

Minhagim: Tradition, Balance, and When to Let Go

Tradition with Intention: When Minhag Enhances, and When It Hinders

Minhagim (customs) play a powerful role in Jewish life. They're not just cultural extras — they're often what give our practices color, rhythm, and personal meaning. While not all minhagim are halachically binding, they've historically helped shape the Jewish experience and keep communities connected across generations. But like anything in Judaism, they require balance, awareness, and intentionality.

Minhagim add a kind of spice that enhances our religious and spiritual experience. They're not just filler or fluff; they enrich the texture of Jewish life.

Take, for example, the *Yehi Ratzon* prayers on Rosh Hashanah at the meal as we eat specific foods— they help us shift toward a more hopeful and optimistic outlook, instead of defaulting to the classic “angry God” narrative. Or think about the minhag to fast on certain days — it's not just about abstaining from food, it's a pause from the chaos of life, a reminder that we are still in a kind of exile, and that there's still a yearning for deeper connection with God. Even the *minhagim* at the Passover Seder — songs, symbols, and rituals — create lasting memories for our children and tie the family together in a shared story of survival, redemption, and divine presence.

Minhagim are not just old habits — they carry emotional, communal, and spiritual weight. They awaken layers of meaning that halachah alone may not fully express. If we strip them all away because they're inconvenient, we risk making Judaism feel dry, mechanical, and uninspiring — especially for the average person who thrives on those experiential and emotional layers to stay connected.

There are generally two categories:

1. **Minhag Kadmonim** – ancient customs from the time of the Gemara (over 1500 years ago), often deeply rooted in halachic thinking.
2. **Later Minhagim** – developed more recently, in the post-Talmudic era.

Practically, Minhag Kadmonim usually carries more weight, sometimes even to the level of near-obligation (*ke'ein din*). Later customs are still meaningful, but may be more flexible depending on the context, the community, and the individual's spiritual journey. That said, even recent customs can become deeply binding when they take root in a community.

All that said, it is still just a *minhag*, and should be treated as such. We most certainly don't want someone who isn't feeling well, who is going through a hard time, or maybe not in the mood today, to feel pressured into keeping a *minhag* that ends up upsetting them rather than enhancing anything. The general rule of thumb should be: if it's positively affecting you — do it. If it's not — **absolutely do not do it.**