

Swallowing Medications on Yom Kippur

Rabbi Asher Bush [Elul 5784]

While the primary topic of the last chapter of Yoma is fasting (and the other four afflictions), a major corollary to this is the topic of Pikuach Nefesh (saving a life) in cases where fasting is or could potentially be life-threatening. With this as a springboard, the Mishna also addresses other cases of Pikuach Nefesh, not specifically related to fasting or Yom Kippur. There is no doubt in the Mishna or Gemara that Pikuach Nefesh supersedes Shabbos and Yom Kippur, and even when the Talmud records a conversation regarding the source that saving a life suspends the laws of Shabbos, it was never a question of whether this is true, but merely what is the source¹. Whether the risk to life is clear or even if it is only a possibility, the laws of Yom Kippur and Shabbos, and almost all others, if need be, are to be set aside².

The Shulchan Aruch³ records this halacha, writing: “A sick person who needs to eat, if an expert physician is present, even a Gentile, who says that if he does not eat it is possible that his illness will get worse and lead to danger, we feed him based on the words of the doctor, and needless to say he should be fed if he may die.” Several aspects of this ruling of the Shulchan Aruch should be noted. Firstly, that whenever such a question arises the primary person to consult with is a qualified physician, even a non-Jew who does not observe and likely does not appreciate the value of Yom Kippur. But more to our point, the case here is not specifically one where there is immediate danger to the life of the patient, as regarding such a case the Shulchan Aruch concluded with the words “and needless to say.” Primarily the case addressed by the Shulchan Aruch is one where fasting may lead to a deterioration of his condition/worsening of his illness that could lead to a dangerous situation, even if the danger is not immediate or apparent.

While there are certainly individuals today who need or may need to eat on Yom Kippur, that is not the issue to be addressed here, rather the more common and possibly less clear question regarding those who need to take various medications. The general question of the permissibility of taking medications on Yom Kippur will not be addressed here, as the cases under discussion are all either life threatening, potentially life threatening or even when there is no threat to life there is serious illness or pain; in all of these cases the restrictions of taking medications on Shabbos/Yom Tov do not apply⁴. The questions to be addressed here focus more on the liquid which will be used in order to swallow the pills.

Within this, for our conversation there are three groups of medications. The first group are to treat life threatening conditions, so that if the patient did not take this medicine in a timely

¹ יומא פה, the fact that there are seven different sources, some from the laws of Shabbos, with others from such diverse areas as Mila, the Mizbe'ach, midnight intruders in one's house, suggest that rather than indicating a “weakness” seems to show that throughout the Torah the primacy of Pikuach Nefesh is seen.

² יומא פג, ספק נפשות הוא וספק נפשות להקל. The notable exception to this rule is murder, adultery and idolatry, סנהדרין עד.

³ או"ח סי' תקי"ח סע' א'

⁴ או"ח סי' שכ"ח סע' א' וסע' י"ז

manner there is every reason to fear that they will be in danger. A second group is where the danger is not so clear, and the medication is taken to prevent conditions from deteriorating or that could potentially lead to a life threatening situation if not for the medication. The third group are medications that are clearly not related to such danger, but to alleviate significant pain or discomfort. Based on the above quote from the Shulchan Aruch it would emerge that just as when it comes to eating there is no difference in the halacha in cases of present danger and cases where there is a real fear that something might become dangerous, so too when it comes to taking medications on Yom Kippur whether there is a present danger or only a realistic fear of deteriorating to danger, these cases would be in the same category.

Before proceeding, it is worth mentioning that the impetus behind writing this is that I was approached by a man who was given an antibiotic prescription right before Yom Kippur for a significant dental infection⁵. He was advised by a well known Talmid Chacham to swallow the pills without water, which he was comfortable doing. Unbeknownst to this man, with the very first dose taken without water after the start of Yom Kippur one of the pills got stuck in his throat, causing substantial pain throughout Yom Kippur. While he was very aware of the pain, its cause was not clear to him and it was only after Yom Kippur that he discovered that this pill had gotten stuck in his throat causing an esophageal ulcer, a very serious and painful situation.

While this is not something often seen (since most people do swallow pills with water or other liquids) these are well known risks with clear guidance given that pills should be taken with ample water, the typical recommended amount is 200-250 ml, 6.8-8.5 ounces⁶. Some medications tend to get stuck in the throat and can lead to pill esophagitis and even to ulceration. Per the Mayo Clinic and NIH there are over 30 medications that have been reported to cause esophagitis. A (partial) list of these medications include:

- Over-the-counter pain-relievers, such as aspirin, ibuprofen, and naproxen sodium
- Acetaminophen
- Antibiotics, such as tetracycline and doxycycline
- Potassium chloride (used to treat potassium deficiency) and ferrous sulfate
- Bisphosphonates (used to treat osteoporosis)
- Quinidine (used to treat heart problems)
- Warfarin (Coumadin, a commonly prescribed blood thinner)

⁵ While not commonly thought of, a dental infection is included in Pikuach Nefesh, as seen in the Shulchan Aruch (או"ח סי' שכ"ח סע' ג'). The Mishna Brurah (שם ס"ק ז') writes וכל שכן אם חלה מקום מושב השיניים דהיינו החניכים בודאי הם בכלל מכה שבתוך חלל הגוף, that this is particularly true when the pain is in the gums. Dr. Avraham wrote (נשמת אברהם שם אות י"א) that even when the pain is only in the tooth (and not the gums) if the pain is extreme and there is fear of fever or infection, or even without pain but the gums are swollen, such cases are all included in Pikuach Nefesh and if need be, Shabbos is set aside. It should be noted that the fact that dental infections are not seen by laymen as dangerous is likely due to the fact that they are effectively treated, not due to lack of danger (perhaps similar to childbirth where modern medicine has drastically reduced the dangers of childbirth, but there is no doubt that Shabbos is to be set aside for a woman in labor).

⁶ Mayo Clinic website, also see note 9 below. Other doctors have suggested that somewhat less would be acceptable, but the difference in quantity is of no halachic significance.

Looking at this list it is important to note that it includes some of the very same pills that people feel obligated to take without water since they are not for dangerous situations. So, while coumadin is used to prevent strokes and its use in many cases is Pikuach Nefesh, others, particularly acetaminophen, aspirin, and ibuprofen, that can indeed have significant negative results from swallowing them without water (and if one lies down within 30 minutes of taking them) are not typically related to the cure or prevention of dangerous conditions, but for the amelioration of pain, swelling or fever.

So, the question at hand is not so much about the propriety of taking many of these oral medications, but about which beverage/liquid should or may be used to swallow it successfully and safely, and what about cases where food is needed with the medication. It should be noted that from the point of view of halacha there is absolutely nothing novel in these words, but they are being written to provide clarity to both Rabbis and laymen for this rather common situation which lacks clarity and can well lead to pain and possible danger as seen from the abovementioned case.

Rav Moshe Feinstein⁷ addressed several of these issues. He was asked regarding a person who is presently not in medical danger, but their present health issues can well lead to others that would be potentially life threatening. The questioner asked whether this patient would be permitted to take pills without water.

Rav Feinstein's response has two important aspects. Firstly, that even though this person is not presently in danger, given the real possibility that his present condition will lead to a dangerous one, he is presently to be viewed as a sick person in a dangerous situation. It is noteworthy that in viewing the patient's status based on what might later result, he even referenced the well-known account of Rav Yisrael Salanter who permitted healthy people to eat on Yom Kippur to prevent the spread of cholera in times of a virulent epidemic. To determine whether one is in this category, namely the risks and fears of one's condition, both with and without the use of medications, a physician need be consulted⁸.

Secondly, and more directly related to our issue, he wrote that if this person cannot swallow the pills without water, it is permitted to use water. It should be noted that he did not routinely permit the use of water, only in cases where the person could not swallow the pills without water. In cases where water is not needed but would be convenient, there simply would be no justification to use it even though the pills are for Pikuach Nefesh.

He also did not mention that the amount of water used should be less than the shiur⁹; assumedly this is not to permit more, but as he has written, this is specifically in a case where a person

⁷ שו"ת אגרות משה או"ח ח"ג סי' צ"א

⁸ This last requirement, to consult with a physician, is despite the fact that in general a patient who feels that they are in possible danger is authorized to make this determinations and to act on it ('או"ח סי' תרי"ח סע' א'), but in this case it is about the role of the medication, not in the purview of the layman.

⁹ 'או"ח סי' תרי"ב סע' ט', מלוא לוגמו נשמת אברהם סי' (תרי"ב אות ט'), it is one half of the liquid that a person can hold in their mouth. If one thinks that they may need to use this on Yom Kippur, he advises measuring before the day so that one will know just how much to use.

cannot swallow without water, so the assumption is that whatever water they are using is indeed needed. All of the above only pertains to cases of danger or potential danger.

Regarding the pills themselves, Rav Feinstein viewed them as being something not fit for consumption and since they are swallowed without chewing this act is viewed as eating/consuming in an unusual manner¹⁰. Significantly for our case, he added that since even the eating of real foods which are not fit for consumption and in an unusual manner are permitted even for a person whose sickness is not (even potentially) life-threatening, so too seriously ill people who do not face any danger are permitted to swallow pills on Yom Kippur. However, for this last case there is no permission to use water since it is being consumed in the normal manner and has its normal taste. [How these pills are to be swallowed is addressed below.]

Rav Feinstein specifically permitted individuals who cannot swallow pills without water to use water when needed but he did not address the case of a person who is physically capable of swallowing a pill in a case where there are significant risks associated with swallowing it without water. Should the use of water also be permitted in such a case? On one hand it seems that once a patient is deemed a chole m'sukan their health needs are to be taken care of properly and not in a manner that might create new risks in the process¹¹. Accordingly, there would seem to be good reason to permit the use of (small amounts of) water for this person as well, particularly if there is concern that the pill may not be swallowed properly thus depriving the patient of the needed cure. However, given that the statistical risks of drug induced esophagitis or ulcers are so small¹² perhaps these risks should not be considered. Alternatively, the fact that it is universally advised to use water and the idea of taking a pill dry is against all medical norms might be a significant factor in deciding this matter¹³. But, as will be addressed below, there are possible alternatives that may obviate this question.

¹⁰ שלא כדרך אכילה

שו"ע (סי' שכ"ח סע' ד') מכה של חלל א"צ אומד שאפילו אין שם בקיאיין וחולה אינו אומר כלום עושים לו כל שרגילים לעשות לו בחול. ומ"ב (שם ס"ק י"ד) כל שרגילים: ממאכלים ורואות [רמב"ן] ומשמע אע"פ שאין בו סכנה במניעת הדבר ההוא כיון שהחולי יש בו סכנה ויש בהדבר צורך קצת ורגילים לעשות לו בחול עושין גם בשבת [מגיד משנה]. ועיין בבאיור הלכה שהבאנו מכמה פוסקים דס"ל שאפילו במקום שצריך חילול אין מחללין ע"י ישראל אלא בדבר שיש לחוש בו שאם לא יעשהו לו יכבד עליו חליו ויוכל להסתכן אבל כל שברור שאין במניעת אותו דבר חשש סכנה אע"פ שמ"מ צריך הוא לו ורגילין לעשות לו, אין עושין אותו בשבת אלא ע"י א"י כדין צרכי חולה שאין בו סכנה, וע"כ בודאי מהנכון להחמיר באיסור של תורה. ובביאור הלכה (שם ד"ה כל שרגילים, בסוף דבריו) ודע עוד שאפילו לפי דעת האוסרים הנ"ל היינו דוקא בדבר שברור לנו שלא יכבד חליו ע"י מניעת דבר זה אבל בדבר יש חשש שע"י מניעת דבר זה יחלש ויכבד חליו מחללין עליו השבת ... ולפי דברי המאירי הנ"ל ביומא משמע שאם ע"י פעולת החילול הזה יתחזק אבריו ג"כ אין למנוע דבר זה מאתו כיון שהוא חולה שיש בו סכנה

¹² Studies indicate that the incidence of drug induced esophagitis is approximately 4 per 100,000 population per year (NCBI Bookshelf, of the National Library of Medicine, NIH, F. Saleem & A. Sharma, "Drug Induced Esophagitis"). However, it is worth noting that this is a figure based on all patients, older and younger, under varying conditions, and while not specifically noted, it is safe to assume that most are not cases where the medicine is taken without water. It is quite likely that these figures would be noticeably larger for pills taken without a beverage or a sufficient amount. Also of note, the recommended amount of water to use for swallowing a pill is between 200-250 ml (6.8-8.5 oz), far larger than the shiur of Yom Kippur, **generously** larger than two רביעיות.

¹³ Even if the general statistical risks are considered too minimal to permit the use of water on Yom Kippur, a person with a history of esophagitis or with specific medical concerns, would still be permitted to use water.

Also not addressed in his T'shuva are cases where if these medications are taken without eating some food, they will cause nausea and vomiting or diarrhea and thus will not be absorbed into the body. While such cases are not common, eating the minimal amount of food needed for these medications to work would also be permitted no differently than the small amount of water needed to swallow the pill in cases where the need for the pill is in the category of Pikuach Nefesh.

But, as indicated above, many of the medications commonly used on Yom Kippur are not related to danger or even potential danger (common examples being severe headaches or migraines), or in some cases the danger may be viewed as very remote. In these cases, the lenient ruling of Rav Feinstein that allows water would not apply. In each of these cases the person is certainly a seriously sick person and permitted to take medications on Shabbos or Yom Kippur, but given that they are not permitted to use water, how are they to be swallowed, whether due to the patient's inability to swallow without water or the fact that their use without water is ill advised (such as aspirin or ibuprofen)? Below we will address three alternatives, each are halachically acceptable, but some may be far more advisable than others.

The Use of Other Liquids:

Liquid antacids:

At first glance these might appear to be ideal liquids to use to swallow a pill, since they are not fit as foods, they are not considered beverages in terms of fasting on Yom Kippur, and by definition do not cause distress to the stomach or digestive system. However, in many cases they can significantly impact the efficacy of the needed medication, potentially rendering them useless or less effective than desired.

Accordingly, it is necessary to consult with a doctor or pharmacist, and unless one has specific knowledge of the interactions between the specific antacid and the prescription medication, this would be ill advised. In cases where there is no medical reasons not to use an antacid, it is likely the easiest, and thereby the most effective, method available; but as mentioned, this must first be clarified with a physician or pharmacist.

Quinine:

In the past the use of quinine was recommended by some leading Poskim, as it is not meant as a beverage and is quite unpleasant. However, its use can no longer recommended as today it is known that there can be extremely serious side effects on the heart, kidneys, and blood cells, and today it is only used under a doctor's supervision for the treatment of some types of malaria, where the benefits out way the potential risks.

Spoiled water:

Dr Avraham Sofer Avraham¹⁴ records his communications with both Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach and Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv each of whom suggested adding a small amount of

¹⁴ נשמת אברהם או"ח סי' תרי"ב אות י'¹⁴

liquid soap to the water thus rendering it as spoiled, and no longer a beverage that is forbidden to be consumed on Yom Kippur. He adds that Rav Elyashiv ruled that the water need not be overly bitter/unpleasant, merely that it will taste somewhat unpleasant. Dr. Avraham clarifies that the soap or other bitter substance should not be added in such large quantities that one will become nauseous, just enough to make the experience somewhat unpleasant.

He also suggested that in a case where the pill itself was unpleasant tasting it could be somewhat dissolved in the water thus causing the water to taste bitter and then that water could be used to swallow the remaining undissolved part of that pill. Whether this suggestion can and should be followed would depend on the specific medication, as certain pills, like long-acting or slow-release drugs, will work less effectively when crushed; accordingly, this too should only be attempted after consulting with one's physician and/or pharmacist. This would also apply to crushing the pill and placing it into the water, a strategy sometimes utilized by those who have trouble swallowing pills. Needless to say, for Yom Kippur, each of these suggestions only applies in cases where the pill will indeed cause the water to taste unpleasant, which is not always the case.

Even in these cases where the water has an unpleasant taste many Poskim still recommended using a small amount less than the shiur of drinking for Yom Kippur. However, if this small amount is not sufficient to swallow the pill Rav Yehoshua Neuwirth¹⁵ ruled that since the water was spoiled a larger amount could be used.

Rav Neuwirth¹⁶ similarly suggested adding a bitter substance to spoil the water. Unlike the above quoted rulings, he wrote "regarding the quantity of the bitter substance to be added one should best consult with a Rav and a Doctor." While the other Poskim seem to have left this matter up to the patient, it would seem that even they might suggest experimenting before Yom Kippur to find out indeed if this quantity will be noticed but still allow one to actually drink it to swallow the pill.

In a similar vein Rav Mordechai Willig¹⁷ has suggested that a small amount of mouthwash could be added to the water for the same effect. Rav Hershel Schachter also permitted the use of mouthwash in this manner¹⁸.

¹⁵ Clearly this is understanding the use of פחות מכשיעור as a stringency and not an absolute halachic requirement.

¹⁶ ספר שמירת שבת כהלכתה פ' ל"ט הל' ח'

¹⁷ Personal communication, Dec 2022. It should be noted that even though mouthwash is not intended for consumption and the standard warning written on the label states "If more than used for rinsing is accidentally swallowed, get medical help or contact a poison control center right away." Clearly swallowing small quantities is not dangerous, as a small amount will almost inevitably be swallowed when gargling, nevertheless, when mixing with water for Yom Kippur, even though this is likely not a substantial risk as one will certainly be using less than the amount of "more than used for rinsing", caution should be taken. It is likely that the words of Rav Neuwirth are better understood in this light, as he concluded by writing that if the medication is available in suppository form, one should request it from one's doctor.

¹⁸ Personal communication, January 2023.

Rav Asher Weiss¹⁹ has suggested that salt could be added to water, thus ruining its flavor. While he does not insist on a massive amount, clearly a small sprinkling would not ruin its flavor and would not suffice.

Liquid Medications:

If the medication needed is itself a liquid, in most cases this would be an example of a “spoiled” beverage, as they do not resemble a beverage in any way. Even though many have a mint or cherry flavor, this is generally added to mask the otherwise unpleasant taste which is still noticed despite the mint; this would seem to be precisely the point made by Rav Elyashiv that it need not be thoroughly spoiled, only somewhat unpleasant. A thoroughly enjoyable/tasty medicine, such as many cough drops, could indeed be viewed as foods or beverages on Yom Kippur and would be prohibited²⁰.

Conclusion:

Like so many areas of halacha, each stringency has a potential flip side that is not just a leniency, but possibly even a violation. So, as was pointed out by Rabbi Dr. Aaron Glatt, a practicing physician who is also a known Talmid Chacham, the advice mentioned above to use “spoiled water” to take certain medications might, with the best of intentions also be utilized for medications that are in the category of Pikuach Nefesh, and due to the unpleasantness might discourage the use of these urgent medications. Accordingly, if a person is contemplating being extra strict (something that is not unlikely on Yom Kippur) and will try to take even essential medications with water that has been rendered “spoiled”, it is strongly recommended that they try this out before Yom Kippur to see if they can successfully swallow a pill on these terms, otherwise they may miss these needed medications.

¹⁹ כינוס הרבנים השנתי בידיני חולה ביום הכפורים, בחסות דרכי תורה וביה"ח שערי צדק.

²⁰ This last point could relate to some chewable medicines as well. Similar to liquid medications, these are generally flavored. Common examples of this include medications for upset stomach/indigestion (Tums, Rolaids, etc.) and for the relief of pain and fever made for children who often cannot yet swallow pills (Ibuprofen and Acetaminophen in particular). The clear benefit for Yom Kippur is that since they are to be chewed, these pills do not need water. Even though these pills are all flavored (similar to the liquid medications mentioned above), nevertheless, they really are not food, and even though they are being chewed, this would not be a violation of the prohibition of eating and drinking on Yom Kippur. But because these pills are chewed, taking them would not be considered לאכילה/לאכלה/consuming in an unusual manner, but they are still לאכילה/לאכלה/not viewed as edible food, and likely not food at all. In cases of sickness many Poskim permitted the use of foods that are not fit for consumption even for a sick person who is not in danger, and all the more so to take medicines which are not food at all.

[It should be noted that Rav Moshe Feinstein (או"ח ח"ג סי' צ"א) explained the permission to take needed pills on Yom Kippur based on the fact that they are לאכילה/לאכלה/not fit for eating; this is something that would likely apply to all pills, those swallowed and those chewed. Other Poskim (see קל"ג אות ט') focus on the fact that many pills are מרים/unpleasant tasting.]

Accordingly, a question may remain in some cases where the flavoring is fully pleasant and not just serving to mask the otherwise unpleasant flavor; whether these should be viewed more like a cough drops which are somewhat of a “glorified candy” or not may require case by case decisions.

If an adult is using children’s chewable medicines they should be aware that the doses are typically 50% of the adult dose, but may vary, so it is important to check in each case in order to receive the appropriate dosage.

Additionally, it is imperative that whenever possible, prior to Yom Kippur a person who knows or thinks that they will be using medications should speak with their physician or pharmacist to ascertain which medications must be taken on or close to schedule, which can be omitted or delayed significantly, which can safely and effectively be taken without liquid and which cannot, and whether some alternative, like an antacid would be prudent or not. Yisrael Kedoshim, the Jewish people are holy and endeavor to observe this most holy day in the meticulous manner, but to jeopardize oneself in such a manner is the antithesis of holiness as is so graphically seen in the words of Rabbi Yonatan ben Yosef²¹, “it is Kodesh for you, it is given to your hands, and you are not given to its.”

²¹ Sanhedrin 85a.