

Can coffee be provided to early attenders in shul before Shabbat morning davening?

The question was asked as to whether one may serve coffee, and possibly other refreshments, in shul to be consumed before or during the davening.

At first sight there are three problems. The first is that, as I understand it, people shouldn't really be eating or drinking anything before they daven shacharit. The second is a general prohibition on eating or drinking in a shul. The third is a problem of heating water and cooking on Shabbat.

I believe that we can get round these problems. Around the problem with eating and drinking before prayers, one can argue that it is only a cup of coffee and that these men need it in order to focus on their prayers. Better to get to shul early than spend those 15 minutes at home and leave the men in shul short of a minyan. The problem with not eating or drinking in shul, I thought that perhaps we could place a mehitzta behind the men's section and have the coffee-machine behind that. (the women are on the other side of the mehitzta to the side of the men).

To solve the problem of cooking and heating water, I propose to set up the coffee-machine on a timeswitch before Shabbat comes in so that it starts making the coffee at about 8:45 am and switches off at 9 am. Is there a problem with doing this?

So tell me your opinion please -

1. Would it be permissible, given the urgent need to attract men at 9am, to use a timeswitch so that they can have real coffee fresh on Shabbat morning in shul? – bearing in mind that the machine would already be switched off when the men arrive in shul? The alternative would be to use instant coffee.
2. Would they be allowed to drink it in shul in the men's section, would they have to remain behind a mehitzta while they drank it, or would they and the coffee have to stay in the kitchen?
3. As for the problem with eating and drinking before tefilla, are we as leaders of the kehilla, prohibited from facilitating such sinful behaviour, or could we quietly support it? Would we be permitted to slip some croissants on to a plate next to the coffee-machine, or maybe chocolate digestive biscuits?

Are there any other objections that I haven't thought of?

Rabbi Mickey Rosen's response was a verbal one, over the telephone from Jerusalem. It is written here in my own words as I understood it.

Jonathan

Rabbi Mickey Rosen's Response

1. There is no problem with drinking coffee before davening.
2. It is best to steer away from Mezonot before davening.
3. It is probably permitted to make coffee on a timeswitch, however Rav Moshe Feinstein would rather that it is hot and fully cooked before Shabbat came in. You decide.
4. As for the prohibition of eating in shul, I never considered the room used for tephilla at Yakar as a shul, in my mind. A Bet Midrash has actually has a higher kedusha than a shul – yet it is permitted to eat in a Beth Midrash. My understanding of the room used for Shabbat davening at Yakar Kehilla is that it is a multi-purpose room used for davening one day a week. Therefore it is permissible to eat in the room.

Further clarifications:

- There is no need to erect an additional mechitsa between people eating or drinking coffee and the Aron Kodesh.
- As for someone eating or drinking while another has started berachot hashachar that is a matter of “etiquette” not halachic prohibition.

Based on this answer, the Yakar Kehilla committee decided to try serving coffee and after-eights at 9am to early attenders.

It was decided to accept the chumra of Rav Moshe Feinstein (since we already use shomered milk in shul which is also a chumra of Rav Feinstein) and therefore the real coffee on a timeswitch idea was rejected. It was decided instead to mix up a “cos sh'lishi” jug of instant fair trade coffee at 9am on Shabbat mornings at the back of the hall - initially, for a trial period - with After-Eights.