**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**THE LAWS OF THE BERAKHOT**

**Rav David Brofsky**

***Shiur* #50: *Mayim Acharonim***

**and Other Preparations for *Birkat Ha-Mazon***

This week, we will begin our study of the blessings said after eating bread, known as the *Birkat Ha-Mazon*. We will begin by noting and studying the preparations for *Birkat Ha-Mazon*, including the customs not to remove the bread and to cover the knives before saying *Birkat Ha-Mazon*. We will also study the laws of *Mayim Acharonim*. Nest week, we will discuss the *Zimun*, and we will then begin to study the laws of the *Birkat Ha-Mazon* itself.

**Leaving Bread on the Table During *Birkat Ha-Mazon***

Tosafot (s.v. *salek*) infers from the Talmud (*Berakhot* 42a) that it was customary to remove the table before saying *Birkat Ha-Mazon*. He notes that our custom not to remove the bread before saying *Birkat Ha-Mazon* appears to contradict this passage. He suggests that even in the times of the Talmud, the table was not removed from before the *mevarekh*, the person who leads the *Zimun* and says the *Birkat Ha-Mazon* for everyone. Since nowadays everyone eats together around one table, it would be inappropriate to remove the table and the bread before saying *Birkat Ha-Mazon*.

The Shulchan Arukh (180:1) cites this practice, and the Mishna Berura (180:1) explains that one should not remove or clear the bread from the table, as it should be clear that one is saying the *Birkat Ha-Mazon* over the food that God, in his great mercy, provide for man. The Magen Avraham (180:1) cites another reason based on the Zohar (*Parashat Lekh Lekha* 88a), which teaches that “blessing does rest upon an empty thing.” This idea is derived from the story of Elisha, who miraculously filled the widow’s empty vessels with oil (*Melakhim* 2 4:1-6). Therefore, before the blessings are said over the bread, we must ensure that there is still bread on the table, as “a blessing does not rest upon an empty thing.”

Furthermore, the Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 9a) teaches:

R. Elazar also said: He who leaves no bread on the table [at the end of his meal] will never see a sign of blessing, as it is written, “There be none of his meat left; therefore shall he not hope for his prosperity” (*Iyov* 20:12). But did not R. Elazar say: He who leaves crumbs on his table is as though he engaged in idol worship, for it is written, “That prepare a table for Gad, and that furnish the drink offering unto Meni” (*Yeshayahu* 65:11)? It is no difficulty: In the latter case, a whole loaf is left therewith [i.e., with the pieces], but in the former, there is no whole loaf left therewith.

Rashi explains that one should leave crumbs on the table, symbolizing that he is leaving over food to share with those less fortunate. However, one who brings a new loaf to the table in addition to the leftover crumbs appears to be offering a loaf to a pagan god. If there are no crumbs on the table, he may even bring a loaf to the table for *Birkat Ha-Mazon*. According to Rashi’s interpretation of this passage, one should not only say the *Birkat Ha-Mazon* in the presence of the food, but one should also leave a bit over.

**Covering the Knife before *Birkat Ha-Mazon***

The *Rishonim* (see Orchot Chaim, *Hilkhot Birkat Ha-Mazon*; see also Tur and Beit Yosef 180) cite the custom to cover the knife on the table during *Birkat* *Ha*-*Mazon*. Two reasons are cited for this custom.

The Rokeach (332) explains that since the table is compared to the altar (*Chagiga* 23a), the verse “you shall lift up no iron tool upon them,” referring to the construction of the altar, applies to a table as well. Knives should be covered during *Birkat Ha-Mazon*, reflecting the idea that while weapons shorten life, the altar and the table lengthen life.

R. Tzedekiah ben Avraham Anav, in his Shibbolei Ha-Leket, cites Ha-Chaver R. Simcha, who related that there was once a person who, upon reaching the blessing of *Bonei Yerushalayim*, stabbed himself in the stomach, in grief, as he recalled the destruction of Yerushalayim. It is therefore customary to remove knives from the table before reciting the *Birkat Ha-Mazon*, in order to avoid such tragedies.

The Shibbolei Ha-Leket records that it is customary NOT to remove knives from the table before saying *Birkat Ha-Mazon* in Shabbat and Yom Tov. Seemingly, this is because one cannot build the altar on Shabbat or Yom Tov. He notes that although the custom is indeed not to cover the knives on Shabbat and Yom Tov, according to R. Simcha, there should be no distinction between Shabbat/Yom Tov and a weekday.

The Taz (180:3), commenting on the Shulchan Arukh’s (180:5) ruling that one does not cover the knives on Shabbat and Yom Tov, suggests that even R. Simcha might agree that there would be no reason to cover the knives due to the festive and happy nature of Shabbat. Some *Acharonim* suggest other differences between these two reasons (see, for example, Sefer Ta’amei Ha-Minhagim 184).

As mentioned above, the Shulchan Arukh (180:5) records that although it is customary to cover the knives during *Birkat Ha-Mazon*, it is not customary to do so on Shabbat and Yom Tov.

***Mayim Acharonim***

The Talmud (*Chullin* 105a) teaches that there is a “*chova*,” an obligatio), to wash one’s hands before saying *Birkat Ha-Mazon*.

What is the reason for this obligation? On the one hand, the *gemara* (*Chullin* 105b) states:

R. Yehuda the son of R. Chiyya said: Why did [the Rabbis] say that it was a bounden duty to wash the hands after the meal? Because of a certain salt of Sodom which makes the eyes blind.

Rashi explains that after touching this type of salt, *melach sedomit*, if one rubs his eyes, the salt will cause blindness.

The origins of and the type of salt referred to by the *gemara* is not clear. The *gemara* implies that the salt is from the region of the Dead Sea/Sedom, and Rashi (*Beitza* 39a, s.v. *sedomit*) explains that this salt is very fine and sticks to the hands, and then apparently can reach the eyes. Elsewhere (*Bava Batra* 20b s.v. *melach*), Rashi explains that *melach sedomit* is “thick and hard as a stone.” In any case, the Talmud expresses concern that after eating a meal with this salt, apparently generally eaten with bread, one must wash his hands.

Elsewhere, the Talmud implies a different reason for *Mayim Acharonim*:

R. Yehuda said in the name of Rav… “Sanctify yourselves” – this refers to washing of the hands before the meal. “And you should be holy” – this refers to washing of the hands after the meal. (*Berakhot* 53b)

According to this passage, R. Yehuda believes that just as washing before eating bread fulfills the Biblical verse of “Sanctify yourselves,” washing one’s hands before saying the *Birkat Ha-Mazon* fulfills the second half of the verse, “And you should be holy” (*Vayikra* 20:7).

The *Rishonim* disagree as to which is the primary reason for *Mayim* *Acharonim*. On the one hand, Tosafot (*Berakhot* 53b, s.v. *ve-heyitem*) explains:

[This law is] only [binding] for them, as they were accustomed to wash their hands after the meal because of the *melach sedomit*. We, however, do not have *melach sedomit* and we are not accustomed to washing after the meal. The washing does not prevent one from blessing [the *Birkat Ha-Mazon*].

Tosafot clearly maintains that *Mayim Acharonim* is due to the presence of *melach sedomit*. Nowadays, since there is no *melach sedomit*, *Mayim Acharonim* is no longer obligatory. However, Tosafot adds:

However, for those particular people who are accustomed to washing their hands after the meal, washing [the hands] certainly prevents one from saying *Birkat Ha-Mazon*, and they should wash their hands before *Birkat Ha-Mazon*.

Although Tosafot does not explicitly relate this last point to the passage in *masekhet Berakhot*, seemingly, this ruling may be understood as an expression of “and you shall be holy,” the other reason given for *Birkat Ha-Mazon*.

Other *Rishonim* write that although *melach sedomit* is the primary reason for *Mayim Acharonim* and *melach sedomit* is not found nowadays, *Mayim Acharonim* is still obligatory (see Rif, *Chullin* 37b, and Rambam, *Hilkhot Berakhot* 6:3 and 11:6).

On the other hand, other *Rishonim* (see Rosh, *Berakhot* 8:6; Rabbanei Tzarfat cited by Talmidei Rabbeinu Yona, *Berakhot* 40b; Ra’avad, *Hilkhot* *Berakhot* 6:2, et al.) relate to the reason cited in *Berakhot* (53b), and maintain that one should wash *Mayim Acharonim* as a means of preparation and sanctification before reciting *Birkat Ha-Mazon*. The Ra’avad (*Hilkhot Berakhot* 6:4) even maintains that one whose hands are dirty should wash and say a blessing over *Mayim Acharonim*!

The Shulchan Arukh (181:1) rules that *Mayim Acharonim* is an obligation (*chova*). He also acknowledges that some are accustomed not to wash before saying *Birkat Ha-Mazon*. He insists that even according to that practice, if a person generally washes his hands after a meal, he must do so before *Birkat* *Ha-Mazon*, as from his personal perspective, his hands are not clean.

Despite the view of Tosafot and others who maintain that *Mayim* *Acharonim* is not obligatory nowadays, and despite the common practice of many not to wash (see also Mor U-Ketzi’a 181, who explains that since nowadays people eat with silverware, there is no need to wash after eating), many *Acharonim* still maintain that one should wash *Mayim Acharonim* (see, for example, *Mishna Berura* 181:22). Furthermore, if one’s hands or soiled (Sha’ar Ha-Tziun 181:32), or if one ordinarily washes one’s hands after a meal (Shulkhan Arukh 181:10), *Mayim Acharonim* should be performed.

Seemingly, women should also wash *Mayim Acharonim* before saying *Birkat Ha-Mazon*. Indeed some *Acharonim* (see Yalkut Yosef 181:2, *Halikhot Bat Yisrael*, p. 58) write this explicitly. However, in practice, even in communities in which *Mayim Acharonim* is strictly observed, women usually do not participate in this *mitzva*, even when the *Mayim Acharonim* cup passes from person to person sitting around a table. Some (see Shevet Halevi, vol. 4, OC, no. 23) suggest that since nowadays *melach* *sedomit* no longer exists, women did not accept upon themselves the custom to wash *Mayim Acharonim* in preparation for the *Birkat* *Ha-Mazon*. Of course, this observation, which is most probably correct, highlights that *Mayim Acharonim* nowadays is viewed by many as a stringency and not an obligation.

For those who are accustomed to wash *Mayim Acharonim*, we note the following details.

The *Rishonim* debate some of the details of *Mayim Acharonim*. For example, the Rashba (Torat Ha-Bayit 6:2) writes that one should wash until the second joint of the fingers. The Bet Yosef cites those who require that one wash until the knuckles (where the fingers join the hand). Although the Shulchan Arukh (181:4) rules in accordance with the Rashba, the Gra insists that this is subject to the same debate found in the laws of *Netilat Yadayim*, and preferably one should wash to the knuckles. As the Mishna Berura notes (181:10), one should wash with more than a few drops of water.

Some *Acharonim* require that one wash from a vessel containing a *revi’it* of water (see Gra, Ma’aseh Rav 85). Others disagree (see Mishna Berura 181:21) and insist that there is no need for a vessel, for *ko’ach gavra*, or for more than enough water to rinse until the second joint of the fingers.

The Talmud (*Chullin* 105a) rules that one should not wash *Mayim Acharim* with hot water. The Mishna Berura (181:7) notes that one may wash with lukewarm water, although the Maharshal disagrees.

Next week, we will study the laws of *Zimun*.