

The Halachic History of Coffee, Tea, Sugar and Chocolate

By: ARI GREENSPAN

For our perception and experience shows that a person who is used to drinking it cannot open his eyes and lose the sleepiness and be able to concentrate without drinking his coffee.

Rav Refael Aharon ben Shimon, Chacham Bashi, Cairo (1848–1928)

Introduction

Rarely do the constellations of Halachah, history and social change align as they did with the introduction of coffee, tea, sugar and chocolate to Europe in the 16th century.¹ Each of these stimulants changed the modern world forever, created chains of international trade and intrigue, and introduced halachic and hashkafic conundrums never before dealt with. Today they have gained a firm foothold in Jewish life. A shul in Bukhara has a small teapot near each *mispallel* and the huge Belz *beis midrash* in Jerusalem has a large room with mountains of instant coffee, tea and sugar ready for students to help sharpen their concentration. And let's not forget the chocolate in Chanukah *gelt* or the man in the shul who holds his coffee mug during *Pesukei d'Zimrah*. This article aims to study the impact of coffee, tea, sugar and chocolate on Jewish communities, practice and liturgy around the world. Coffee is the primary focus but tea, sugar and chocolate all arrived from the new world in the 16th century and play a role in the coffee story.

¹ Robert Liberles, *Jews Welcome Coffee* (Brandeis University Press, 2012) is an exceptional compendium on the topic of coffee and Jews.

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Social Import of Night

Alcoholic Fog

People in the late Middle Ages, and Christian Europe in particular, lived in a fog of hard work and alcohol-induced tiredness. In Europe, where the water was often tainted, people drank beer as their primary liquid. We know from documents that the amount of wine or beer drunk was staggering. In fact, part of the leniency that Rabbeinu Tam shows regarding the realities of wine production and the issue of *yayin nesech* relates to the huge quantities of wine utilized by even small numbers of Jews.² It was impossible to grow, harvest and produce the wine without non-Jewish help, and without it not enough wine would be available. As a result of all that alcohol, as the sun set over Europe, a tired and well-lubricated population trundled off to bed.

The Perils of the Night

Night was considered an unsafe time and *Chazal* understood the dangers of roaming in the dark.

Rav said in the name of Rav Yehudah: A person should always leave when it is good and enter a destination when it is good, as it says: “The morning became light and the men were sent on their way.”³

Rashi explains that at night robbers are on the roads; it is hard to see dangerous ditches and pits; entering a town at night might arouse suspicion that one is a spy or thief. More than that, *Chazal* had concerns about *sheidim*, evil spirits, as well as one’s personal reputation. “A person should not go out alone at night so as to not arouse suspicion.”⁴ Rashi comments that the suspicion is that of immoral activities.

Suddenly the new stimulant opened up night and for the first time, people had a way to stay awake. So when the earliest coffee houses opened in Europe, *poskim* had to deal with a myriad of potential issues and concerns. Firstly, people now were out and around at night and good things don’t happen at night. Secondly, for the first time in history, people of all backgrounds, sexes and religions began to mix easily in a social environment of conviviality. People found friendship, like-mindedness, and were able to exchange ideas.

² Soloveitchik, Haym: *Wine in Ashkenaz in the Middle Ages: Yayin Nesech—A Study in the History of Halachah* (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 2008).

³ *Taanis* 10b.

⁴ *Berachos* 43b.

Historical Overview

According to legend, the goats of an Ethiopian shepherd discovered coffee. The shepherd noticed how his goats had unbridled energy after eating the beans of a particular shrub, so he then tried the caffeine-rich beans himself. Word of the discovery rapidly spread across the Muslim world. Coffee soon was cultivated in Yemen, across the sea from Ethiopia. A primary port there, Mocha, still lends its name to the drink of hot chocolate with a shot of coffee. Coffee was not brewed at home but in coffee houses. Since coffee originated in the Muslim world, it initially reached Sephardic Jewry, and the first responsum relating to it was authored by the Radbaz, Chief Rabbi of Egypt in the 16th century.⁵

Jews soon became coffee dealers and importers. One source has it that coffee itself was introduced into England in 1650 by a Jew named Jacob who opened a coffee house.⁶ Indian Baghdadi Jews led by David Sassoon had a monopoly on the opium trade to China, receiving tea in return. Sassoon became one of the world's major tea traders. A Jewish-owned company established in Russia in the 19th century, Wissotzky Tea, became the world's largest tea company.⁷

Business flourished around coffee. After 1650, coffee houses developed around specific clientele: politicians in one house, businessmen in another, and musicians and artists elsewhere. Lloyd's Coffee House in London became a hub of mariners and shipping information leading to the development of the huge marine specialty insurance house, Lloyds of London. Politics were discussed, no topic was taboo and the coffee house was referred to as every man's university. But soon governments and religious leaders understood the potential for revolt and heresy and at one time or another, Christianity, Islam, Judaism and governments banned entry into coffee houses.

Rav Yaakov Emden, the Champion of Coffee

Rav Yaakov Emden, born in 1697 to the Chacham Tzvi, was a *talmid* of his father and the torchbearer of the anti-Sabbatean movement. He mentions coffee, water, tea and sugar multiple times in his writings and goes into great detail about his physical and mental maladies and the relationship these drinks had to his health. He visited a coffee house in London. We know of the incident because Rav Emden was questioned

⁵ Radbaz was born in Spain c. 1479 and died in 1573 in Tzfat, at the ripe old age of 94. He authored more than 3,000 *teshuvos*.

⁶ *Familiar Letters* (Boston: Howell, Houghton, Mifflin, 1907), p. 662.

⁷ *Jewish Encyclopedia*. See *Sassoon*.

by an acquaintance who was surprised and doubtful of the veracity of the report he had received.

I heard people speaking ill publicly of *maalas kvod Toraso* (his Torah eminence) saying that he drank coffee in a non-Jew's house while here. And even though the Ashkenazim sitting there told *maalat kvod Toraso* that it is forbidden due to the milk that they put into it (not *chalah Yisrael*), none of this prevented *maalat kvod Toraso* from drinking it. To the contrary, you replied that you have heard this contention and one need not be concerned with this and we have previously permitted it.⁸

Ultimately, Rav Emden expresses self-reproach for not observing the prohibition of the local Rabbis but clearly sees no wrong in going to a coffee house where no local Jewish prohibition exists. (Curiously or comically, the Ashkenazim sitting and drinking there rebuked him for doing the selfsame thing that they were doing.) One wonders what drove him to visit the coffee house. Was it his craving for a cup of joe, desire for companionship, or possibly the anonymity of sitting alone with a good coffee?

Interestingly, even sitting and drinking unsweetened tea with a group of fellow Jews before davening was frowned upon due to the chance of getting caught up in schmoozing and missing the time of prayer.⁹ As we shall see, drinking before davening, whether or not the drinks were sweetened, became a convoluted topic discussed in great detail. One thing was clear—coffee was making inroads and was proving to be an attractive libation.

Medicinal Effects of Coffee and Tea

In an age where medicine was poor at best, these new drinks were praised for their perceived or real medicinal value. Rav Yaakov Emden was one of the few Rabbis to write an autobiography. His fascinating *Megillas Sefer* is full of descriptions of daily activities and personal problems. He describes his financial and business difficulties and particularly his health and depression issues. Being a polymath, he studied medicine as it pertained to his illnesses and describes in great detail his physical disorders and his attempts to treat them.

I came upon a chapter in one of the aforementioned medical books and I saw it expounded upon the benefits of tea and praised it and

⁸ *Responsa Yaavetz*, no. 142.

⁹ *Mishnah Berurah, Hilchos Tefillah*, 79:3:22.

commanded to drink its boiled water... I constantly drank teas in the morning and a lot in the evening; it was my main drink and I found it exceedingly beneficial for my health, and I almost drank nothing else besides it... Upon drinking tea I found clarity and calmness and it made me happy as if I had drunk wine... Alas, due to my sins, after I fell into the aforementioned depression in Amsterdam and I thought I could relieve my sadness by drinking large quantities of this drink... but this time it was to my disadvantage, particularly when I drank copious quantities and as a result my blood turned to water... and I could not control my urination for even a minute... Under great distress that I had never known I suffered... until I thought I would die... and a few times they had to profane the Sabbath for me. I suffered with urinary problems for more than 20 years. Even though I had stopped drinking tea, I chose to drink coffee, just 3 or 4 small cups a day.¹⁰

All this was in line with general medical thought of the time. In discussing his eye ailments and their treatments, Rabbi Pinchas Katzenellenbogen (1691–1767) writes:

And with G-d's help I accustomed myself to some bread in the morning and a pitcher of water, as *Chazal* say (*Bava Metz'ia* 107b), that being [for me] coffee with milk and white bread.¹¹

Coffee was held to be a medicinal drink in Eretz Yisrael as recently as the beginning of the 20th century.¹² Being treated as a “medicine” impacted the permissibility of drinking before davening in the morning.

Evidently Jews became so enamored of the drink that Rabbi Avraham ben David Yitzchaki, the *Rishon L'Tzion* from 1715 to 1722, mentions coffee as it was referred to by the Muslims in Egypt:

Many have drunk from a vessel holding a *reviit* of the **Jewish drink** “משקה ישראל” which is called coffee.¹³

The Coffee House Riots

The late 18th century saw many Jews visiting coffee houses in Germany. This leisure activity was an expression of the beginning of social integration in Europe. Indeed, the coffee house riots in Hamburg in 1819 reflected the citizenry's unhappiness with the emancipation and the integration of Jews into the public space. On Thursday, August 19, 1819,

¹⁰ *Megillas Sefer* (Warsaw, 1897), pp. 98–99.

¹¹ *Sefer Yesh Manchilin* (Yerushalayim, 1986), p. 45.

¹² Shmuel Heller, *Sefer Refuos U'Segulos* (Yerushalayim, 1907).

¹³ *Responsa Zera Avraham, Orach Chaim*, no. 2.

a young Jewish man was injured as he was forcibly removed from a coffee house. Before the riots of 1819 Jews were not permitted to enter the public sphere despite the fact that many coffee house owners let them in. Going to the coffee house was a sign of their increasing status and in line with the Rabbis' concerns regarding social integration, intermarriage and Westernization.¹⁴

Instructively, 1819, the same year as the coffee riots, saw the Jews of Sarajevo suffering under a Turkish pasha who imprisoned 13 Jews and sentenced them to death unless a ransom was paid that Shabbos. The community did not have the funds for ransom. A religious Jew named Refael Halevi decided something had to be done. The course of action he took was unorthodox. On Friday night he went into each of the city's eight Muslim coffee shops, ordered a cup of coffee, and put down the extraordinary sum of one gold coin as payment. The confused Muslim shop owners couldn't help but ask: Why would a Jew desecrate Shabbos and put down a gold coin to pay for a coffee in a Muslim coffee house that was forbidden to Jews?

Halevi explained that the evil pasha held the lives of 13 righteous men in the balance, demanding a ransom that their fellow Jews couldn't come up with. The Muslims marched on the pasha's residence and released the Jews. Until today, it is celebrated and called the Purim of Sarajevo.

The triangles of trade around coffee, tea and sugar led to huge fortunes but terrible suffering. For both tea and coffee were bitter drinks and not palatable without sugar. The Caribbean Islands growing sugar cane and processing it made sugar available. All of that needed energy, and black African slaves provided it.

Coffee, *Kashrus* and the Jews

Bishul Akum

The Radbaz, the Chief Rabbi of Egypt mentioned earlier, was asked whether it was permissible to drink coffee cooked by non-Jews.

You asked me about the fruit *al bon*, and the coffee which is the cooked product made from the beans (peel) of that fruit, and drinking it with non-Jews, if it is permissible or not. Answer: I researched the fruit and I saw that it was not eaten raw and the seeds are hard as stones and cannot be eaten at all; rather they roast them in unique vessels and they soften a bit. Ministers and kings eat them

¹⁴ *The Economy in Jewish History, New Perspectives on the Interrelationship between Ethnicity and Economic Life*, ed. Gideon Reuveni and Sarah Wobick-Segev (Berghahn Books, 2011), pp. 118–120.

as they say it dries out the stomach from fluids and they drink the drink, which they make from the peel of outside of the bean and for this reason it should be prohibited.

But the truth of the matter is it is not used on the king's table to dip the bread and as a result it is not prohibited by a non-Jew cooking it. Regarding non-kosher vessels, they use specific vessels so there should be no other taste imparted so it won't ruin the flavor. And even though we only rely on the principle that *stam keilim* of non-Jews are considered not to be cooked in for 24 hours and we rely on that only in a not-ideal situation, but ideally not, the situation here is different. The non-Jews themselves are careful with the pots they make it in or roast the fruit in that they be clean and burnt up of any flavor lest it taint the flavor of it. Therefore, it is permissible to eat the fruit and drink the coffee.

However, to drink it in a party with non-Jews, I don't agree, as a number of problems can come out of it and Jews are holy and it is not good that they should sit with them.¹⁵

So *bishul akum* was not considered to be a concern. However, interacting socially with non-Jews was. It was clear that the vessels used for coffee were used exclusively for it and they were permissible to use as far as *kashrus* goes.

Drinking with Non-Jews

The *Shulchan Aruch* prohibits the drinking of alcoholic beverages in an establishment that is specifically set up for that purpose.

Any alcoholic beverage of Gentiles, whether it be of dates or figs or of barley or of grain, or of honey, is forbidden because of intermarriage. And it is not forbidden except in the place of its sale, but if he brings the alcoholic beverage to his home, and drinks it there, it is allowed, since the essence of the decree is that perhaps he will dine with the Gentile. And the Sages only forbid it when he has a set place for drinking as people are wont to do.¹⁶

Chazal's concern was not the particular liquid but the social interaction. Interpersonal connection defined the essence of coffee culture. As coffee's allure and addiction spread, so, too, did the Jews' usage of it. We see this expressed in the *psak* of Rav Avraham Danzig (1748–1820), author of *Chochmas Adam*. In the chapter on the topic of drinking alcoholic beverages with non-Jews quoted above, he, like the

¹⁵ *Responsa of the Radbaz*, part 3, chap. 637.

¹⁶ *Yoreh De'ab* 114:1.

Shulchan Aruch, is lenient if the drinking is done in a temporary manner. However,

... coffee and chocolate can be drunk in the house of a non-Jew. Due to the number of our sins, in these days, many detrimental things emanate from that, specifically to drink coffee with milk (not *chalah Yisrael*) which is a complete prohibition,¹⁷ besides which, Heaven forbid, that will bring one to immoral behavior as is well known. Therefore, anybody who is imbued with Torah, will distance himself from going into their houses.¹⁸

Psak emanates from behavior and a curious question in the 19th century reflects how significantly coffee consumption had penetrated the Jewish community. The inquiry made was what if the only *minyan* one can find to say Kaddish is in the coffee house?

On the issue which I was asked, a man who is within the 12 months of mourning and only finds a *minyan* in the coffee house “קעווה הייז” a place where transgressions of the King of kings occur, a gathering place for vacuous, reckless jokers all day and night for behaviors that shouldn’t happen. My answer is short. It is forbidden for him to *daven* there.¹⁹

Eating Before Prayer

It was considered a sign of haughtiness to be concerned with private pleasure needs and to eat before one thanks his L-rd through prayer in the morning. The *Mechaber* writes:

One should not eat or drink (before prayer); however, it is permissible to drink water (daily), as well as on Shabbos and holidays. Similarly, if one eats or drinks for medical reasons it is permissible.²⁰

The *Mishnah Berurah* writes that:

Coffee and tea are permitted before *davening* so that one can concentrate, especially in places where it is customary to drink them and one can’t concentrate without them.²¹

¹⁷ See note 15.

¹⁸ *Chochmas Adam, The Laws of Non-Jewish Foods*, 66:14.

¹⁹ *Responsa Siach Yitzchak*, no. 43.

²⁰ *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim, Hilchos Tefillah* 89:3.

²¹ *Mishnah Berurah* 89:22.

He continues by saying it is forbidden to add sugar, as that is a sign of haughtiness. However, even sugar has a loophole: it is permissible when a sugar cube is held between the teeth and the coffee drunk through it. For conditions like “a weak heart,” medical necessity permits the direct addition of sugar.²²

But as we know, coffee and tea are addictive in nature. Just look at the face of a coffee drinker before his first cup in the morning and his dependence is clear. In his *sefer Nabar Mitzrayim*, Rav Refael Aharon ben Shimon,²³ Chief Rabbi of Cairo, discusses the custom of coffee drinking in Egypt.

There is a widespread custom in Egypt to drink coffee with sugar before prayers as is the opinion of the Pri Chadash, who wrote that in Egypt it is the custom to drink [coffee] prior to prayers for a person cannot concentrate without it; but the Pri Chadash forbade the use of sugar. However, many great people drank it with sugar following the opinion of the Ikarei Daas. And one day while in the holy city of Jerusalem, may it be rebuilt in our days, it became clear that many great Rabbis and significant individuals drink it with sugar. The reason it is drunk is for health reasons. For our perception and experience shows that a person who is used to drinking it cannot open his eyes and lose the sleepiness and be able to concentrate without drinking his coffee. Most men of science don't put in a lot of sugar in order that the bitterness should still be tasted, for the bitterness of the coffee will always be tasted above the sugar for that is the taste of the coffee.²⁴

Clearly, drinking coffee before prayers became a common practice. We find Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach writing:

One who feels the need to drink prior to prayers is permitted to drink a cup of coffee with milk and sugar since in our days everybody drinks it; it is not considered an important drink as such and there is no haughtiness in that, so when one feels the need, it is permissible and this is the custom of the world.²⁵

²² Ibid.

²³ Born in Morocco in 1848 and growing up in Israel, he became the Chief Rabbi of Egypt where he served for three decades. *Nabar Mitzrayim* lists *minhagei Mitzrayim* in the order of the *Shulchan Aruch*.

²⁴ *Sefer Nabar Mitzrayim*. Vol. 1, *Hilchos Tefillah*, *halachab* 5.

²⁵ *Halichos Shlomo*, *Prayer*, chap. 2, par. 2.

Coffee on Shabbos

As coffee houses became ubiquitous, Jews, like everyone else, became addicted. Coffee was not commonly prepared at home because a person needed special roasting equipment, roasted beans were not sold, and no instant coffee existed. Since cooking by a non-Jew for a Jew on Shabbos is forbidden, the addict's quandary of how to procure his drug on Shabbos became a major concern. Rav Yaakov Emden, in describing one of his detractors, mentions a behavior that seems to have been common.

When I came to Altona, I saw things that should not happen in Israel. On the holy Shabbos, the fire was burning on the oven to cook him coffee although he was healthy.²⁶

Yet once needing coffee, people had to find a way to drink it on Shabbos. Questions about heating and cooking it were only natural. Rav Chaim Benvenisti, who lived from 1603 to 1673 and was a great *posek* in Turkey, was asked by Rav Avraham Leon regarding coffee on Shabbos. Rav Benvenisti's response follows:

Izmir 1631

To the powerful, wise and exalted Rav Avraham Leon

Question: Please enlighten us, our Rabbi, about the black water that is the cooking of coffee with water that was completely cooked before Shabbos. On the morrow, on Shabbos when you want to drink it, the non-Jewish servant girl takes it, builds a fire and heats it so it will be drinkable. Is it a good thing to do this or not since there are those who forbid it and (those who) permit it...

Answer: ... The general principle therefore is that to put the coffee directly on the fire is forbidden even if the servant girl does it on her own volition and certainly if you tell her to do it. But if she does not put it on the fire itself but opposite the fire... it is permissible.²⁷

A number of ways to get hot coffee or tea were used. Firstly, one could simply make it in a *keli sheni* or *keli shelishi*. However, that was not considered such a simple solution; since these items cook very easily, the heat of the *keli sheni* could also cook it.

Since it is explained that anything that is washed (in hot water) which is the manner of completing its cooking, is considered *bishul* and one transgresses Shabbos ...

Therefore, the plant, which is called tea, that one pours hot water over, and everybody knows that it easily cooks even in a *keli sheni*, like

²⁶ *Megillas Sefer* (Warsaw, 1897), pp. 117–118.

²⁷ Rav Chaim Benvenisti, *Responsa of the Keneset Hagedolah*, no. 17 (Izmir, Turkey).

we see with our own eyes, he who pours over it on Shabbos even from a *keli sheni* is obligated to bring a *chata*s. Many stumble (are mistaken) claiming that the tea is precooked, and there is no cooking after cooking but this is a great mistake. Since even if this is true, they do not cook it except as a preparatory step to make it ready. That is because they sell it at full cost in order to cook it.... And the best way to do it is to prepare ‘sense’ (סענעס) before Shabbos and this is what we do and the law is the same with coffee and other types of foods like this, like chocolate and cocoa.²⁸

‘Sense’ is a concentrated liquid of tea, which can be diluted in hot water on Shabbos and poses no halachic concern of cooking.

Rav Yaakov Reischer (1661–1733), a German *posek*, was asked at his son’s wedding by a student about drinking coffee prepared on Shabbos. The student tried to justify it by claiming that the leniency used by some for buying bread made on Shabbos due to necessity, applied to coffee made by a non-Jew on Shabbos. Rav Reischer disagreed and claimed:

Anytime that we have the concern that the non-Jew added food to the cooking for a Jew, it is forbidden... and that which they were lenient under extenuating circumstances with bread, that is specifically regarding bread because there are times of extenuating circumstances and on bread man lives²⁹ which is not the case with coffee for it is new and recently arrived and you can’t call it an extenuating circumstance.³⁰

While coffee drinkers might argue that not drinking coffee is a matter of life and death, Rav Reischer felt, however, that there is another reason one should not go into the coffee house on Shabbos; that is because it is a “*moshav leitzim*,” a place where time is wasted with people who are frivolous.

An interesting question is: Might the addict prepare the ground coffee before Shabbos in an electric brewer and have a Shabbos clock turn it on? While the knee jerk reaction would be to prohibit it, a fascinating responsum explains otherwise. Rabbi Shlisil, *av beis din* of Munkacs, in writing about setting a timer on an electric stove to cook food on Shabbos, quotes a story from the Chasam Sofer. People who *needed* their coffee on Shabbos morning used to

²⁸ *Aruch HaShulchan, Orach Chaim*, 318:28.

²⁹ A play on words in Hebrew of the *pasuk* “for not only on bread does man live but on the word of G-d does man live” (Deuteronomy 8:3).

³⁰ *Shvus Yaakov*, part 1:12.

set up the fire Erev Shabbos in a way that it would burn [a wick] along a route that by morning would reach the oven with the coffee sitting on it³¹

thereby lighting the oven and cooking the coffee. Accordingly, it would be permitted.

Berachah – Before Drinking

Unlike today, when we can immediately know the botany of any new food item, in days past it was not like that. Was the bean from a tree or a bush? What blessing should be made—*HaAdamah*, *Shebakol* or *Borei Pri HaEitz*?

Rav Yaakov Reischer (1661–1733) was asked:

How should one bless coffee and tea and is there not a concern of drinking it on Pesach? ... The blessing is *shebakol* ... because one does not eat the actual coffee or tea and one only drinks the liquid thereof...³²

Rav Yaakov Emden, writing in the mid-18th century says:

I saw it correct to mention here the laws concerning the drink called coffee that was first introduced in our times close to 60 years ago, and we need to clarify the following points: a) Its blessing is *Shebakol* and I don't understand the reasoning of the author of *Sefer Halachos Ketanos* who writes that it is proper to bless *HaAdamah*. For it is a tree as everybody knows and for this purpose it was planted; if so ... its liquid is like it, then you should bless *Borei Pri HaEitz*.³³

The *Kaf HaChayim* notes:

And a coffee mill that they ground coffee on without a *bechsber*, it is obvious that it is permissible to use and more than that, if it is the only one that exists you can use it *l'chatchilah* since it is exceedingly uncommon to find any other seeds in coffee.³⁴

Berachah – after Drinking

In order to be obligated in a *berachah acharonah* after drinking, a person needs to swallow a *reviis* of liquid, about 3 fluid ounces, in the time it takes to eat half a loaf of bread (*kdei achilat pras כְּדֵי אֲכִילַת פֶּרֶס*). There are multiple

³¹ *Sefer Yerushas Pleitah*, a compilation of Hungarian *teshuvos* gathered before World War II and published in 1946.

³² *Sbvus Yaakov*, part 2:5.

³³ *Sefer Mor Ukitz'ia*, 204.

³⁴ *Kaf HaChayim, Orach Chaim*, 451:189.

opinions regarding the exact volume of food and the exact amount of time but all agree that sipping a hot coffee over the course of a few minutes would likely alleviate the obligation to recite a *berachah* after drinking. However, as Rav Yitchak Lampioni writes in the halachic encyclopedia, *Pachad Yitzchak*:

In a case where there is a doubt and sometimes you do drink the *revivis* in less than *achilas pras* then all agree that you make a *berachah*.³⁵

Pesach

Like any new vegetable the question of its status regarding *kitniyos* needed to be clarified. At first there were those who classified coffee as *kitniyos*. Many, from a lack of understanding of botany, decided to be stringent. We saw the exact same thing happen in recent years with quinoa. However, although botanical clarification settled the matter scientifically, the social issue was a different matter.

And that which the Gaon Rav Avraham Broda is stringent with coffee and classifies it as *kitniyos*, he should forgive me but it is the fruit of the tree and it comes from India and America. A number of years ago I saw the tree in gardens in Amsterdam and in Pisa; certainly the *Gaon* knew that it is a tree. But because it is not found here, and the simple people won't understand or realize that it is the fruit of a tree and will come to be lenient with true *kitniyos* and break down the fences that *Rishonim* had erected, he therefore was stringent with coffee.³⁶



An Engraving of a Coffee Tree

³⁵ Yitzchak Lampioni (1679–1756), *Pachad Yitzchak, coffee*.

³⁶ Rav David Chaim Azulai (Chida), *Sefer Tov Ayin* (Livorno, 1846), chap. 9.

Additives and Chicory

General *kashrus* concerns naturally arose concerning potential additives to and substitutes for these drinks. A poor man's alternative to coffee was chicory, the ground-up root of the endive. Like all natural products, it was consumed without any concerns until around 1865 when an advertisement appeared in a Jewish newspaper claiming the chicory drink was not kosher since the chicory was mixed with pig fat to improve its taste.³⁷ The fascinating acerbic Rabbinical discussion that ensued is immaterial but it shows that additives existed. However, coffee seemed to be drunk unadulterated; otherwise we would have seen a similar discussion by the *poskim* on this issue.

Coffee as a Stimulant

The stimulant effects of coffee were well known. The *Pri Chadash*, discussing drinking after the Pesach *Seder*, rules that only intoxicating drinks are forbidden then, lest it appear that one is starting a second *Seder* or that one won't be able to stay awake to discuss the exodus from Egypt.

Any drink that is not intoxicating is permissible; therefore it is obvious that the drink of coffee is permissible.³⁸

Kabbalistic Nocturnal Rituals and *Tikkun Leil Shavuos*

In a world where people went to bed early with darkness, what prompted developing customs of nocturnal rituals? Radbaz, cited above as author of the first responsum on coffee, opened a yeshivah in Cairo which attracted many *talmidei chachamim* including Rav Yitzchak Luria, the Ari. Radbaz later left Cairo and moved to Tzfas where he was a member of the *beis din* together with Rav Yosef Karo and passed away in 1573. His student, the Ari, also made his way to Tzfas at the same time, and there he attracted a circle of students and popularized a system of Kabbalistic study and unique religious practices. These practices continued to spread after his death. One of the practices he introduced was a prayer over the destruction of the Temple and the hope for its rebuilding. The prayer, said at midnight, was called *Tikkun Chatzot*.

Tikkun Chatzot did not take off until the late 16th century, when it ultimately spread to Jewish communities around the Mediterranean and today is a worldwide Jewish custom. It was part of a general interest in Kabbalistic rites and it would be hard to say that the popularity of staying

³⁷ Rabbi I. Goldhaber, *Yesburun*, vol. 19, Elul 2007.

³⁸ *Pri Chadash, Orach Chaim* 481:1.

up late at night was not related to coffee. It seems that the introduction by Rav Yosef Karo and his brother-in-law Rav Shlomo Alkabetz of the universally-accepted custom of staying up all night to study Torah on Shavuos was related to the stimulant effects of coffee and tea.

Scholem suggests that this readily available stimulant might be the initiator of the renewal of a “half-forgotten observance” of *Tikkun Chatzot*. The fact that midnight religious rituals flourish in the spiritually infused atmosphere of Lurianic Tzfas may not be surprising.

The history of religion knows countless instances in which human beings, when present in spiritually charged environments (of which Safed is a classic example), have been able to transcend the normal limits of their physical constitutions.³⁹

What is remarkable is the way this custom spread around the Jewish world, indicating that a new conception of utilizing the night had penetrated Jewish communities.

Starting in the 1570s a new type of nighttime ritual began in Italy. Rising before dawn, a society called *Shomrim LaBoker* arose to encourage voluntary prayer. They spread around Italy and membership documents for these groups exist, indicating widespread popularity. Seven editions of the prayers were printed from the end of the 16th through the beginning of the 17th century, while only a single edition of *Tikkun Chatzot* appeared. Staying up all night on Shavuos and Hoshana Rabbah appeared in Italy in the early 17th century as coffee became more available in Italy and the coffee could be cooked on both of those holidays.

During the 17th–18th centuries, coffee houses blossomed in Italy and even opened within the ghettos. *Shomrim LaBoker* societies’ records show diminishing membership in favor of *Tikkun Chatzot*, which grew and flourished. The specific towns with these details of membership can be plotted against the records of coffee houses opening, and the relationship is striking. Wherever coffee came, so did *Tikkun Chatzot* grow in popularity.

The popularization of coffee and the ritualization of the night hours thus went hand in hand.⁴⁰

Numerous midnight services happened at important graves and coffee made its way to be part of the ritual itself. *Kever Nachum* in Kurdistan attracted many Iraqi Jews for centuries for Shavuos celebrations. They had a fascinating tradition to engage in mock fighting

³⁹ Elliott Horowitz, “Coffee, Coffee Houses and Nocturnal Rituals,” *AJS Review*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Spring, 1989), p. 27.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

and hand-to-hand combat on the mountain behind the grave to symbolize the Jews fighting their enemies. They stayed up all night and coffee was served to keep people awake. The traveler Joseph Benjamin, known as the second Benjamin after Benjamin of Tudela, described the drinking of coffee.

On the first night of Shavuot everybody comes to the prayer house which is lit by about 1,000 lamps, and they come to the room with the prophet. Those who can read say their prayers and the others pay attention and when the prayers are over they all return to the prayer room and their hearts are restored with food and in particular they drink coffee.⁴¹

Similar descriptions of *Kever Shmuel* exist in the 19th century.

Coffee, like sugar, tea and chocolate, offers us a window into the nexus of social aspects of *psak* and we can see how the development of Halachah went hand-in-hand with the cultural acceptance of these stimulants. ☞

⁴¹ קברים קדושים בבבל, אברהם בן-יעקב (מוסד הרב קוק, 1973)