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Yeshivat Ateret Yerushalayim

IN THE HEART OF THE OLD CITY OF JERUSALEM

On the Air with Ha-Rav Shlomo Aviner

Rav Aviner answers questions of Jewish Law and faith on the radio in Israel on Tuesday & Thursday nights (To listen: www.kimizion.org/shiur/shut.html). On the Air presents a sample each week.

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Questions in this issue:

1. Thumb sucking before Netilat Yadayim
2. Advice for weaning a child off thumb-sucking
3. A three year old waiting between meat and milk

Thumb sucking before Netilat Yadayim

Q: Is there a problem for a child to suck his thumb before he washes netilat yadayim in the morning?

A: In general, it is forbidden for a person to put his fingers in his mouth before netilat yadayim. But this law applies to adults and not to children who are not obligated in netilat yadayim, as they are not obligated in the other mitzvot. The first Lubavitcher Rebbe – the Baal Ha-Tanya – in Shulchan Aruch Ha-Rav (end of chap. 3) writes that the reason for netilat yadayim in the morning is to remove the "ruach ra" (evil spirit which attaches itself to a person at night while sleeping) and therefore children are not obligated since the "ruach ra" does not affect them. Thus, until the age when children need to be educated to fulfill the mitzvot – approximately the age of 6 – there is no issue of sucking one's thumb before netilat yadayim.

Advice for weaning a child off thumb-sucking

Q: Is it possible to wean a child from sucking his thumb? If so, at what age is appropriate to do so? My child is three years old.

A: It is certainly possible to wean a child from sucking his thumb and the proof is that adults do not suck their thumbs. But this should not be done with force as with everything involving educating children and especially at this age, since a child loves to suck his thumb and it makes him happy and gives him comfort. Three years old is a reasonable age to wean a child from sucking his thumb. You can make a deal with him that if he stops you will give him a gift. Some say that a pacifier is preferable to thumb-sucking since a pacifier is softer and the thumb can push the child's teeth forward. You can also take the pacifier away from the child, but he always has his thumb. I recommend that you buy ten books for child-rearing at a young age – it does not matter which, they are all good but not all are complete, so they will complement one another. If you read these ten books, you will have a good picture of what to do.

A three year old waiting between meat and milk

Q: How long must a three year old waiting between eating meat and milk?

A: He does not have to wait because he is a child. We obviously have to educate him; but if there is a need, then he does not have to wait at all. Sometimes we serve a child meat and he eats with difficulty and now he is hungry, or we want him to eat more and we give him something else like milchigs. Some Rabbis have established guidelines that at a certain age a child should wait one hour, at this age two hours, at this age three, etc... but this is not definitively set from a halachic perspective. It is certainly logical that a child should slowly be educated so that he will be able to fully wait by his bar mitzvah. In Shut Yabia Omer (vol. 1 Yoreh Deah #4), Rav Ovadiah Yosef discusses this issue and writes that it is a case of a double doubt. The first doubt is perhaps the Halachah follows the opinion of the Rishonim, such as the Rashba (Yevamot 114 and Shut Ha-Rashba vol. 1 #92), that it is permissible to give child something to eat which is forbidden by the Rabbis (although we do not hold this way in practice – see Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 343:1) and waiting between meat and milk is a Rabbinic prohibition. The second doubt is perhaps the Halachah follows the Tosafot (Chullin 105a) that there is no obligation to wait between eating meat and milk. It is forbidden to mix them, but if I eat meat, clean the table, wash my hands and brush my teeth, it is permissible to eat milk (although we do not hold this way in practice – see Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah 89:1). Therefore, there is no problem to give a child under bar mitzvah milk after meat when there is a pressing need.

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