrees, however, that if someone can effortlessly do the second mitzvah, he should nonetheless fulfill it. The Ran's point is that the Torah does not obligate a Jew to overexert himself to fulfill multiple mitzvos in close temporal proximity.

To Summarize: The Rishonim argue regarding what to do in a situation where one is technically capable of performing 2 mitzvos simultaneously ("אפשר לקיים שתייהם"). Such an individual is either:

- Obligated to do the 2nd mitzvah [Tosafos];
- Absolved from doing the 2nd mitzvah, but permitted [Rashi & Ran]

3 – IS ONE ALLOWED TO DO THE 2ND MITZVAH??

Until now we've been discussing a situation where although one is currently preoccupied with 1 mitzvah this does not preclude the possibility to do a 2nd one as well: "אפשר לקיים שניהם" – it is *technically* possible to do both.

What about a scenario where the 2 mitzvahs are mutually exclusive; where the involvement with the 2nd-mitzvah will come at the expense of the 1st – "אי אפשר לקיים שניהם"? In this scenario, everyone will certainly agree that one is "off the hook" from the 2nd mitzvah, but, if one decides, can he *choose* to do the 2nd mitzvah??

What do you think??

The Ritva deals with this issue:

Source 5. Ritva's Commentary on Sukkah 25a

Since they are only exempt from another mitzvah while they are actively involved in a prior mitzvah, why does this principle need to be derived from a verse in the Torah? Isn't it obvious that you should not drop one mitzvah to perform another?!

We can answer as follows. The verse is teaching us that even if you want to leave this mitzvah to do a greater mitzvah, **you have no permission to do so**. You might have mistakenly thought that you are exempt from an obligation to do the second mitzvah, but if you want to leave it and do the other you have that option. The verse teaches us that since you are exempt from the second mitzvah, it is now considered a totally voluntary act, and it is **forbidden** to leave a mitzvah in order to do something voluntary instead.

וְכִינּוּן דְּלֹא מִפְטָר אֶלָּא בְּעוּדוֹ עוֹסֵק
בְּמִצְוָה זֹאת לְמַעַן לִיהוּ קָרָא פְּשִׁיטָא לְמַעַן
יְנַיֵּחַ מִצְוָה זֹאת מִפְּנֵי מִצְוָה אַחֲרֵת?

וַיֵּשׁ לומר דְּהָא קָא מְשַׁמַּע לָן דְּאֶפְלוּ
בְּעֵי לְהַנִּיחַ מִצְוָה זֹאת לְעֲשׂוֹת מִצְוָה
אַחֲרֵת גְּדוּלָּה הֵימְנָה אֵין הִרְשׁוּת בְּיָדוֹ.
סְלִקָא דְּעֵתָהּ אֲמִינָא אִיפְטוּרֵי הוּא
דְּמִפְטָר מִינָהּ, אֲבָל אֵי בְּעֵי לְמִשְׁבַּק
הָא וּלְמַעַבְדַּי אִידָּהּ הִרְשׁוּת בְּיָדוֹ. קָא
מְשַׁמַּע לָן דְּכִינּוּן דְּפְטוּר מִן הָאַחֲרוֹן הִרְי
הִיא אֶצְלוּ עֲכָשְׁיוּ כְּדָבָר שֶׁל רִשׁוּת,
וְאִסוּר לְהַנִּיחַ מִצְוָתוֹ מִפְּנֵי דְּבָר שֶׁהִיא
שֶׁל רִשׁוּת.

The Ritva deduces that the novelty of the concept of "Osek BeMitzvah" is that the verse comes to teach us that not only is one exempt from the 2nd mitzvah, but that he's not even *allowed* to do the 2nd one!

The reasoning behind this is logical but profound:

1. One's involvement with mitzvah #1 renders his involvement with mitzvah #2 a voluntary act ("דבר רשות");
2. One is not allowed to abandon an obligatory act in order to do a voluntary act;
Therefore,
3. One's involvement with mitzvah #1 makes his involvement with mitzvah #2 forbidden.

(This approach is in contrast to the Ran, from above, who deduced a different novelty, namely, that the exemption applies even while one is technically capable of fulfilling both mitzvos.)

4 – PREEMPTING A 2ND MITZVAH

The Ritvah continues with a second answer, which carries with it major ramifications:

Source 6. Ibid

Additionally, the verse is teaching us that even in a scenario where one has an upcoming obligatory mitzvah at an affixed time, for example Shema or the Pesach sacrifice, and prior to this another mitzvah opportunity comes his way wherein his involvement with this will nullify his capacity to perform the prior obligation (which has not yet arrived), *he is allowed to begin the mitzvah which is in currently in front of him*, and if this nullifies the other one then so be it. It is not considered as if he's 'casting off the yolk' of mitzvahs by doing so, since the obligation for the mitzvah has not yet arrived, whereas the new mitzvah opportunity *has* arrived.

ועוד למדנו הכתוב דאע"ג דאיכא עליה מצוה קבועה לזמן ודאי, כגון ק"ש ושחיטת פסח, וקודם לכן באת לו מצוה אחרת שתבטלנו מן האחרת אם יתחיל בה, רשאי הוא להתחיל בזו שבאה לידו אכשיו, ואם יבטל מן האחרת יבטל, ואינו חשוב פורק עצמו ממנה כשפורקה מעליו מחמת דבר מצוה, שאין חיוב המצוה עליו עד שיגיע זמנה וראשונה קודמת, כנ"ל.

The Ritva explains that the concept of “Osek baMitzvah” is teaching us something profound: even though one has an obligatory mitzvah which is inevitably incumbent upon him, he *is* allowed to begin another mitzvah which will preclude this.

The reason for this, as he explains, even though mitzvah #1 is *conceptually* “already here” (like Shema: it’s time will inevitably arrive!), *practically* it has not yet arrived. Therefore, the actual mitzvah opportunity which *is* in front of him currently takes precedence, even though this will nullify his capacity to do the 1st mitzvah when its time actually arrives.

This is the novelty of “Osek baMitzvah”.

Practical Scenario's:

1. On your day-off at home, your wife's asked you to put up some shelves in the closet, but then your friend David (whose got 2 left hands) calls, asking if you're available today to help him put up some shelves at *his* place
2. On route Friday afternoon to get some challa's for Shabbos, as per his mother's request, Shloimy meets his friend at the bakery and sees that he may need some help loading his groceries in to the car...
3. Same as above, but this time, Shloimy's friend asks him if he "has a few minutes to go *shlep* some sukkah-boards from his car in to the garage"...
4. You're in the middle of asking the Rabbi a question, when someone comes over to ask *you* a question...
5. It's 7:42pm on Wednesday evening, and you're sitting with your kids helping them with their homework, when you realize that today is the last day that the voting stations are open for the elections...and they close at 8:00pm...
6. While relaxing on a much anticipated, get-away vacation with your wife, you receive an e-mail from one of the t'zeddakah organizations that you volunteer for, who have an important fund-raising event coming up, asking you if you can join for a 15-min conference-call that evening...
7. David is at the hospital with his wife – who's in the middle of giving birth – when he realizes that the time for Davening is soon passing...
8. You're in the middle of davening, and someone comes to collect tzeddaka: are you required to rummage through your pockets, thereby disturbing your concentration, in order to give charity?
9. It was the night before Pesach, and Izzy was in the middle of checking his house for chametz, when Ari called and said "Hey, we're gonna go down to the matzah bakery to make some special hand-made matzos, wanna come?" Izzy has always wanted to make his own matzos, but he's preoccupied currently...but he could squeeze in both...what is the halacha?

SUMMARY:

Osek BeMitzvah

1. **Mishna**: The basic idea of Osek BeMitzvah...
2. **Gemara**: Clarifying the source; from the Shema
3. **Defining parameters of the Osek Bemitzvah:**
 - a. When does the principle apply?
 - i. Tosafot – Only when actively involved with 1st
 - ii. Ran – Even while resting, one is not obligated in the 2nd mitzvah
 - b. What is the extent of the exemption?
 - i. Ritva – While involved with one mitzvah, the 2nd is forbidden!