

Tractate Brachos

The Rabbanim taught in a baraita, The night consists of four watches, these are the words of Rabbi. R' Nassan says: three. What is R' Nassan's reason for saying this? Because it is written (In the book of Judges) So Gideon, and the hundred men that were with him, came to the edge of the camp, at the beginning of the middle watch. And a baraita taught: "middle" is only when there is something before it and something after it. [Since the verse uses the term "middle watch" it must mean that there is something before it and after it. But, even though this is a good observation, it does bring up the question of, how would Rabbi explain this verse.] And Rabbi, [since he holds to four watches,] to him, what is the middle? What does the term "middle" mean? It means, one of the "two" middles. [In other words, out of the four, he refers to numbers 2 and 3 as "middle ones."] And R' Nassan [who disagrees] says, Is it written "a middle one of the middle ones." [No, it is not so] What is written [here is] "the" middle one. [The Gamorah is very interested in Rabbi's point of view, and thus wishes to investigate his reasoning.]

What is Rabbi's reason? R' Zerika said in the name of R' Ami who said in the name of R' Yehoshua ben Levi: One verse states [in King David's Psalms], At midnight I will arise to thank You for Your righteous judgments. And another verse states, My eyes preceded the watches. [The word watches is plural in this verse. Now if we combine the two verses we will see that King David arose at midnight and there were still watches (plural, min. two) ahead of him. Indicating four watches, according to him.] How is this? The night [thus] consists of four watches! [Now the Gamorah too must return to R' Nassan to see how he understands this new proof.] And R' Nassan holds like R' Yehoshua, for we have learned in a Mishnah: R' Yehoshua says: [he holds that one's obligation for reading the Shema extends] until the third hour [of a day]. For it is the way of kings to arise at the third hour, [the beginning of the third hour. Notice that we are now talking about "days." The reason is, there are also watches in the day, not only at night. Now if King David arose at midnight, there must have been 6 hours remaining in the night.] Six hours in the night, and two hours in the day, [when the kings arose - until the beginning of the third hour.] That is a total of eight hours, [this is] two watches [at four hours per watch.]

[R' Nassan is saying that the verse: My eyes preceded the watches, is referring to that David awoke at midnight, eight hours before other kings. The reason why the Gamorah is connecting R' Nassan with R' Yehoshua is to show us the machloket. Do you see the machloket or kashia?]

[Since R' Yehoshua says, the obligation for reading the Shema extends until the third hour of the day, it actually means 9 hours after midnight, but within the discrepancy of R' Nassan saying 8 hours and R' Yehoshua saying 9, we know that King David only counted the hours that it was known that kings would arise, and not the last possible time. In other words, kings were already starting to arise at the eighth hour, and by the ninth hour it was already too late to say the Shema, and all kings had already arisen. This is what is meant by the "beginning of" the third hour.]

Rav Ashi said: One and a half watches are also referred to as "watches." [Another point of view. But this statement also informs us, if we read between the lines, that Rav Ashi is of the opinion that he night has 3 watches, and not 4. In other words, there are three watches in the night, and at midnight there are actually 1.5 watches left. King David could therefore use the plural form of the word "watches".]