

The Prohibited Labor of Sifting (*Meraked*)

Is it permitted to use a faucet with a filter, or a water purification apparatus?

Is it permitted to use a utensil of tea essence with a filter on its spout?

Does one violate the prohibition of Selecting when using a tea bag?

Is it permitted to use a slotted spoon?

Is it permitted to use a device to dry lettuce leaves?

Definition of the labor

Grinding wheat kernels produces a mixture of fine flour and coarse flour, bran. The next stage is to separate them, for which purpose the mixture is placed in a sifter to be sifted. The fine flour falls through the holes in the sifter, while the bran remains in the sifter. This action constitutes the prohibited labor of **Sifting**. As mentioned above (p. 770), the labor of Sifting is fundamentally similar to the labor of Selecting, as it, too, involves separating waste from food. The difference is that Selecting is performed by hand, while Sifting is performed with a utensil.

There is a detailed discussion of the difference between Selecting and Sifting in a **talmudic** passage (138a) that addresses **straining**. This consists of placing wine sediment in a fine strainer in order to strain

What is the difference between Sifting and Selecting?

it. The clear wine that was mixed with the sediment passes through the holes, while the sediment remains in the strainer. The Gemara cites an amoraic dispute regarding which primary category of labor (*av melakha*) is performed with this action:

For performance of which category of prohibited labor do we forewarn him? Rabba said: It is for Selecting; Rabbi Zeira said: It is for Sifting. Rabba said: My opinion is more reasonable. What is the manner of one who selects? He takes the food and leaves the waste;¹ here too, when straining wine, one takes the food and leaves the waste. Rabbi Zeira said: My opinion is more reasonable, as what is the manner of Sifting? The waste remains atop the sifter and the food is below. Here too, when straining wine, the waste remains atop the strainer, and the food is below.

According to Rabbi Zeira, one who strains is liable due to Sifting, as there is a clear parallel between the two activities: In each case one transfers food through a sifter or strainer, food passes through the holes, and waste remains in the sifter or strainer.

Does Rabbi Zeira maintain that the labor of Sifting is applicable only when the food descends through the filter and the waste remains behind? It seems that this question is subject to a dispute between

Rashi: The prohibition of Sifting applies only when the food descends and the waste remains

1. The Gemara seems difficult, as Selecting is typically performed in the opposite manner, by removing the waste and leaving the food, while removing food from waste is often permitted, as explained in the chapter on Selecting. The majority of *Rishonim* explain that the formulation of the Gemara is imprecise, and the reference is simply to the separation of food and waste, or to those specific instances where it is prohibited to remove food from waste, e.g., if one uses a utensil or does so for later consumption (*Ramban*; *Ritva*; *Ran* 74a). In contrast, *Tosafot* (74a, s.v. *borer ve'okhel*) maintain that removing food from waste is permitted only when the amount of food is greater than the amount of waste, and the Gemara is addressing a situation where there is more waste than food. In that case, removing food is the typical manner of selecting and is prohibited. This opinion of *Tosafot* and the dispute between *Rishonim* on this matter is analyzed in greater detail in the chapter on Selecting (see pp. 777–779).

Rishonim. **Rashi** holds that the prohibition of Sifting applies only in this case (s.v. *denotel okhel*):

According to Rabbi Zeira, if the one straining was forewarned due to Selecting, this is not forewarning, as it is not similar to Selecting, since the food is below and the waste above, **which is not the case with regard to one who selects legumes, where the waste is below.**

It follows that one who passes **legumes** through a strainer, with the waste going through the holes and the food remains in the sifter, is liable due to Selecting, not Sifting. The prohibition of Sifting applies specifically to filtering that is similar to Sifting, that is, with the waste remaining above and the food descending below. For any other separation between food and waste, one is not liable due to Sifting, but due to Selecting, which is a broad category of labor that encompasses any separation between food and waste.

In contrast, from the explanation of **Rabbeinu Hananel** (74a) it appears that any separation of food from waste by means of a sieve or sifter is prohibited due to Sifting, regardless of whether the food descends and the waste remains, or vice-versa:

Sifting is when one places food and waste in a sieve, and the food remains. If the food is thin and the waste is thick, like straw, the food passes through and the waste remains in the sieve.

According to Rabbeinu Hananel, then, Rabbi Zeira's formulation is not to be taken literally, as he was referring to any situation where food and waste are separated through the use of a utensil. *Eglei Tal*, among others, agrees (*Zoreh* 3).

To this point, Rabbi Zeira's opinion was addressed. However, Rabba disagrees with Rabbi Zeira and maintains that one who strains is liable due to Selecting. His reasoning is that there is a general similarity between straining and selecting, at least regarding the end result; both engender separation between food and waste. Why then, according to Rabba, isn't one who strains liable due to Sifting? After all, the act of straining is identical to the act of sifting, as Rabbi Zeira

Rabbeinu Hananel:
The prohibition
of Sifting applies
to any separation
performed with a
utensil

Rabba's opinion

claimed, while the parallel between straining and selecting is more general in nature.

Rashi (s.v. *denotel okhel*) and many other *Rishonim* contend that Rabba indeed concedes to Rabbi Zeira that one who strains is liable due to Sifting. The difference between their opinions is that Rabba holds that straining is also similar to Selecting, as in both cases one is separating food and waste; therefore, forewarning due to Selecting is also effective.²

Re'a: The prohibition of Sifting applies only to the separation of dry items

By contrast, *Tosafot* (73b, s.v. *mishum*) hold that according to Rabba, one who strains is liable only due to Selecting, not Sifting. The **Commentary Attributed to the Ran** (138a, s.v. *Rava*) agrees, citing the **Re'a**. The **Re'a** explains that one who strains is not liable due to Sifting because that labor applies specifically to separating **dry items**, e.g., sifting flour with a sieve, not to filtering **liquids**. Therefore, one who strains can be liable only for Selecting, which is a broad labor that includes separation of all kinds of food and waste.

Beur Halakha:
The prohibition of Sifting applies only to an action performed on both food and waste

Another suggestion is raised by the *Beur Halakha* (319:9, s.v. *mishmeret*). He maintains that the labor of Sifting applies only to one who performs an action on both the food and the waste together, with the aim of separating them, e.g., when one places both food and waste into a sieve and moves the sieve to and fro to separate them. However, when using a strainer, the sediment remains in place and the wine flows down. At no point is the wine placed in the strainer. This is not considered an act of Sifting but a form of Selecting, as one removes the food and leaves the waste.

Summary

There are disputes between *amora'im* and between *Rishonim* with regard to the precise scope of the labor of Sifting:

1. **Rabbeinu Hananel**, commenting on the opinion of Rabbi Zeira: Any filtering by means of a utensil is categorized as Sifting.

2. Nevertheless, *Aḥaronim* note that even according to Rabba, one who strains unwittingly is not liable to bring two sin-offerings, as ultimately, these are two similar primary labors whose essence is the same (*Lehem Mishne* 10:14; *Eglei Tal*, *Zoreh* 2; and others).

2. **Rashi**, commenting on all opinions: Filtering with a utensil so the food descends and the waste remains is categorized as Sifting.
3. **Re'a**, commenting on the opinion of Rabba: Filtering dry items with a utensil is categorized as Sifting.
4. **Beur Halakha**, in explaining *Tosafot*, who addressed the opinion of Rabba: Only filtering that requires action on both the food and the waste is categorized as Sifting.

There are no significant practical ramifications to the above dispute, with the possible exception of the formula of the forewarning, since all agree that in those instances where there is no liability due to Sifting, there would be liability due to Selecting, a more comprehensive prohibition, which includes separation of all kinds of waste and food. In practice, then, whichever primary category is violated, all filtering is prohibited by Torah law.

In any case, all types of filtering are prohibited by the Torah

This point is underscored in the ruling of the **Rambam** (8:11) as well:

With regard to one who selects sediment from liquids, this is a subcategory (*tolada*) of Selecting or a subcategory of Sifting, and he is liable, as Winnowing, Selecting, and Sifting are all similar to one another. Why, then, did the Sages enumerate them as three separate categories of labor? Because every labor that was in the Tabernacle is enumerated separately.

The Rambam writes that one who filters liquids is liable, but he does not determine whether that liability is due to Selecting or Sifting. Rather, he explains that Selecting and Sifting are very similar prohibitions, and they are enumerated as separate categories only because they were both performed in the Tabernacle. It is difficult to determine whether filtering liquids is more similar to Selecting or Sifting, but this is not particularly significant, as there is liability in any case.³

3. In this book, we have chosen to address the matter of straining liquids in the chapter that addresses Sifting, but this in no way implies an answer to the question of whether one who strains is liable due to Selecting or due to Sifting.