**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**Deracheha: Women and Mitzvot**

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In memory of Amos Dubrawsky (Amos ben Chagai HaLevi and Nechama Pearl) zt"l -
brother, son and friend. May his neshama have an aliyah.

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***Zimmun* (2)**

**By Laurie Novick**

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May men and women combine to form a *zimmun*? Who can make a *zimmun be-Shem*? What are the parameters for the text of *zimmun*?

# Mixed *Zimmun*

We've seen that three men or three women can form a *chavura* to recite *zimmun*.

We’ve also seen that when there is a *chavura* of three or more men, everyone eating with them is obligated to recite *zimmun*. Women may participate in the men’s *zimmun*, or a group of at least three women can split off and recite it on their own.

What of a *zimmun* of two men and one woman, or two women and one man?

The mishna seems to address this question, though its meaning has been debated:

Mishna *Berachot* 7:2

Women, bondsmen, and minors, we don’t recite *zimmun* over them.

On the whole, halachic authorities understand this mishna as prohibiting men from combining with women, bondsmen or minors to create a *zimmun*. But there is a minority view that understands it differently. Let's look at both approaches, starting with the minority view.

Minority View

We could understand the mishna as simply prohibiting women, bondsmen, and minors from combining with each other to create a *zimmun*.[[1]](#footnote-1) On this view, the mishna may imply that women and free men are permitted to combine to create a *zimmun*.

This type of reading likely explains the halachic position of Rav Yehuda Ha-kohen (end of tenth century Mainz), who rules that women **are** permitted to combine with free men to create a *zimmun*:

Responsa of Maharam Rothenberg IV:227

Rav Yehuda Kohen said that a woman can combine [with men to create a *zimmun*] of three for *birkat ha-mazon*…He brought a proof from the Talmud's doubt (*Berachot* 20b) whether [women's obligation in *birkat ha-mazon*] is on a Torah level or rabbinic [and presenting the practical outcome] as discharging the masses [in their obligation]. That implies that it is clear to us that women combine [with men for *zimmun*], for if you don’t say so, rather than asking if she can discharge [a man's obligation], it [the Talmud] should ask if she can combine [with men to create a *zimmun*].

Rav Yehuda Ha-kohen reasons that if women's ability to combine with men for *zimmun* were in question, the Talmud should have raised that question prior to discussing women discharging men's obligations in *birkat ha-mazon*. (We'll see Maharam's rebuttal of this point below.)

A few later authorities have suggested that Rav Yehuda Ha-kohen's view had more limited application, based on a more mainstream reading of the mishna. Taz, for example, suggests that Rav Yehuda Ha-kohen in fact does read the mishna as limiting combinations of women and free men, but specifically when the combination would be two women to one man:

Taz OC 199:2

…Regarding women in our mishna, that is if they [women] are the majority, one man cannot recite *zimmun* for them [as a group]. But to combine two men and her as the third, she can well combine [with them to form a *zimmun*]. That is the view of Rav Yehuda Ha-kohen.

Rav Yehuda Ha-kohen's view in all its versions, and men and women combining to create a *zimmun*, have been widely rejected in practice.

Prevalent View

The prevalent view is that the mishna simply prohibits a mixed *zimmun* of fewer than three women with fewer than three men. Those who take this view need to account for why mixed *zimmun* is a problem. Here are some of the main possibilities:

**I. Different Text** *Zimmun* ideally creates a communal *birkat ha-mazon*, in which the *mezammen* can discharge the obligations of all participants. Therefore, the people instrumental to creating the *zimmun* should recite the same core text.

Rashi says men and women cannot combine to **create** a *zimmun* because they recite different texts of *birkat ha-mazon*. He assumes that women omit mention of circumcision, which is an obligatory part of [*birkat ha-mazon*](https://www.deracheha.org/birkat-ha-mazon/) for men.

Rashi *Arachin* 3a s.v. *mezammenot le-atzman*

**They [women] recite *zimmun* for themselves** - Three women, and similarly three bondsmen, but two women or two bondsmen do not combine with men, for men have something that women, and bondsmen, don't have. For women don't mention "*berit*" [in *birkat ha-mazon*]…

Nowadays, many women do recite the lines of *birkat ha-mazon* that refer to circumcision. According to Or Zarua, this might enable a woman to discharge a man's obligation. But since this recitation is voluntary and reflects a different relationship to circumcision than men's, one could still argue that Rashi's rationale remains in place.

**II. Different Obligation** This interpretation parallels the previous one. *Zimmun* ideally creates a communal *birkat ha-mazon*, in which the *mezammen* can discharge the obligations of all participants. So the people instrumental to creating the *zimmun* should share the same level of obligation in *birkat ha-mazon*.

Maharam takes this perspective. He writes that, if women clearly had a Torah-level obligation in *birkat ha-mazon*, then men and women would be able to combine to form a *zimmun*. However, since it is possible that women are obligated only rabbinically in [*birkat ha-mazon*](https://www.deracheha.org/birkat-ha-mazon/), a combination of this sort cannot work.

Responsa Maharam Rothenberg IV:227

Rav Yehuda Kohen said that a woman can combine [with men to create a *zimmun*] of three for *birkat ha-mazon*…And Maharam responded to him: …Would you say that regarding a woman, who can never come to be [certainly] obligated on a Torah level [in *birkat ha-mazon*]?...For if she [could] discharge others' obligations [in *birkat ha-mazon*] if so, her obligation would be on a Torah level, and it would be simple that she can combine [with men to create a *zimmun*].

These first two views see the inability of women and free men to combine to create a *zimmun* as purely the result of technical halachic reasoning.

**III. Lack of Kevi'ut Status** Unlike Maharam, Ra'avad views women as definitively obligated on a Torah level in *birkat ha-mazon*. Yet he, too, reads the mishna as ruling out the possibility that free men and women could combine to create a *zimmun*. His stated reason is that women and men **cannot** halachically create *kevi'ut* as a joint *chavura*, i.e. cannot halachically establish a joint eating fellowship together. (For more on what this means, see [here](https://www.deracheha.org/zimmun-part-1/).)

Ra'avad *Temim De'im* 1

Women are obligated in *birkat ha-mazon* as a matter of Torah law as the main Talmudic discussion [establishes], and even so, "[men] don't recite *zimmun* combining with them," because they are not eligible for *kevi'ut* [establishing communal eating].

Because he is so terse, it's hard to be certain what Ra'avad means. His idea seems to be that a mixed-gender group cannot formally, ritually create a *chavura* together because halacha does not recognize their eating together as a fully integrated communal act on the same level as single-gender groups.[[2]](#footnote-2) This might be related to the range of halachic perspectives on the propriety of men and women eating together, especially on festive occasions. (We discuss these more [here](https://www.deracheha.org/mechitza-3-in-society/).)

On this view, a mixed *zimmun* is simply impossible because the group is not considered a halachic *chavura*.

**IV. Propriety** A last view maintains that, while a mixed *zimmun* might be technically possible, concerns for propriety make it impermissible.

A baraita stipulates that women and bondsmen may not combine for *zimmun*. The Talmud explains that this constraint stems from concern that such mixing will lead to inappropriate behavior.

*Berachot* 45b

"Women and bondsmen, if they wish to [combine to] recite *zimmun*, they do not recite *zimmun*." Why not? … because of immodesty.

Rashi comments that these mixed groups could potentially lead to inappropriate behavior. Therefore, it is **unfitting** for them to create established halachic status, *keviut*, as a *chavura*, fellowship of eaters:

Rashi *Berachot* 45b

**[Women, bondsmen, and minors] If they want, do not [combine] to recite *zimmun*** - as the rationale is explained later: that establishing eating with them [*kevi'ut*] is not fitting, because of immodesty, whether [bondsmen] with women, or whether male sexual relations of bondsmen with minors.

Now, one could argue that we are specifically concerned about inappropriate behavior on the part of bondsmen, and that we would not have this concern regarding free men. Along these lines, Sefer Ha-me'orot explains that Halacha makes negative assumptions of this sort about bondsmen:

*Sefer Ha-me'orot Berachot* 45a

There is no concern of immodesty for an adult [free] man with the women, for that is specific to bondsmen, who are immodest with illicit relations as we say in general "lack of restraint suits a bondsman," but with respect to free men we don't say this.

Rabbeinu Yona disagrees. He writes that Rashi is concerned about the propriety of gender-mixing even with free men (though this claim does not appear in our versions of Rashi).

Rabbeinu Yona *Berachot* 33a (Rif Pagination)

Women, bondsmen, and minors, [men] don't combine to recite *zimmun* with them. Rashi explains that women don't combine for this reason to create *zimmun*, even with their husbands, for forming a *chavura* with them is not fitting.

Following this logic, Halacha might rule out any mixed *zimmun* across the board, regardless of context, due to concerns for propriety. Alternatively, it might allow for mixed *zimmun* where propriety is assured.

Peri Megadim suggests that, following this position, Rav Yehuda Ha-kohen permitted men and women to combine to create a *zimmun* specifically within a family context. Family would be an exception to the mishna's prohibition because it presents fewer concerns about propriety or modesty:

*Peri Megadim* OC *Mishbetzot Zahav* 199:2

For one can say that a woman does not combine with men, for their forming a *chavura* together is not fitting, or is immodest. But Rav Yehuda Ha-kohen was dealing with a woman with her husband and her son, where these rationales are irrelevant. But see Levush 7, that a woman and her husband do not combine for *zimmun*.

Peri Megadim, however, goes on to quote Levush, who rejects combining to create a *zimmun* even within a family even though he views propriety as the central consideration.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Creating vs. Participating

Women can **participate** in a *zimmun* of three or more men, but (according to the prevalent view) cannot join with one or two men to **create** a *zimmun*. Why should there be a halachic difference between these scenarios?

According to the first two explanations we saw above, the answer is fairly straightforward. Unity of obligation and of text is more pressing among those needed to create the quorum together than among those who simply participate.

But, from the perspective of propriety, it is harder to explain the difference between men and women participating in a single *zimmun* and combining to create one.

Furthermore, as we saw in Part I, *kevi’ut* (formally eating together as a group) enables one person to recite *ha-motzi* on behalf of all present – without regard for gender. Yet (according to the prevalent view) *kevi’ut* for *zimmun* requires a core group of the same gender. Again – why the difference?

Ritva provides a partial answer, taking the propriety approach:[[4]](#footnote-4)

Ritva *Megilla* 4a

[That they (women) don't combine] for *zimmun*. This case is different because there is a major combining, for there is a change in *birkat ha-mazon* on their account, to add *birkat ha-zimmun* on account of them, and one should be concerned for immodesty…Wherever there is a *zimmun* of three men without them [the women], they [women] join and recite *zimmun* with them [men] to discharge their *beracha* [obligation], for it is not considered combining wherever the men do not fully need their [women's] combining, for there is a *zimmun* without them [the women] …

A situation in which *zimmun* can be recited only by halachically integrating men and women in the ritual is more sensitive than a communal *ha-motzi,* or a *zimmun* in which men and women participate but don't need to combine.

Regarding the comparison to *ha-motzi*, Chazon Ish adds that *birkat ha-motzi* is an act of communally praising God, but *birkat ha-zimmun* is a *beracha* **about** the community that forms it:

*Chazon Ish* OC 30:8

Women and bondsmen, [men] don't combine with them to recite *zimmun*…. [The fact] that women don't combine with men [to create *zimmun*] is because their forming a *chavura* together is not fitting, and they do not create *kevi’ut* with each other for a single *chavura*. Nevertheless, it seems that with respect to *birkat ha-motzi* they [women] discharge their obligation with men’s *beracha*, and [the mixed group] is not considered a lack of reclining [together] such that everyone must recite their own *beracha*. For specifically to participate in a *beracha* on account of their unity is unfitting, but their *kevi’ut* is [considered] *kevi'ut* for the matter of *ha-motzi*.

Rav Ben Tziyon Uziel further develops this line of thought:

Responsa *Mishpetei Uziel* 4 CM 6

Rabbeinu Yona wrote in his commentary on the Rif: Women, bondsmen, and minors, [men] don't combine to recite *zimmun* with them. Rashi explains that women don't combine to create *zimmun*, even with their husbands, because forming a *chavura* with them is not fitting…For even if we accept this version of Rashi, he must have said that only specifically regarding *birkat zimmun*, whose halachic meaning is expressing special gratitude over the fellowship and his opportunity to be together with them. This is truly not a fitting matter since it includes an aspect with a sense of immodesty. But in any other gathering that does not include such an expression, no one would say we are concerned for immodesty…the request of this [mixed] fellowship to come together without it being required and to express their joy over their combining together, this is a matter that is not fitting and appears immodest, even with respect to her husband, for this [eating together] is within the category of a lightheaded interaction between a man and his wife…

*Zimmun* expresses gratitude and joy at the opportunity for a specific group to join together to eat communally. Where there are enough men to form such a group and express that joy, women join with men as part of the larger group of eaters and blessers without calling ritual attention to the mixed-gender fellowship.

However, when *zimmun* would only be possible by men and women mixing, it ritually marks the opportunity of men and women to join together as a mixed-gender group. This inherently seems to celebrate the act of women and men coming together to eat. Such a ritual would either highlight an act with potential for frivolity, which would be inappropriate, or formalize it, when our rituals tend to be more separate. (For more on gender mixing, see [here](https://www.deracheha.org/mechitza-3-in-society/).)

# In Practice

Widespread practice follows the view that men and women may not combine to create a *zimmun*. At the same time, there are some historical attestations of Torah scholars following the view of Rav Yehuda Ha-kohen, at least in the context of family. For example, Rav Yom-Tov Lipmann Heller writes:[[5]](#footnote-5)

Malbushei Yom Tov 199:5

In Derashot Maharash 199, when he ate with his wife, he called another to recite *zimmun* so they would be three. I challenged this above, (196:2) for Rabbeinu Yona prohibited in the name of Rashi.

On the one hand, this stands to reason since the laws of *kevi’ut* are more flexible within a [household](https://www.deracheha.org/zimmun-part-1/), as are the laws of [*tzeni’ut*](https://www.deracheha.org/tzeniut/). On the other, if the concern relates to potentially different levels or types of obligation, family connection is irrelevant.

Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach rejects the possibility of male and female family members combining to create a *zimmun*:

*Halichot Beitah* 12:3

…For a woman does not combine with three men to [create] *birkat ha-zimmun* when they have eaten together, even a woman with her husband and sons also may not combine with them…

Rav Eliezer Melamed, however, writes that it is permissible to rely on the rulings allowing for mixed *zimmun* within the family, though he considers not doing so to be preferable:[[6]](#footnote-6)

Rav Eliezer Melamed, “The Law of Women Joining *Zimmun*,” *Akdamot* 26 (Nissan 5771): 31.

…There are early authorities who wrote that a woman who is a close family member combines with men to form a *zimmun*, and according to their approach, the sages distinguished within their enactment between relatives and those who are not relatives…and one who wishes to rely upon them in the framework of first-degree relatives is permitted to do so. But it seems more [correct to follow] the opinion of most early and later authorities, who think that from the fundamental enactment, the sages did not enact an obligation of men and women of [combining to create] *zimmun* together.

Rosh Yeshivat Har Etzion Rav Baruch Gigi permits family members to combine to create *zimmun*. However, he recognizes the sensitive nature of the issue and thus conditions application of this ruling on taking into account local sensitivities.

Rav Baruch Gigi, Message about *Zimmun*

I think that it is possible to combine with women to form a *zimmun* within the nuclear family, where there is no problem of *tzeniut* and their creating a *chavura* is fitting… In questions that touch on a woman's status, her place in the synagogue, and sociological changes in family structure and more, there is great sensitivity and tension….Therefore, these questions require great sensitivity. A resolution that fits one particular community may not be suitable for another…In this case the man is the *mezammen*, and not the woman, because of the doubt regarding a woman's level of obligation in *birkat ha-mazon*.

# *Zimmun* Be-shem

Often, communal rituals require a [*minyan*](https://www.deracheha.org/minyan/). While we have learned that *zimmun* requires only three people, the mishna includes a *zimmun* that mentions God's name "*Elokeinu*" as part of a list of ritual recitations requiring ten or more men.

Mishna *Megilla* 4:3

...We do not recite *zimmun be-Shem* [*zimmun* with God's name] with fewer than ten…

The Talmud explains that many of the recitations listed in the mishna are *devarim she-bikdusha.* (See more [here](https://www.deracheha.org/minyan/)).

*Megilla* 23b

Every *davar she-bikdusha* is with no fewer than ten

However, the Talmud goes on to suggest that *zimmun be-Shem* requires a quorum of ten simply because that is how rituals invoking God's name in a call to others are performed:

Since he needs to say “*nevarech l-Elokeinu* – fewer than ten is not the usual practice.

*Zimmun* thus may not technically be considered a *davar she-bikdusha*.[[7]](#footnote-7) In this vein, some early authorities refer to a *zimmun* of any number as **akin** to a *davar she-bikdusha*:

Shita Mekubetzet *Berachot* 45b

For *zimmun* is like a *davar she-bikdusha* and is not practiced with fewer than three…

*Zimmun* with God's name, *zimmun be-Shem*, raises two interesting questions regarding women. First, given that women can make an all-women's *zimmun* of three, may women create a *zimmun* of ten? Second, may a woman serve as the tenth for *zimmun be-Shem*?

These questions intersect with the question of whether *zimmun* with ten is considered a *davar she-bikdusha* or simply functions like one. If it is a *davar she-bikdusha*, then women would not count toward the minyan, as is usually the case.[[8]](#footnote-8)

If it is not a *davar she-bikdusha*, but functions like one, then there might be room for women to count towards a minyan for *zimmun be-Shem*, even though women do not count towards the minyan for a *davar she-bikdusha*.

Talmudic Evidence

The Talmud does not directly address the case of a group of ten women reciting *zimmun be-Shem*. However, a discussion of a different case – whether two men may opt to recite *zimmun* – sheds some light on our question.

The Talmud likens a group of a hundred women to a group of two men:

*Berachot* 45a-b

It was said: Two who ate as one— Rav and Rabbi Yochanan had a dispute. One said, if they wish to recite *zimmun*, they recite it; and one said: if they wish to recite *zimmun*, they do not recite it…Yet a hundred women are similar to two men, and the baraita teaches "women recite *zimmun* for themselves…" That [a women's *zimmun*] is different, for there are [still three] distinct minds.

To summarize the argument: Two men and many women are comparable; many women recite *zimmun*; therefore, two men should be able to recite *zimmun*. But this argument is rejected, because a group of many women (or even just three) includes more people (or minds) than a group of two men, reaching the threshold of three for *zimmun*.

Early authorities disagree as to what the assumed comparison of a hundred women to two men means, presenting three primary approaches:

**I. Neither Can Create a Minyan** Tosafot understands the comparison to mean that a hundred women can never constitute a minyan, just as two men do not:

Tosafot *Berachot* 45b s.v. *Ve-ha me’a nashi ke-trei gavrei damyan*

For a hundred women are like two men: Regarding gathering for prayer and regarding **any matter requiring ten**, and even so we consider them [women] as three and this is the law for two [men]. But one cannot say they are like one man, that they [women] would be unable to recite *zimmun*, for the baraita teaches that women recite *zimmun* for themselves.

Tosafot states that, for any recitation that requires ten, only men are counted. According to Tosafot, then, a group of ten or more women cannot recite *zimmun be-Shem*.

**II. Neither are Obligated in *Zimmun*** Rashi understands the comparison to mean that a hundred women are not obligated in *zimmun*, just as two men are not. *Zimmun* in these cases is voluntary.

Rashi *Berachot* 45b s.v. *De-afilu, De-ika*

**For even 100 [women] are similar to two [men]** — with respect to obligation, for they [women] are not obligated to recite *zimmun*, and if they want to, they recite *zimmun*, and this is the law for two [men]. **For there are distinct minds** - For even though regarding obligation they [women] are not obligated, regarding voluntary performance, they are considered three minds to give thanks to God, more than are two men, for there is an aspect of "Make God great along with me."

Rashi's reading does not rule out the possibility of ten or more women voluntarily reciting *zimmun be-Shem*.

**III. The Comparison is Rejected** Rosh maintains that the comparison of a hundred women to two men is ultimately rejected by the Talmud.

Rosh *Berachot* 7:4

Once [the Talmud] concludes that "minds are different" and [a group of women] is legally distinct from two men, they [women] have also gone back to [being unlike two men] in the matter of being obligated like three [men, for *zimmun*].

Rosh’s reading, like that of Rashi, does not rule out the possibility that women could count toward *zimmun be-Shem*.

Indeed, Rosh is cited as an authority who allowed for a woman to count toward the tne needed to recite *zimmun be-Shem*.

*Shiltei Gibborim* 2, 32a in Rif pagination

…Rabbeinu Asher wrote that they [women] combine with men to create *zimmun be-Shem*….

In Practice

Perhaps because the status of *zimmun be-Shem* as a *davar she-bikdusha* is unclear and because the Talmudic passage is subject to conflicting interpretations, practical Halacha regarding women forming or combining with men to create a *zimmun be-Shem* errs on the side of caution.

**I. An All Women’s Group**  Rambam rules that an all-women's group may not recite a *zimmun be-Shem*:

Rambam Laws of *Berachot* 5:7

Women and bondsmen and minors [men] do not combine with them to recite *zimmun*, but they recite *zimmun* for themselves. And there should not be a *chavura* made up of women and slaves and minors because of immodesty, but women recite *zimmun* for themselves or bondsmen for themselves, so long as they do not recite *zimmun be-Shem*.

Rav Yosef Karo explains that Rambam's rationale is to treat *zimmun be-Shem* as a *davar she-bikdusha*:

Kesef Mishneh *Berachot* 5:7

What he wrote, "as long as they do not recite *zimmun be-Shem*," is because we say that every *davar she-bikdusha* requires no fewer than ten adult free men

Sefer Ha-me'orot offers an alternative reading. He lists some of the factors raised in discussion of mixed *zimmun*— level of obligation and *kevi’ut*— as reasons for women not to recite *zimmun* be-Shem.

Sefer Ha-me'orot *Berachot* 45a

Rav Moshe wrote "as long as they do not recite *zimmun be-Shem*," and this requires study, why they [women] do not recite *zimmun* as ten mentioning God's name as with three….It is possible to say that the Rav [Rambam] thought that *zimmun* for them was voluntary and not obligatory, and therefore they don't recite *zimmun be-Shem*…and one can say further…that *zimmun* depends on *kevi'ut* and women and bondsmen and minors are not subject to *kevi’ut* such that they should recite *zimmun be-Shem*. In any case, it seems that one should not protest their reciting *zimmun be-Shem*, since it was not mentioned in the Gemara.

He adds that one should not protest if a group of ten or more women go ahead and recite *zimmun be-Shem*. This view has not been accepted as halacha, which instead follows a straightforward understanding of Rambam.

Shulchan Aruch OC 199:6

Women…recite *zimmun*…for themselves, as long as they do not recite *zimmun* be-Shem.

**II. A Mixed Group**  A few early halachic authorities cite a position that women can help make up the quorum of ten for reciting God's name in *zimmun*. We saw above that Rosh takes this position. Similarly, Mordechai reports that Rabbeinu Simcha of Speyer permitted a woman to count as the tenth for *zimmun*.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Mordechai *Berachot* 7: 158

Rabbeinu Simcha would in practice combine a woman [to the ten] for a *zimmun*. Even if you conclude and say that a woman is only obligated rabbinically [in *birkat ha-mazon*], for this is a question in Ch. 3 (20b), this applies to discharging others' obligations but just to combine for the mentioning of God's name, they can well combine.

As we discuss [here](https://www.deracheha.org/minyan/), Rabbeinu Simcha's view is not followed in practice, neither here nor with respect to [*tefilla be-tzibbur*](https://www.deracheha.org/tefilla-be-tzibbur/)*.*[[10]](#footnote-10) Additionally, the issues raised regarding combining to create a *zimmun* of three could also apply to *zimmun be-Shem*.

# Text

We can more readily recognize the significance of adding God's name by returning to the essential ritual text of *zimmun*. Though called a *beracha*, and though *berachot* typically do mention God's name, *zimmun* takes a different form, as a short call and response:

Rambam, Laws of *Berachot* 5:2-3

…He says, "Let us bless (*nevarech*) [the One] from Whose [food] we have eaten." And everyone responds, "Blessed is [the One] from Whose [food] we have eaten and through Whose goodness we live." And he repeats and recites "Blessed is [the One] from Whose [food] we have eaten and through Whose goodness we live."

This is the core text of *zimmun*. The *mezammen* invites others to bless God, and they do, continuing to *birkat ha-mazon*.

The first few lines of *zimmun* – the responsive permissions with which we are familiar – are merely introductions to *zimmun* and not obligatory. We can trace them back to the Talmud, which tells us that Rav's students would call for a glass of wine and express intent to begin, as a prelude to reciting *birkat ha-mazon*:

*Pesachim* 103b

They said to him: Give us [the cup of wine] and let us recite a blessing (*ve-nivrich*).

The Zohar expands on this formula, calling it a special, mystical preparation geared for reciting *birkat ha-mazon* over wine:

Zohar *Be-midbar Balak*, p. 186b

If you say "let us bless [the One] from Whose we ate," that is the invitation. "Blessed is [the One] from Whose we ate," that is the *beracha*. This is certain. But "let us bless," is a different invitation, an invitation for "Who creates the fruit of the vine." For first recites an invitation just for the cup of blessing. And this cup, once he takes it, he recites another invitation with the word "let us bless" regarding the Exalted World from which all of our food and *berachot* emerge...

This pre-*zimmun* call to recite a *beracha* has been widely adopted and adapted, even when *chavurot* recite *birkat ha-mazon* without wine.

Magen Avraham Introduction to 192

It is written in the Zohar at the beginning of *Devarim* that he should say "Give us and let us bless" for all sacred matters require invitation and therefore we are accustomed to say in Yiddish, "Esteemed companions, we wish to recite *birkat ha-mazon*" (*Rabosai mir vellen bentschen*) and they respond "May God's name be blessed from now and forever (*Tehillim* 113:2).

The Ashkenazi version of *zimmun* even includes mention of God's proper name, detracting from the impact of adding God's name for a *zimmun* with ten. Still, this mention may be different because it comes within a quotation of a full verse from *Tehillim*:[[11]](#footnote-11)

*Zimmun Nusach Ashkenaz*

Leader: Esteemed companions, let us recite a *beracha*/ Response: May God’s name be blessed from now and forever/ Leader: With the permission of… our masters and esteemed companions, let us bless…

Ashkenazi permissions included "*rabotai*," esteemed companions, as a gesture of respect to all in attendance.

*Sefer Kolbo* 25

It is proper for everyone who blesses to ask permission from the significant people who are eating there, and he says “*birshut rabbotai nevarech*…” "with the sanction of my esteemed companions, let us recite a *beracha*."

Sefardim generally preserve the language from the Talmud, simply adding a mention of God as Highest King. In effect this requests permission from Heaven to recite *birkat ha-mazon* and only secondarily from attendees:

*Zimmun Nusach Edot Ha-mizrach*

Leader: Give us and let us bless the Holy Highest King/ Response: Heaven/ Leader: With the sanction of the Holy Highest King and with your sanction, let us bless…

Women reciting a Sefardi *zimmun* need not change any of the language. The formula is briefer and gender neutral, with the possible exception of feminizing "*bi-rshut’chem*" with your permission to "*bi-rshut’chen*" (the feminine plural form) when no men are present.

Feminizing Ashkenazi *zimmun* is slightly more complicated. In a responsum, Rav Yehuda Henkin lays out some options:

Responsa *Benei Banim* 4:4

Regarding the language of the *zimmun*, and whether it is permitted to include men and women together and to say “*gevirotai ve-rabotai nevarech*” or “*birshut gevirotai ve-rabotai nevarech she-achalnu mi-shelo*” and so on, I do not see a halachic objection… In any case, if three women ate with one or two men, it is preferable for the *mezammenet* to say “*gevirotai nevarech*” or “*chavrotai nevarech*” without including the men, since they are not drawn after the women’s *zimmun* at all, even though it is permissible for men to answer a women’s *zimmun*… But when she says “*birshut*…” she can ask permission from men as well, and similarly a man from women, and especially from the master and mistress of the house. Asking permission is primarily from someone who is greater than him in Torah and *derech eretz*, but today there are those who ask permission from all those eating, and it is even possible to shorten and say “*hav lan nevarech*” and “*birshut ha-mesubin nevarech she-achalnu mi-shelo*” without enumerating who they are.

*Gevirotai* maintains the formal, polite tone of *rabotai*. *Chavrotai* has the advantage of referencing the idea that the women combine as a "*chavura*." Therefore, it can apply even when the women are not specifically "*chaveirot*," or friends, in a colloquial sense. Rav Henkin allows for employing the male plural form or referring to the men present where relevant, though his preference is not to say *"rabotai*," so as to make it clear that the men are not joining with the women to create the *zimmun*.

Rav Henkin also notes that, in his opinion, the asking of permission is informal, and can include the mistress of the house, "*ba'alat ha-bayit*." This addition has been contentious in religious Zionist circles. Specifically, Rav Ya'akov Ariel has been opposed to it, even in the case of a son recognizing his mother. In an online responsum, he describes the current language as fixed, and the mother's desire for recognition as an outgrowth of militant feminism: since she is not obligated in *zimmun* (an interesting claim, since she is obligated if there is a *zimmun* of men present):[[12]](#footnote-12)

Rav Ya’akov Ariel, What is the Problem with Asking Permission from Mother in Zimmun?

Jews have an accepted formula for *zimmun*. …the *mezammen* asks permission from the rest of those obligated in *zimmun*. Or from the host who honored him with *zimmun*. The mother is not obligated in *zimmun* and therefore there is no reason to ask her permission. The mother’s request that he ask her permission deviates from what is accepted, and represents an unjustified breach that apparently stems from social conflicts whose place is elsewhere, but under no circumstances in this context of *birkat ha-mazon*.

Others, however, including Rav Shlomo Aviner, have ruled that men reciting *zimmun* may freely ask permission from their mothers or from the female heads of the household alongside the males:[[13]](#footnote-13)

Rav Shlomo Aviner, “*Birshut Ba’alat Ha-bayit*” in a *Zimmun*

One can say “*bi-rshut imi*” or “*ba’alat ha-bayit*”…this forumla is not part of the primary *zimmun*. The primary *zimmun* is “*Baruch Elokeinu she-achalnu mi-shelo u-vtuvo chayyinu*.” This “*birshut*” is an addition. Therefore, there are different formulae. On Shabbat, the custom was to add “*birshut Shabbat Malketa*.”

As Rav Aviner notes, if the logic to ask permission were specifically to recognize someone who would otherwise recite *zimmun* or choose the *mezammen*, it is hard to see how Shabbat would be included.

Rav Aviner's logic is reminiscent of Magen Avraham. Both see the language of the introduction to *zimmun* prior to "*nevarech she-achalnu*," the beginning of *zimmun* itself, as inherently flexible. This is why, even though women typically begin a woman's zimmun with "*gevirotai*" or "*chavrotai*," even *rabotai* "my esteemed companions," may be acceptable.

How should we relate to the flexibility of the introductory lines of *zimmun*?

Though “rabotai” can be a general polite term of address, the introductory lines for the Ashkenazi zimmun come across as very gendered. They are also fairly open to revision (whether in Hebrew, Yiddish or one’s language of choice), since the halachic aspect of zimmun really begins with “nevarech.”

What should women reciting zimmun, or men seeking to acknowledge women at the table, such as their mothers or the hostesses, do with this flexibility?

By keeping to a more traditional introductory formula, we can preserve and respect the style and intention that reflect established custom. At the same time, by tweaking the formula a bit, we can be more accurate and inclusive of women.

In practice, very few of us make independent liturgical choices, even in the relatively rare cases like this one where there is no halachically mandated text. Especially for a ritual that requires coordinating three or more people, we inevitably rely on what is printed in a siddur or birkon.

Deracheha Editor-at-Large, Sarah Rudolph, notes that Orthodox birkonim very rarely include the option of women’s zimmun at all, and that affects women’s readiness to recite zimmun:[[14]](#footnote-14)

Sarah Rudolph, 'Women, Bentching and the Role of Publishing'

When there happen to be three women, but fewer than three men, at my Shabbos table, I don’t want to have to spend the whole meal wondering how I’m going to broach the topic and ask my guests if they would like to join me in this optional mitzvah. I dream of the day when it won’t be awkward or uncomfortable, and my guests can simply answer “yes” or “no.” And one step in that direction would be to simply put it in the bentchers. To change our printing habits to more accurately reflect our halachic tradition….I dream that these elements will become standard in our books and in our announcements, impromptu or not. Because the alternative, allowing communal habits to continue eroding communal awareness of actual halachic options, leaves us no real choice at all.

Similarly, men’s not acknowledging their hostess or mother at a meal may contribute to a tendency not to be careful about women present participating in a men’s zimmun, though it is a halachic obligation.

As a resource, Deracheha is happy to offer this [card](https://deracheha.org/zimmun-card/), which reflects a range of liturgical possibilities for introducing a women’s zimmun while adhering as closely as possible to traditional practice, so that more women can feel more comfortable coming together to praise God in zimmun.

# Further Reading

* Brofsky, Rav David, “Zimmun”. VBM Shiur. Available [here](https://www.etzion.org.il/en/shiur-zimun).
* Frimer, *Rav Aryeh,*“Women and Minyan.” *Tradition* 23:4, (Summer, 1988), pp. 54-77. Available [here](https://traditiononline.org/women-and-minyan).
* Melamed, Rav Eliezer*,*“The Law of Women Joining *Zimmun*.” *Akdamot*26 (Nissan 5771), pp. 31. Available [here](https://bmj.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/26.3.Melamed.pdf).
* Tubul Cahana, Meirav*, “Women in Birkat Ha-Mazon.”*Talelei Orot*15, 5769.*
* Wolowelsky, Joel B., “The Eating Fellowship: An Exploration.” *Tradition* 16:3 (Spring, 1977), pp. 75-82. Available [here](https://traditiononline.org/the-eating-fellowship-an-exploration/).
* Wolowelsky, Joel B., “‘With Your Permission’: Zimmun in Cyber-halakha.” Tradition 41:2 (Summer, 2008), pp. 275-287. Available [here](https://traditiononline.org/with-your-permission-zimmun-in-cyber-halakha/).
* Zivotofsky, Ari Z. and Naomi, “What’s Right with Women and Zimmun.” *Judaism*, Sept. 22, 1993. Available [here](https://www.thefreelibrary.com/What%27s%2Bright%2Bwith%2Bwomen%2Band%2Bzimmun-a014873623).
1. For example:

Piskei Rid Berachot 47b

In the Mishna: "Women, bondsman and minors, we don't recite *zimmun* over them." That means even though we learn in the mishna in Berachot ch. 3 that women and bondsmen are obligated in *birkat ha-mazon*, even so they are not counted to combine with men for *zimmun*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This view may have historical roots. According to Katharine D. Dubabin's *The Roman Banquet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 22: "In Greece, reclining at dinner was a male prerogative…On occasions where women were present, for example at wedding feasts, they would be seated, not reclining." [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Levush* OC 199:7

However, even though they are obligated in *birkat ha-zimmun*, [men] do not combine with them to form a *zimmun*, for them to be among the three, such as when they are two men and one women, for the sages forbade them form a *zimmun* together, because it appears like immodesty to recite *zimmun* with a woman, to combine her with men, and even with her husband it is not fitting to form a *zimmun*, but when there are three men without them [the women], they [the women] are also obligated in *zimmun* and fulfill their obligation with the mens’ *zimmun*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See also Ran:

Ran on Rif, *Megilla* 6b (Rif pagination) s.v. *Matnitin*

For even though women recite *zimmun* for themselves, even so they do not combine for the quorum of three to recite *zimmun* with men because of immodesty…*Zimmun* constitutes a change in the formula of *birkat ha-mazon*, and since their combining with men is noticeable, there is concern for immodesty…With birkat *ha-mazon*, where there are three [men] without women, the women also combine with them because now the women’s combining with them is not at all noticeable. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For more details and examples, see Yonatan Gershon, “*Shalosh De’ot Mezammenot*,” n. 64 (available here: https://bmj.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/26.1.Gershon.pdf). For example, Maharil mentions a *talmid chacham* who had this practice.

New Responsa Maharil 18

I saw in the responsum that Rav Yehuda Ha-kohen wanted to permit and Maharam prohibited it and deflected his proofs. And I heard … one of the great teachers to acted to join together to combine [women with men for a *zimmun*] but our other rabbis did not do this. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Available here: https://bmj.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/26.3.Melamed.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The mishna in *Berachot*, which suggests a debate as to whether there should be a graduated series of mentioning God's name based on how many participate in *zimmun* or if ten is the only inflection point, may also reflect *zimmun* functioning like a *davar she-bikdusha* without technically being one:

Mishna *Berachot* 7:3

How do we recite *zimmun*? With three, he says “*nevarech*.” With three plus him, he says “*barechu*” [instead of “*nevarech*”]. With ten, he says “*nevarech l-Elokeinu*.” With ten plus him, he says “*barechu*.” Ten or one hundred thousand is the same. With one hundred, he says “*nevarech l-Hashem Elokeinu*.” With one hundred plus him, he says “*barechu*.” With one thousand, he says “*nevarech l’Hashem Elokeinu Elokei Yisrael*.” With one thousand plus him, he says “*barechu*.” With ten thousand, he says “*nevarech l’Hashem Elokeinu Elokei Yisrael Elokei Ha-tzeva’ot Yoshev Ha-keruvim al ha-mazon she-achalnu*.” With ten thousand plus him, he says, “*barechu*.” In the manner that he blesses, thus they respond after him, “*Baruch Hashem Elokeinu Elokei Yisrael Elokei Ha-tzeva’ot Yoshev Ha-keruvim al ha-mazon she-achalnu*.” Rabbi Yose Ha-gelili says they bless according to the size of the assembly, as it is said “in chorus bless God, the Lord from the source of Israel” (*Tehillim* 68:27). Rabbi Akiva said, just as we have found in the synagogue, whether they are many or few, he says “*barechu et Hashem*.” Rabbi Yishma’el says, “*barechu et Hashem ha-mevorach*.” [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Mishna Berura 199:15

*Be-Shem* – For mentioning the name is a *davar she-bikdusha*, and every *davar she-bikdusha* requires no fewer than ten free males. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Rosh and Mordechai were contemporaries, and both students of Maharam of Rothenburg, so they may have been aware of each other’s views on this question. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. In both cases, Rabbeinu Simcha allows one woman to be counted alongside nine men:

Mordechai *Berachot* 173

I found in the name of Rabbeinu Simcha [of Speyer]: A bondsman and a woman can be counted [as tenth for a minyan], whether for *tefilla* or for “*baruch Elokeinu*” [in *zimmun*]. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Responsa *Yechaveh Da'at* 3:13

One who learns Talmud or Midrashim and Zohar, and reaches a verse that includes mention of God, may mention God in his reading, and there is even a mitzva in doing so. So is the law for one who expounds in public and mentions verses…. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Available here: <https://www.yeshiva.org.il/ask/15000> See discussion of Rav Ariel and Rav Aviner in Joel Wolowelsky, "'With Your Permission': Zimmun in Cyber-halakha." *Tradition* 41:2 (Summer 2008), pp. 275-287. Available here: https://traditiononline.org/with-your-permission-zimmun-in-cyber-halakha/ [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Available here: http://shlomo-aviner.net/index.php?title=%22%D7%91%D7%A8%D7%A9%D7%95%D7%AA\_%D7%91%D7%A2%D7%9C%D7%AA\_%D7%94%D7%91%D7%99%D7%AA%22\_%D7%91%D7%96%D7%99%D7%9E%D7%95%D7%9F\_(%D7%9E%D7%90%D7%9E%D7%A8) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Available here: https://www.ou.org/life/inspiration/women-bentching-and-the-role-of-publishing/ [↑](#footnote-ref-14)