Mishna Minute

Brachos Chapter 1 — Study Sheet

The opening perek of the Mishnah: when and how to recite the Shema, the blessings that surround it, and why we mention the Exodus at night.

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BRACHOS 1:1

When Can You Say the Evening Shema?

The very first mishnah in all of Shas opens with a deceptively simple question: from what time in the evening may you recite the Shema? The answer is anchored to the rhythm of ancient Jewish life — from when the kohanim, the priests, go in to eat their terumah, the sacred food they may eat only after dark. And when is that? When three medium-sized stars appear in the night sky.

But “until when” sparks a three-way debate. Rabbi Eliezer says: until the end of the first watch of the night (the night was divided into three watches, the first ending about four hours after sunset). The Sages disagree: until midnight. And Rabban Gamliel, the great leader of the generation, extends it all the way until the break of dawn.

The mishnah then asks the deeper question: why does the entire Mishnah — all six orders — begin with the evening Shema? Because the Shema is our declaration of loyalty to God, the foundation on which everything that follows is built.

Quiz: From when may the evening Shema be recited?

Answer: From when the kohanim go in to eat their terumah — when three medium stars appear.

BRACHOS 1:2

The Morning Shema

Having established the evening Shema, the mishnah turns to the morning: from when may you recite it? From the moment you can tell the difference between tekhelet — the sky-blue thread — and white. Rabbi Eliezer narrows it further: from when you can tell blue from leek-green, an even subtler shade.

And you must finish by sunrise — haneitz hachamah, when the sun's rays break over the horizon. Rabbi Yehoshua, however, extends the time: until three hours into the day. Why? Because that is when kings rise from their sleep — and “when you rise” still applies to them.

And if you missed the proper time? The mishnah offers comfort: you lose nothing. Reciting the words is like reading Torah, and you are still rewarded.

Quiz: What if you missed the proper time for the morning Shema?

Answer: You don't miss out — it's like reading Torah, and you're still rewarded.

BRACHOS 1:3

How Should You Read the Shema?

Does your position matter when you read the Shema? Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel disagree sharply. Beit Shammai reads “when you lie down and when you rise” literally: at night, recline and read; in the morning, stand and read. Beit Hillel says the verse refers only to the time of day — read however you happen to be: sitting, standing, even walking on the road.

Then Rabbi Tarfon tells a story. Once, traveling on the road, he reclined to read the Shema — following Beit Shammai. But stopping to recline on a lonely road was dangerous: highwaymen were lurking nearby.

The Sages told him: you risked your very life — all for going against the ruling of Beit Hillel. The lesson: it is not the position that makes the mitzvah. The Shema goes with you, wherever you are.

Quiz: Beit Shammai vs. Beit Hillel — what does Beit Hillel say about posture during the Shema?

Answer: Read it however you are — sitting, standing, even walking.

BRACHOS 1:4

The Blessings Around the Shema

The Shema never stands alone — it is wrapped in blessings, and the mishnah counts them precisely. In the morning: two blessings before the Shema — on the light of creation, and on God's love for the Torah — and one blessing after: emet veyatziv, “True and Firm.” In the evening: two blessings before, and two after — on redemption, and hashkiveinu, “help us lie down in peace.”

Then the mishnah lays down the golden rule of blessings, stated with architectural precision: where the Sages made the formula long, you may not shorten it. Where they made it short, you may not lengthen it. Where it must end with a blessing, don't skip the ending — and where it must not end with one, don't add one.

Every word in its place — that is how a blessing keeps its power.

Quiz: What is the rule about the blessings around the Shema?

Answer: Don't shorten the long ones, lengthen the short ones, skip required endings, or add unrequired ones.

BRACHOS 1:5

Remembering the Exodus at Night

We mention the Exodus from Egypt every day — but at night too? That was once a real debate. Enter Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya: “I am like seventy years old,” he said, “and I could never prove it” — until Ben Zoma cracked it from one extra word in the Torah.

“That you may remember the day you left Egypt all the days of your life”: “days” means the daytime — but the little word “all” comes to add the nights as well.

The other Rabbis read it differently: “the days of your life” means this world — and “all” comes to include the days of Mashiach. One small word — and the night fills with the memory of freedom.

Quiz: Why do we mention the Exodus at night?

Answer: “All the days of your life” — the word “all” adds the nights. (The Rabbis add: “all” includes the days of Mashiach.)