Eating Before Feeding One’s Pet

Today it is very common for Jewish people to own pets. There are many halachos in regard to owning certain kinds of pets; however, we will focus on the halachos of eating before one feeds his pets. What is the source for this halacha? Is there a difference between taking a drink and eating? Can one “taste” food before feeding his pets? Does one have to own the pet in order for the halacha to apply? Does it apply to fish? All these and other questions will be answered in this issue.

Source

The Gemorah¹ says that it is permitted to be mafsik between the beracha of hamotzei and eating by saying the words, “Give food to my animal.”² The hefsek is considered a need of

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¹ Mesechtas Berochos 40a. The Gemorah in Mesechtas Gittin 62 says it is forbidden to “taste.”
² Some say this is only b’dieved (Divrei Chamudos Mesechtas Berochos 6:64, Biur Halacha “167 mekol mokom,”
the meal since one may not eat before he feeds his pet.³ This is derived from the posuk⁴ that first says, “grass for your animals” and then “you will eat.”⁵ This halacha is quoted by all the poskim.⁶ Most poskim are of the opinion that this issur is an issue d’rabbanan.⁷ The halacha applies even if the animal is not kosher⁸ (see below in regard to dogs, cats, birds and fish).

However, there are a few instances in the Torah where it seems that one may eat before feeding his animals.⁹ The meforshim discuss the case of Noach.¹⁰ Noach ate before feeding the animals in the teivah. This seems to contradict the above halacha. Some answer that since Noach took care of all the animals in the teivah, and they all had different feeding schedules, if he did not eat before the animals he would have not had time to eat at all. Therefore, he ate before the animals.¹¹

Another example is the incident of Eliezer, who drank water before the camels. The Ohr Ha’chaim¹² says that Eliezer was dangerously thirsty, and needed to drink before the camels. The halacha does not apply in that situation. Others prove from this incident that the halacha only applies to food, not to drinks (see below where this is discussed in greater detail).¹³

Reasons

There are a few reasons given for the halacha.

Some explain that sometimes one is not zocheh to food by his own merits; rather, it might be solely for the sake of his animals that his land produces food.¹⁴ Others say that it is based on the issur of paining an animal.¹⁵

Kaf Hachaim 56).
5. Sefer Chassidim 531.
7. Shevus Yaakov 3:13, Biur Halacha O.C. 167 “mekol mokom.” Refer to Magen Avraham O.C. 271:12 who says this is an issur d’oraisa. The Ramham Hilchos Avodim 9:8 says this is a midos chasidos.
11. Gan Ravah on the above posuk. Also see Tzar Balei Chaim page 479.
Tasting

An opinion in the poskim limits the prohibition to eating, but tasting is permitted. The Chai Adom says that tasting is permitted if one does not plan on eating a large meal. However, if one plans on eating a large meal, then even tasting is prohibited. Most poskim make no such distinction and tasting is forbidden in all situations.

Nonetheless, some permit a quick snack. Some say that if one started a seuda before feeding his animal, he should stop his seuda and feed his animal.

Water vs. Food

Based on the first reason for the halacha, many say that it only applies to food. It does not apply to water, because we do not need the merit of an animal for water. Others permit water for the following reason. A great deal of work is required to prepare food. Therefore, the human is considered the owner of the food and the animal is his guest. A guest is served first. However, water is drinkable without any preparation, so the human is also considered a guest. Therefore, he may drink before feeding his animal. Another reason is because if one does not drink it is more of a danger than if he did not eat.

Finally, some say that one does not tend to get involved with a drink, but might immerse himself in a meal. Therefore, drinking before feeding animals is permitted, while eating is not.

Not Home

Even if one is not at home he is still not allowed to eat (or drink, according to the stringent opinion) before arranging with someone to feed his pet.

17. Chai Adom 45:1.
22. Some say this may apply to other liquid drinks as well (Refer to Al Pi Hatorah 1:14:page 259:15, Tzar Balei Chaim page 451:footnote 1020).
23. Yad Ephraim ibid, Elya Rabbah 167:10, Shulchan Hatohar (Karmarna) 167:footnote 4. see Igros Moshe O.C. 2:52. Some say nonetheless, if one sees that the animal is suffering from thirst then the animal should be given to drink before the owner of the animal drinks (Shulchan Hatohar ibid). Refer to Bamidbar 20:19.
27. Sheilas Yaavetz 1:17, Sharei Teshuba 167:9, Birchei Yosef 167:6, Kaf Ha’chaim 52, see Piskei Teshuvos 167:
Dog or Cat

Some say that the halacha does not apply to a dog or cat since they can find food on their own. Nonetheless, it is proper to feed them before one partakes of his food.

Owning the Animal

The issur is only relevant if the animal is one’s property. Therefore, a stray cat, another person's animal (according to some poskim) or dog would not be included in the issur, and one could eat before feeding them. Based on this, some say that Noach was not obligated to feed the animals in the teivah first since he did not acquire them (see above for other explanations). This would also explain why those who have the custom to feed birds on Shabbos Shirah are not particular to do so before they eat. Some apply this rule to explain that Eliezer drank before the camels since the camels did not belong to him.

Birds

When the earlier poskim quote this halacha as applying to animals, it applies to birds as well.

How Often

Some say that this halacha only obligates the owner to feed (or water) his animals a bit once during the day. There is no need to feed them any other time during the day.

Some say that as long as one provides his animals with enough food for the day, he does not have to feed them before every meal. In addition, if one knows that it is not time for the animal to eat, then one may eat before the animal.

Young Children

One who has young children who cannot feed themselves must feed them before feeding their animal. In addition, children who do not own an animal may eat before the owner of the animal feeds the animal.

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28. Refer to Sheilas Yaavetz 1:17 about keeping a dog in one’s home.
30. Chai Adom 45:1, Sheilas Yaavetz 1:17, Sharei Teshuva ibid, Kaf Ha’chaim 53.
32. Eishel Avraham Butchatch ibid.
33. Piskei Teshuvos (red sefer) 348.
34. Shevus Yaakov 3:13, Eishel Avraham Butchatch ibid, Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 42:1.
35. Eishel Avraham Butchatch ibid. Refer to Biur Halacha 334 :ha’rou.”
36. Refer to V’ein Lumo Michshal 4:pages 158-159.
37. Piskei Teshuvos 167:15.
Fish

Many people have aquariums in their homes.40 The poskim say that the halacha applies to fish as well;41 therefore, one should be careful not to eat before making sure that the fish in the fish tank are fed.42 Some say that if the fish have edible plants in the tank, then one may eat before feeding the fish.43

Seudas Mitzvah

There is an uncertainty in the poskim if the issur applies if one wishes to eat a seudas mitzvah (such as a Shabbos or Yom Tov meal) before feeding his animal.44

Appointing a Messenger

If one appoints a messenger to feed his animal, he may eat even if the messenger did not actually feed the animal yet.45 The reason is that since he told the messenger to feed the animals the owner shown he is worried about them and therefore eating before them is permitted.46

Fast Day

The halacha applies even if the owner of the animal is fasting.47 Some say this applies to motzei Yom Kippur as well, unless he is in a lot of pain and must eat.48

Other Activities

We do not find that any other activities other than eating are prohibited before one feeds his animal.49 Therefore, one may daven or take a shower before feeding his animal.50

Danger

If one is in danger of death by starvation then of course he may eat or drink before feeding his animal.51

Guest at Someone’s Home

Some say that if one hosts a friend and his animal, he does not have to feed his friend’s
animal before feeding his friend. Harav Moshe Feinstein zt”l disagrees.

According to the first opinion, we can understand why Rivka gave Eliezer a drink before watering the camels.

**On the Road**

If one is traveling with his animal and does not have sufficient food for both them, the owner may eat the food, and there is no need to give any to the animal.

**Rented Animal**

If one hires an animal (such as a horse and buggy ride), he does not have to feed it before he wishes to eat. This is because the animal is rented to him and he does not own it.

**Not Human Food**

If one is feeding human food to his animal then he is permitted to eat before feeding his animal. According to this opinion, the halacha only pertains to food which is designated exclusively for animals.

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52. Chasam Sofer in Toras Moshe on parshas Chaya Sara page 14, Kesav Sofer O.C. 32.
53. Igros Moshe O.C. 2:52.
54. Chasam Sofer ibid.
55. Ohelecha B’amisecha page 183:15, see Tzar Balei Chaim page 454.
57. Refer to Tzar Balei Chaim pages 450-451.
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