
Earliest Time for Shema in the Evening

ברכות דף ב' וש"ע סימן רל"ה סעיף א' [עפ"י פסקי המ"ב]

From when can one read קריאת שמע in the evening?

- 1) מקבל שבת - From sunset, when one must be ר' אליעזר.
- 2) מקוה; just before nightfall. - From when the כהנים immerse themselves in the ר' מאיר.
- 3) תרומה; nightfall [when three medium-size stars can be seen - we await three small stars]. - From the time the כהנים can eat their ר' יהושע.
- 4) סעודה; after nightfall. - From the time that the עני eats his ר' חנינא.
- 5) רש"י and [weekdays or שבת - see ר' אחא and תוספות]. - From when people come in to eat their meal.

Is there any opinion earlier than sunset?

According to תוספות, the times for קריאת שמע and תפלה are linked. Hence, according to ר' יהודה, one may read from פלג המנחה [10 ¼ hours], as with תפלת מעריב. Earlier than this, however, it is forbidden to pray.

Common practice is to daven מעריב before nightfall. Does one fulfil his obligation for קריאת שמע?

תורה - שמונה עשרה from מעריב in שמע - No. The reading of שמע in מעריב is only so as to enter עשרה.

תוספות - Yes.

How do we pasken?

The ר"י points out that our משנה supports the opinion of ר' יהושע and so is the הלכה, as is the position of almost all ראשונים.

What does one do if the מנין davens before nightfall?

Although a number of variations are found in the ראשונים, in the final הלכה, two options are mentioned:

- 1) Daven everything with the congregation, with specific intent not to fulfil the obligation of קריאת שמע. Then repeat קריאת שמע [at least the first two paragraphs but לכתחילה all three]

after nightfall, at the earliest opportunity. If need be, one can do so when reading שמע before bed, but must then ensure to have intent to fulfil the מצוה of קריאת שמע. [This is the advice of the שלחן ערוך and is the mainstream מנהג.]

- 2) Daven קריאת שמע with the congregation and then after nightfall, say שמע together with the ברכות. [Testimony has it, that this was the practice of the חפץ חיים.]

To separate oneself from the ציבור and act stringently even with regard to תפלה, is seen as being arrogant and should only be practiced by one who is well known for his piety. However, those who follow the מנהגי הגר"א, will be particular to always – even on שבת – daven after nightfall, even if it means praying without a מנין. [However, one must be careful not to lose more than he gains!]

One last point of mention is that although the מנהג in many shuls is to pray both מעריב and מנחה after פלג המנחה and before nightfall, if at all possible, at least the individual who is able to be stringent, should avoid doing so; either daven מנחה before פלג, or מעריב after night.

To quote the closing words of the משנה ברורה on the subject, “Happy is the one who prays מעריב with congregation in its right time [i.e. after night].”