



# Bet Haraah בית הוראה Shaarei Ezra שערי עזרא

Parshat Ki Tavo

Zmanim for New York:

Candle Lighting: 6:37pm

Shabbat ends: 7:35pm

R"T 8:06pm

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## SPACEWALKS AND BEYOND: THE TORAH'S STANCE ON RISKY ADVENTURES

WRITTEN BY RABBI SHAY TAHAN

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Jewish billionaire Jared Isaacman and SpaceX engineer Sarah Gillis achieved a major milestone as the first non-professional astronauts to conduct a spacewalk on a commercial mission.

On Thursday, the pair left the SpaceX Dragon capsule, orbiting 435 miles (700 km) above the Earth. Isaacman, who financed the Polaris Dawn mission, was the first to exit. "From up here, Earth looks like a perfect world," he said, reflecting on the view. Spacewalks pose serious risks, including exposure to the vacuum of space, extreme temperature changes, and dangerous



levels of radiation. Space debris moving at high speeds can also damage spacesuits. Additionally, astronauts face the threat of decompression sickness and life support system failures, all while working in a physically demanding environment.

Many who read about this journey may feel a sense of envy, knowing they will never be able to afford such a thrilling experience. Since this challenge was undertaken by a Jewish individual, some might even feel an added reason to admire such a figure. In response, they may look for more affordable yet risky alternatives, seeking similar excitement in dangerous but accessible activities. We would like to explore how the Torah views engaging in such adventures.

This article will not focus solely on space travel but will also consider other high-risk activities like skydiving, mountain climbing, big wave surfing, cave diving, hang gliding, and even less dangerous pursuits such as helicopter tours or skiing in risky areas. This also extends to activities like riding motorcycles and electric scooters, which carry inherent dangers.

Much of our youth are seeking greater thrills, finding that traditional activities like roller coasters at amuse-

ment parks or ice skating no longer satisfy their desire for excitement. The growing urge to visit risky places is a real concern, one that the Torah itself warns against.

The Torah is a set of mitzvot (commandments) and averot (prohibitions). It doesn't typically comment on matters outside these categories, yet interestingly, it strongly emphasizes the importance of avoiding danger. In fact, the Torah uses even stricter language regarding safety than it does for sins, stating: (דברים ד, טו) "You shall guard your soul very much." חולין י', א חמירא (סכנתא מאיסורא) that the obligation to avoid danger is treated more seriously than the obligation to avoid sin.

The halacha clearly states (שולחן ערוך סימן קטז ס"ה): "One should be careful of all things that cause danger, because danger is stricter than transgressions, and one should be more careful with an uncertain danger than with an uncertain issur. They also prohibited going to a dangerous place, such as under a leaning wall, or alone at night... All of these things are because of the danger, and a person who guards his soul will distance himself from them and it is prohibited to rely on a miracle in all of these matters."

But one may ask: how do we evaluate danger? Is there a way to measure it? On one hand, almost anything can be considered risky—even stepping outside involves some level of danger from accidents, crime, or terrorism. On the other hand, the Torah clearly doesn't expect people to stay sheltered their entire lives.

The Gemara quotes the pasuk "Hashem protects the simple" to illustrate that when a person lives their life simply, without excessively calculating what is permissible based on safety or risk, Hashem will protect them.

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Poskim of the previous generation addressed this dilemma, offering similar perspectives with slight variations (ראה הרב אלחנן (ואסרמן הי"ד קובץ שיעורים, כתובות קלו ושם אריה סימן כו). They mainly explained that a person is permitted to engage in routine activities, as one is expected to live life normally, provided there is no obvious danger. However, they advised against participating in activities considered risky if they are not part of one's regular schedule.

According to this view, one may go about their day normally but should avoid adventures, trips, or activities that are not considered very safe.

The definition of "safe" is shaped by what society considers dangerous or acceptable (שלמה זלמן אורבך מנחת שלמה).

(תנינא ס' ל"ז ד"ה). Take smoking for example. In the past, it may have been socially acceptable, but today, with a clear understanding of its risks, it is widely regarded as unsafe. According to this view, a person can't rely on the notion that "Hashem protects the simple" to justify smoking, as the dangers are well-known. Therefore, one is obligated to avoid it.

On the other hand, something like eating fatty foods or consuming

sugar, though potentially harmful in large amounts, is not generally perceived as dangerous. People tend to consume these without a second thought. As a result, someone who is otherwise healthy and chooses to eat such foods wouldn't be seen as violating the Torah's command to avoid danger, since society doesn't commonly label these actions as inherently unsafe.

It's interesting to note that, a generation ago, smoking was not considered unsafe and was extremely common. As a result, Rav Moshe Feinstein (אג"מ יו"ד ב' סימן מט) and Chacham Ovadia Yosef (יחזקאל דעת ח"ה סימן לט) applied the same logic we discussed, but in reverse, to permit smoking at that time.

Accordingly, engaging in the activities mentioned above, especially spacewalking, is prohibited as they are widely recognized as risky. Moreover, people often pursue such activities precisely because of the risk involved, seeking the thrill that comes from engaging in dangerous endeavors. For example, the current trend of taking selfies at high altitudes or on the edge of buildings is driven by the allure of danger, as individuals aim to garner likes and followers on social media by showcasing their risky behavior.

## WHY SILENCE MATTERS: HALACHIC INSIGHTS ON TALKING IN SHUL

Halacha addresses the prohibition of speaking in shul in three different scenarios: first, during tefillah; second, during the reading of the Torah; and third, speaking in shul in general, even when the congregation is not engaged in prayer.

### Speaking during prayer

The strictest prohibition of all is speaking during prayer. The Shulchan Aruch states that one may not talk at all during tefillah, even during chazarat hashatz, when one might think it's permissible to speak since they are not actively praying. However, the Shulchan Aruch emphasizes the severity of this prohibition, noting that the sin of talking at this time is so grave that the person would not be able to bear the punishment. Furthermore, anyone who hears someone talking during chazarat hashatz is instructed to rebuke them strongly.

This ruling, which allows for reprimanding a person who talks during prayer, is unprecedented and raises the question: why is it so severe? The answer lies in the nature of this sin. Normally, when a person sins, they bear the consequences themselves. However, in this case, their talking harms everyone in the shul.

The Mishnah Berurah (קכ"ד ס"ק כז) explains that this sin is so damaging that talking in shul can lead to the destruction of the shul itself. Moreover, not only is the talker's own prayer rejected, but they also cause the prayers of everyone else in the shul to be rejected. Many people wonder why their prayers go unanswered, feeling that despite their sincere efforts, they don't receive a response. The reason could be exactly this: either they or

someone else in the shul is talking during tefillah, hindering the prayers from being accepted.

The mefarshim explain that whenever a person speaks during tefillah, they create a spiritual cloud that hovers over the shul, blocking the prayers from ascending. (ספר יערות דבש ח"א דרוש ד עמוד לג). Thus, one should carefully choose where they pray to ensure their prayers are answered and to avoid the temptation of joining in conversations during tefillah. (חיי אדם בצוואה בית) (אברהם).

Rav Moshe Sternbuch (תשובות והנהגות ח"א) shares a frightening testimony from the Gerrer Rebbe, who demonstrated how refraining from talking in shul provides protection to the entire community.

This principle takes on even greater significance during times when Am Yisrael is at war, as the Torah states, "Hashem will fight for you, and you shall be silent." This verse conveys the message that Hashem will fight our battles if we remain quiet and refrain from talking during tefillah.

(מקדש ה' לרבינו יוסף די אוזידה תלמיד בעל מדרש שמואל, בית ישראל מגור)

### Speaking during the Torah reading

During the Torah reading, it is also forbidden to talk—not only during the actual reading but even between the olim (שולחן ערוך). This means that even when there is a pause to call up the next person for an aliyah, it remains prohibited to speak.

The reason talking is not permitted, even between olim, is to prevent someone from continuing to speak once the Torah reading



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resumes. It's difficult to abruptly stop a conversation mid-sentence or thought when the baal koreh begins reading. However, there are a few exceptions to this rule. It is permitted to say "Chazak u'Baruch," "Yashar Koach," or "Mazal Tov" to someone, and singing for a special event is allowed. Typically, these are done between aliyot, and by the time the reading resumes, the congregation has already stopped singing and is ready to listen attentively.

### Speaking in Shul

There is also the general prohibition against talking in shul. The Torah commands us to show reverence for the sanctuary, which includes the shul. Halacha (שולחן ערוך סימן קנא) advises against being light-headed in shul, which encompasses joking and behaving in a manner that lacks respect. The Shulchan Aruch specifically cites the example of not speaking meaningless words.

The Mefarshim explain that meaningless words include discussions about business, politics, current events, and similar topics. In contrast, talking about Torah and matters of Yirat Shamayim is

encouraged. The Zohar states that someone who talks in shul is not only disrespecting Hashem but also delaying our redemption, and such individuals have no share in the God of Israel.

### Using our phone in Shul

This also includes other disrespectful behavior, such as using one's phone to check the news, browse apps, or text people during prayer. If one must use their phone, they should step outside the shul and return when finished. To put this into perspective, imagine you're an employer in a meeting with a potential employee, and in the middle of the conversation, they take out their phone and start browsing different websites. Would you want to hire someone like that?

When we go to shul, the purpose is to express our respect for the Creator. Now, imagine while we're trying to show respect, with Hashem present and watching us, we take out our phone and scroll through the world's distractions. This behavior could be seen as one of the most disrespectful things one can do in the presence of Hashem.

## THE HIDDEN DANGERS OF STAM: WHEN STAM GOES UNSCRUTINIZED

Elul is a time when the poskim recommend checking tefillin and mezuzot (מט"א סימן תקפא ס"י). Although there is no obligation to check them yearly (או"ח סימן לט ס"י), it is proper to do so—especially the mezuzot placed outside, which can be damaged by rain and sun (ערוה"ש יו"ד סימן רצא ס"א).

Let's summarize what a sofer checks in tefillin, which would mostly also apply to the examination of mezuzot.

### The Batim:

In the external check, the sofer examines whether the tefillin boxes are a perfect square. The top part of the bayit must be a complete square, as well as the bottom part, called the titura, and the stitching. While anyone can check for the square shape, a sofer, who regularly inspects tefillin, has a more trained eye to spot potential issues. If anything seems questionable, he will measure it with a caliper. The square can become distorted over time due to weather changes, from humid to cold days, or if a person sweats or wears the tefillin while their hair is wet after a bath.

There are other issues that can be detected once the tefillin boxes are opened, such as the lines on the top of the rosh not aligning with the actual separating compartments. Another issue is the presence of glue used during the preparation of the batim to make them appear square, which becomes undetectable after painting. These issues render the tefillin invalid for use, making it extremely important to have them checked regularly.



The sofer also checks the straps to ensure they haven't lost their black color. If there are white spots, the straps must be repainted or replaced. He also checks for cracks or tears in the straps, which some poskim invalidate, even if they are only slightly torn (בא"ח

בעוד יוסף חי וירא אות כג ובמשנ"ב סימן לג (ס"ק כט הכשיר אם יש שיעור ברצועה

It's also possible that the straps become very narrow in certain places due to constant tightening. If they become less than 10-11 mm wide, they should be replaced immediately. Another common problem is peeling straps, where a layer of latex is attached to the outer surface, which makes them invalid.

### The Parshiot:

After the sofer opens the batim, he examines the parshiot—the parchments. This is a very meticulous task that requires extensive knowledge of the laws of safrut and a great deal of patience. Each letter is carefully inspected. What is the sofer checking?

### Shape:

Halacha outlines the precise shape of each letter, and the scribe who wrote the parshiot must follow these laws exactly. Since writing the parchments is not easy, mistakes can unfortunately occur and must be examined for their kashrut status. This issue is especially relevant with cheaper parshiot, as the sofer is paid less and must write quickly to make it worthwhile. If a letter is not written correctly, the sofer should stop and decide if it can be corrected. However, many times, due to the pressure to continue, the sofer may move on without fixing it. Once he contin-

### The Straps:



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ues writing, the mistake becomes unfixable, as it is forbidden to correct the letters after further writing has been done.

Due to the pressure of quick writing, many sofrim don't even take the time to review their work for mistakes. These parshiot are then placed in the batim and sold in Judaica stores. Years later, when the owner of the tefillin decides to have them checked, the sofer often finds numerous mistakes and issues. This scenario is not uncommon. In fact, Rav Moshe Feinstein and Chacham Ovadia both wrote that most STaM sold in the market is not kosher. A sofer who regularly inspects tefillin and mezuzot can attest to how true this is and how flooded the market is with invalid STaM. This issue is even worse in America, and here's why. Almost all STaM are prepared in Israel and then sold on the market. When sellers in Israel find a problem or invalidity in tefillin or mezuzot, they return it to the sofer. Now, what is the sofer supposed to do? Another case is when a sofer notices a problem after spending hours writing it. What should he do? He knows that if he sells them, the customer will eventually come back angry after having the parshiot checked and realizing they were sold invalid items.

Of course, if the sofer is yerei shamayim (God-fearing), he should put the invalid items in geniza and not sell them. But unfortunately, some sofrim look for a way to sell them without the risk of the customer returning. One solution they've discovered is selling to visitors from the U.S. who come to Israel to buy holy items from a "holy sofer" in the Holy Land. Seeing an American buyer is a golden opportunity since the sofer knows they likely won't return to Israel to confront him if the items are later found questionable.

Another method is selling these items to merchants who regularly travel to America and supply Judaica stores. Many stores don't have a certified sofer to check the STaM before placing them on the shelves. When these items are found to be invalid years later by the buyer, it becomes almost impossible to return them to the original sofer, as it's simply not worthwhile or feasible.

Other issues with the parchments include letters breaking, which can happen due to placing them too tightly in the compartments or because of the way the ink was made.

Another issue with the ink is that it is sometimes very diluted, causing it to appear slightly grayish rather than fully black on

the parchment. If the writing is not black, it is not kosher (סימן לב (ס"ו).

Then there are the common problems of two letters touching (סימן לב ס"ד) or a hole in the parchment that existed before the sofer wrote on it (סעיף טז). Additionally, there can be issues with the tagim (crowns) on the letters, such as many of them being missing (סימן לו ס"ד) or written but not properly attached to the letters, leaving space between the crowns and the letters (משנ"ב (ס"ק יג).

There are many other potential problems that can be found in tefillin, beyond the scope of this article. The key point is that each person should ensure their tefillin and mezuzot are free of issues that could invalidate them. Those with invalid items are not fulfilling this important mitzvah. In the case of mezuzot, they miss out on the Torah's blessing of long life for themselves and their children, as well as protection (דברים יא, כא), while for tefillin, they are considered sinners and may, because of this, lose their portion in the World to Come (ראש השנה יז, א).

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