

Food and Drink in our Worship Spaces

May 12, 2005

"You shall keep My Sabbaths and venerate My sanctuary"

Leviticus 19:30

Question:

Under what circumstances is food or drink permitted in the sanctuary or chapel?

Answer:

We are blessed to have a campus that provides space suitable for multiple uses. We have a social hall, a multi-purpose room, a library, classrooms, and offices. We also have sacred space, our sanctuary and chapel. This worship space is where our community comes together to pray, to celebrate life events, to mourn, to learn, to search for healing, and to come together as a community. Our sanctuary and chapel are both areas of holiness, different from other rooms in our temple facility. Each has a ner tamid (eternal light) and an Aron Kodesh (ark) to house our torahs. These symbols have intrinsic value and importance to the Jewish community and our congregation, and deserve respect and honor.

The sanctuary and chapel should reflect the sense of spirituality and decorum appropriate to their functions. 1 Different standards of behavior are attached to our sacred spaces. 2 The Shulchan Aruch teaches us that a person should behave seriously in a synagogue or house of study. He or she should not go into them for shelter, or use them for relaxation, or work in them (except for religious purposes), or eat or drink in them. 3

But food is sometimes an intrinsic part of a worship service. For example, we drink wine at the Kiddush. We throw candy in Shabbat services to celebrate b'nai mitzvah, and do the same at an aufruf to honor the bride and groom. In these cases, food is necessary to a rite of religious observance and the appropriateness of its use in the sanctuary or chapel is not questioned. However, when food is not integral to worship, the general prohibition on food in the sanctuary or chapel should be observed. For example, a Shabbat dinner or an Oneg Shabbat should take place in the social hall, multi-purpose room, or the foyers outside the chapel or sanctuary, not in the sanctuary or chapel itself.

Because we are fortunate enough to have sufficient space to meet our worship and social needs, we should strive to ensure that a holy atmosphere is maintained in our holiest places, our sanctuary and chapel. We should convey this sense of holy space to our entire congregation, including children. Sunday morning services during Religious School are no less important or sacred than other services. Consequently, incidental food, such as coffee or juice, should not be brought into the sanctuary or chapel even during less formal services. Drinking bottled water in the sanctuary or chapel should be avoided, but discrete use is permissible when necessary.

This policy serves another purpose as well. Despite every best intention, accidents happen. Food is dropped and drinks spill. In the Jewish tradition, we talk often about performing mitzvot, and the rabbis have taught us about *hidur mitzvah*, performing a mitzvah beyond the minimal obligation and beautifying the act. 4 Honoring what we have by beautifying it -- for example, by drinking from a beautiful Kiddush cup or building an especially well-decorated sukkah -- transforms the commandment and our actions into something more beautiful. This extra touch makes the performance of a mitzvah special and adds extra meaning.

The same is true when we respect our worship space. By keeping our sanctuary and chapel beautiful and ensuring that our use of these spaces honors their inherent holy nature, we enhance our worship experience.

In summary:

1. Food and drink are permitted in the sanctuary and chapel only when part of a worship service, such as for Kiddush and Motzi.
2. Discrete use of bottled water is permissible in the sanctuary and chapel when necessary.

References:

1. "Photographing and Videotaping During Services", Congregation B'nai Israel Responsa.
2. "Applause, Applause...from the Rabbi's Desk", Rabbi Harold F. Caminker, Temple Beth El, Riverside CA (http://www.uahc.org/congs/ca/ca023/rabbi78_02.htm)
3. "Shulchan Aruch", Project Genesis, torah.org (<http://torah.org/advanced/shulchan-aruch/>)
4. "From the Rabbi's Desk", Rabbi Loel M. Weiss, Temple Beth Am, Randolph MA, October 2004

Postscript

We recognize that some congregations do not have the physical space which makes separation of worship space from social space possible. In those instances the dual use of one space for religious and social purposes is understandable since the needs of the community necessitate this dual usage.

Approved by the Temple Board
May 12, 2005, based on
recommendations from the
Religious Practices Committee and the Rabbi