



SITTING DOWN TO YOUR MEAL, HALACHICALLY: AN IN-DEPTH STUDY OF HILCHOT SE'UDAH

I NETILAT YADAYIM

G) The Blessing of Al Netilat Yadayim

Rambam (Hilkhot Berakhot 11:7) All blessings recited upon performing mitzvot are said prior to the mitzva, except for tevilat ha-ger, the immersion of a convert, who cannot recite the blessing until emerging from the water, at which point he is considered to be Jewish.

Pesachim 7b “one ... immerses and then arises [from the mikveh] and upon rising says the blessing asher kiddeshanu ... al ha-tevila.”

Tosafot (Pesachim 7b s.v. al ha-tevila, Berakhot 51a s.v. mei-ikara; see also Rosh, Berakhot 7:34) - 1) This applies to netilat yadayim as well, as one’s hands may be dirty, and therefore one should preferably wait until they have been washed. 2) Reciting the blessing before drying them is actually still considered to be oever la-assiyatan, as if one is reciting the blessing before the performance of the mitzva; the Gemara, cited above, teaches that “whoever eats bread without first drying his hands is as if he eats lechem tamei (unclean bread).”

According to 2) one should recite the blessing before drying the hands, while according to 1) one can recite the blessing even later, possibly until one says the blessing before eating bread (ha-motzi).

Shulchan Arukh (158:11) : One should recite the blessing before washing his hands...it is customary to say the berakha after washing, “as sometimes one’s hands are not clean, and therefore we recite the blessing after rubbing the hands together, at which point the hands are already clean, before pouring water over them a second time.” (1)

Rema: “one can also recite the blessing before drying the hands, as the drying is also

part of the mitzva, and it is considered to be oveir la-assiyatan.” (2)

What if one forgot to recite the blessing before drying his hands?

Rema : “and if he forgot to recite the blessing until after he has already dried his hands, he may recite the blessing afterwards.”

Taz (158:12) cites Maharshal (Yam Shel Shlomo, Chullin 39) : One may recite the blessing until one says ha-motzi before eating the bread. The Taz (see also Chayei Adam 40:4) disagrees and argues that one should not recite the blessing after drying his hands.

Kaf Ha-chayim 158:86 and Pri Megadim 158, Mishbetzot Zahav 12) suggest scratching one’s head or touching one’s shoes, thereby creating a new obligation to wash one’s hands, at which point one may recite the blessing in the proper manner.

Mishna Berura (158:44), - The Acharonim agree with the Rema, and be-di’avad (post facto) one may recite the blessing until he says ha-motzi.

R. Ovadia Yosef (Yalkut Yosef 158:10) disagrees, and rules that in this case one should not recite the blessing after drying his hands. He also objects to the advice offered by the Acharonim cited above, lest this lead one to recite an unnecessary blessing (see Shulchan Arukh 162:4).

R. Yechezkel Landau (1713 – 1793), Derushei Ha-Tzelach (Derush 4:22) observes that many, even Torah scholars, are more careful to avoid speaking in between the blessings of al netilat yadayim and ha-motzi than in between washing one’s hands and the blessing recited before niguv. He insists that although not interrupting between al netilat yadayim and ha-motzi is a “zehirut be-alma” (merely a precautionary measure), interrupting after washing one’s hands is an actual hefsek (interruption) and one may have to wash one’s hands again!

R. Ovadia Yosef (Yalkut Yosef, 158 fn. 11) - One who speaks in between washing and the berakha does not need to wash again, although he should certainly be more careful the next time.

H) The Laws of Chatzitzta for Netilat Yadayim

1) Washing One’s Hands at Once

תלמוד בבלי גטין דף טו ע"ב
בעי אילפא ידים טהורות לחצאין או אין טהורות לחצאין היכי דמי אילימא דקא משו בי תרי
מרביעית והא תנן מרביעית נוטלין לידים לאחד ואפי' לשנים

The Gemara cites another case that is based on the same principle. Ilfa raised a dilemma: With regard to ritual washing, can one’s hands be ritually pure in halves, or can they not be ritually pure in halves? The Gemara asks: What are the circumstances of this case? If we say that two people wash with the requisite one quarter-log of water, and therefore in actuality each one of them washes with only half of a quarter-log, but didn’t we learn explicitly in a mishna (Yadayim 1:1): With the amount of a quarter-log one can wash the hands of one person and even of two? A quarter-log of water suffices for one person to wash his hands before eating bread, and even two may wash their hands simultaneously with this amount, if they do so in the correct manner.

ואלא דקא משי חדא חדא ידיה והתנן הנוטל ידו אחת בנטילה ואחת בשטיפה ידיו טהורות
But rather, Ilfa is referring to a case where one washed his two hands one by one, not both hands at the same time. The Gemara asks: But didn't we learn in a mishna (Yadayim 2:1): With regard to one who purifies one hand by washing with a vessel and one hand by immersing it in a river, his hands are ritually pure? This mishna indicates that there is no need for both hands to be washed simultaneously.

ואלא דקא משי פלגא פלגא דידיה והאמרי דבי ר' ינאי ידים אין טהורות לחצאין לא צריכא
דאיכא משקה טופח

But rather, Ilfa's dilemma refers to a case where he washes his hand in two halves, i.e., he first washes one half of his hand and next washes the second half of that same hand. The Gemara asks: But didn't the Sages from the school of Rabbi Yannai say: **Hands cannot be rendered ritually pure in halves?** If so, one who washes half of his hand and pauses before washing the second half has not performed the act of washing the hands at all. The Gemara answers: No, Ilfa's question is necessary only for a case where there is liquid that is still moist on his hand. When one washes the second half of his hand, some moisture remains on the portion of his hand that he already washed, and therefore one might think that this liquid joins with the water with which he washes the second half of his hand.

Rambam (Hilkhos Mikva'ot 11:7) If one washed a portion of his hand and then washed the rest of his hand, his hand is impure as it was originally. If there is enough water to impart moisture to another substance on the portion of the hand washed first while the other part was being washed, [the hand] is pure.

The Ra'avad - One may not wash the hands part by part even if they are still wet.

Shulchan Arukh (162:3) rules in accordance with the Rambam.

Magen Avraham 162:5 - preferably one should not do this, and others (**Taz 162:5**) insist that even be-di'avad this may not suffice.

Mishna Berura 162:27 - If one washed only part of his hand, and that part then dries, one must then wash the entire hand, and not just the part which wasn't initially washed.

Mishna Berura (162:30) When washing from a bottle with a narrow spout, similar to today's soda bottles, one should be careful that a steady flow of water leaves the bottle when flowing over one's hands. .

Rosh (8:18) Although one may not wash only part of one's hand, if one has a bandage, "it is similar to one whose hand was cut off." In other words, that area of the hand is completely exempt from netilat yadayim. However, one should be sure that water does not reach that area and then return to the rest of the hand, thereby bringing ritual impurity to the entire hand.

2) Chatzitza

תלמוד בבלי חולין קו ע"ב

עד הפרק קידוש ידים ורגלים במקדש עד הפרק וכל דבר שחוצץ בטבילה בגוף חוצץ
בנטילת ידים לחולין ובקידוש ידים ורגלים במקדש

He must pour on the area extending until the joint. In sanctifying the hands and feet in the Temple before the service, he must pour the water until another joint, where the palm meets the wrist. **And any item that is considered to interpose between one's skin and the water with regard to immersion of the body in a ritual bath, disqualifying the immersion, likewise interposes with regard to washing the hands for eating non-sacred food and with regard to sanctification of the hands and feet in the Temple.**

תלמוד בבלי עירובין ד ע"א

אמר רבי חייא בר אשי אמר רב: שיעורין חציצין ומחיצין, הלכה למשה מסיני

Since the Gemara discussed measurements, it proceeds to cite that which Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Ashi said that Rav said: The measures relating to mitzvot in the Torah, and the halakhot governing interpositions that invalidate ritual immersions, and the halakhot of partitions are all halakhot transmitted to Moses from Sinai. These halakhot have no basis in the Written Torah, but according to tradition they were orally transmitted by God to Moses together with the Written Torah.

חציצין, דאורייתא נינהו! דכתיב: "ורחץ את כל בשרו (במים)", שלא יהא דבר חוצץ בין בשרו למים. "במים" — במי מקוה. "כל בשרו" — מים שכל גופו עולה בהן, וכמה הן — כמה על אמה ברום שלש אמות. ושיערו חכמים מי מקוה ארבעים סאה

Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Ashi said above that Rav said that the laws governing interpositions that invalidate ritual immersion are halakhot transmitted to Moses from Sinai. The Gemara challenges this assertion: These, too, are written in the Torah, as it is written: "And he shall bathe all his flesh in the water" (Leviticus 15:16), and the Sages derived that nothing should intervene between his flesh and the water. The definite article in the phrase "in the water" indicates that this bathing is performed in water mentioned elsewhere, i.e., specifically in the water of a ritual bath, and not in just any water. And the phrase "all his flesh" indicates that it must be in water into which all of his body can enter, i.e., in which a person can immerse his entire body at once. And how much water is that? It is a cubit by a cubit by the height of three cubits. And the Sages calculated the volume of a ritual bath of this size and determined that the waters of a ritual bath measure forty se'a. As this is derived from the Written Torah, what need is there for a halakha transmitted to Moses from Sinai?

The Gemara concludes in accordance with R. Yitzchak, that while the verse indeed teaches that there must not be a chatzitza between the water and one's skin, the halakha le-Moshe mi-Sinai further defines this halakha: **only a chatzitza which covers the majority (rubo) and regarding which one objects (makpid) is considered to be a chatzitza.** The Gemara continues and relates that the rabbis prohibited a case in which the chatzitza covers a majority even though one does not object (rubo ve-eino makpid), and a case in which the chatzitza covers only a minority, however the person does object (mi'ut ve-makpid). The Gemara says that

the rabbis did not prohibit a case in which the chatzitza is a minority and regarding which one does not object (mi'ut ve-eino makpid), as "we [do not] go so far as to institute a preventive measure against another preventive measure."

Shulchan Arukh (YD 198:2) (Tosafot -)A chatzitza which is mi'ut ve-eino makpid does not invalidate the immersion.

Magen Avraham (OC 161:3) - In the context of netilat yadayim, "rubo" refers to the majority of one's hand.

How does one define "makpid" regarding the laws of chatzitza?

What if this particular person is makpid, even though most people are not makpid?

Rambam (Hilkhos Mikva'ot 2:15) - if a woman is particular about a single hair which is knotted, even if most women are not makpid, the knot is considered to be a chatzitza.

Rashba (Torat Ha-Bayit 32b), disagrees and rules that we are concerned with whether most women are makpid, and not whether this specific woman objects.

Rema (161:1) rules that we are only concerned with the opinion of the individual, **Magen Avraham (161:5; see Mishna Berura 161:7)** insists that we should follow the opinion of most people.

Regarding the opposite case, in which most people are makpid even if he personally is not makpid, the **Rashba (Torat Ha-bayit Ha-katzar, bayit 7 sha'ar 7)** rules that this is considered to be a chatzitza.

Beit Yosef - the Rambam, cited above, must maintain that it is not a chatzitza.

Magen Avraham (161:5) rules that we follow the opinion of the majority of people, while others are lenient.

Shulchan Arukh (161:2) - if a painter's hands have paint on them, since the painter is not generally makpid, the paint is not considered to be a chatzitza. However, for others, paint is considered to be a chatzitza, unless the paint cannot be felt upon the skin (ein bo mamashut). Therefore, if one's hands are stamped, or if one's hands have ink on them, one may still wash his hands. The Shulchan Arukh adds that regarding "women who are accustomed to paint their hands, for decoration (noy), that paint is not considered to be a chatzitza." However, when one's nail polish begins to chip it may be considered to be a chatzitza, as the woman would most likely want to remove the nail polish in order to paint her nails again.

The Rosh (Hilkhos Mikva'ot 26) cites the Tosefta (Mikva'ot 6:4), which states that rings which are loose are not a chatzitza, while those which are tight are a chatzitza. Regarding netilat yadayim, the **Hagahot Ashri (Berakhot 2:11)** writes that one should remove one's rings before washing his hands. Although one might wonder why a tightly fit ring is not considered to be a mi'ut ve-eino makpid, a chatzitza found on a small part of one's body regarding which one does not object, the **Rosh cites the Ra'avad** who asserts that a woman is careful to remove the ring when kneading bread, and it is therefore considered to be a chatzitza.

Beit Yosef (161) One should remove even a loosely fitting ring before washing one's hands, either because we are unable to determine the difference between a loose and tight fitting ring, or lest we come to permit washing one's hands while wearing a tightly fit ring.

Shulchan Arukh (161:3) - One should remove his ring before washing his hands.

Rema - One should even remove a loosely fitting ring, and even if one does not ordinarily remove the ring before washing, since one removes the ring before doing labor (i.e. kneading bread), the ring should be removed. He concludes by adding that although some are lenient not to remove loosely fitting rings, one should preferably be strict and remove such rings, as it is difficult to distinguish between those rings which are considered to be loosely fitting, and those which are tightly fit.

R. Ben Tzion Abba Sha'ul (1924 – 1998), Or Le-Tzion (2:11): Nowadays, when many women are not accustomed to remove their rings even when kneading bread, women do not need to remove their rings before netilat yadayim. He notes that although the **Kaf Ha-chayim (parashat Acharei Mot)** distinguishes between a ring with an expensive stone, which is a ring that must be removed before washing, and a simple ring, which need not be removed, R. Abba Sha'ul concludes that a person who does not remove rings before kneading bread does not need to remove even rings with stones for netilat yadayim. He concludes that it is still customary to remove one's rings before immersing in the mikveh.

I) One who is unable to obtain water for netilat yadayim

2 Solutions:

1) Wrapping One's Hands in a Cloth

The Talmud (Chullin 107b) questions whether one may wrap one's hand with a cloth and eat bread:

The question was raised: May one eat with a cloth [wrapped around the hand] or not? Must we fear that [the bare hand] will touch [the food] or not? ... R. Tachlifa b. Abimi [said] in the name of Shmuel, "They permitted the use of a cloth for those that eat teruma, but they did not permit the use of a cloth for those that eat taharot." And R. Ami and R. Assi were priests.

The Gemara distinguishes between "okhlei teruma" (kohanim who eat teruma) and "okhlei taharot" (those who eat taharot, i.e. people who eat non-sacred food as if they were eating sacrificial food). Rashi explains that since kohanim are accustomed to eating teruma they are particularly careful not to touch the teruma. Others, however, are not accustomed to eating in such a manner, and therefore they may not eat without first washing their hands.

The Rishonim disagree as to whether this passage refers to the netilat yadayim performed before eating bread as well. Most Rishonim, including the Rosh (Chullin 8:18), Ra'avad (Hilkhot Berakhot 6:18) and Talmidei Rabbeinu Yona (Berakhot 42a s.v. mahu), explain that while the Talmud permitted a kohen who eats teruma to eat with his hands wrapped in a cloth, they did not also permit an ordinary person who wishes to eat bread to merely cover his hands. The Rambam (Hilkhot Berakhot 6:18), however, writes: "A person may wrap his hands in a cloth and eat bread ... although he did not wash his hands." The Beit Yosef (OC 163) concludes that one should not wrap one's hands and eat bread, as most Rishonim disagree with the Rambam.

- 2) The Beit Yosef, however, notes that another Talmudic passage may be relevant to our discussion. The Talmud (Chullin 122b), in the midst of discussing the halakhic significance of "four mil," the time it takes to walk a distance of four mil (approximately 72 minutes), states:

R. Abbahu said in the name of Resh Lakish: For kneading, for prayer, and for washing the hands, the standard is four mil. ... R. Yose b. R. Chanina said: This 'teaching applies only to the distance ahead of him, but [as for going] back he need not turn back even one mil. R. Acha b. Yaakov said: From this [can be inferred that] a distance of one mil he need not turn back, but a distance of less than a mil he must turn back.

The Gemara, regarding netilat yadayim, implies that one who is traveling and does not have water with which to wash his hands **should delay eating bread for the time it takes to travel four mil (72 minutes) in order to reach water. If he has already passed a place with water, but he is still within a "mil's distance, he should return to wash his hands.** The Gemara does not state what one should do if he is further than the above mentioned distances from water.

The Beit Yosef cites the Roke'ach (328), who implies that in such a case one would be completely exempt from washing one's hands. Indeed, the Gra (163:1) notes that this is the view of all authorities. The Arukh (erekh gabal), however, rules that when one is more than a four mil distance from water ahead of him or one mil behind him, he may eat bread without washing, as long as he wraps his hands in a cloth.

The Shulchan Arukh (OC 163:1) rules in accordance with the Arukh, that if one has no water within four mil ahead of him or one mil behind him, he should wrap his hands in a cloth. The Rema adds that one may eat with a spoon. The Mishna Berura (163:4-5) notes that the Acharonim disagree with the Rema. In fact, many Acharonim, including the Chayei Adam, Kitzur Shulchan Arukh, and Arukh Ha-shulchan, don't even mention this leniency. Furthermore, although according to the Rema covering one hand might be sufficient, the Acharonim conclude that one should cover both hands.

The Bi'ur Halakha explains that when one is on a train, which can obviously travel four mil in much less time than 72 minutes, he still calculates the time it takes to walk four mil, i.e. 72 minutes, and not that actual distance of four mil. Similarly, when one is traveling by car and has no water with which to wash his hands, he should continue traveling up to 72 minutes, or return up to 18 minutes, in order to find water for netilat yadayim.

If one is not traveling, but rather sitting in his house or in an area without access to water, the Acharonim debate whether he must travel the time it takes to walk four mil, 72 minutes (Magen Avraham 163:1, Shulchan Arukh Ha-Rav 163:1), or one mil, 18 minutes (Chayyei Adam 40:11, Mishna Berura 163:3), in order to obtain water for netilat yadayim.

The discussion above applies not only to one who has water, but to one who does not have a vessel with which to pour the water over one's hands as well.

The Ritva (Pesachim 48a) writes that one should only rely upon such leniencies in extenuating circumstances, such as when one is weak due to the journey. Furthermore, some Poskim rule that one should preferably wash one's hands with soda, or even fruit juice (see Shulchan Arukh 160:12; see also <http://www.vbm-torah.org/archive/blessings/08berakhot.htm>) when water is not available. Generally, the Acharonim suggest being stringent and not eating bread without washing one's hands unless one is very weak or ill.

3) Relying Upon the Morning Netilat Yadayim

The Talmud (Chullin 106b – 107a), seemingly, provides another solution for one who knows that he will not have access to water for netilat yadayim during the day.

Rav said: A person may wash his hands in the morning and stipulate that it shall serve him the whole day long. R. Avina said to the inhabitants of the valley of Aravot: People like you that have not much water, may wash the hands in the morning and stipulate that it shall serve the whole day long. Some say: This is allowed only in a time of need but not at ordinary times; hence it is at variance with Rav's view. Others say: This is allowed even at ordinary times, and so it corresponds with Rav's view.

Rav suggests that one may wash one's hands in the morning, keeping in mind that this washing will also serve as the netilat yadayim before eating bread later in the day. The Gemara cites a debate regarding whether Rav's suggestion could be used in any ordinary circumstance, or only in extenuating circumstances.

This passage raises a number of questions. First, is the halakha in accordance with those who limit Rav's suggestion, or with Rav himself? Secondly, what is the nature of this stipulation, when and how can one make it, and how can the netilat yadayim performed in the morning serve as the netilat yadayim for the entire day?

The Rishonim debate whether the halakha is in accordance with Rav himself, or the more limited variation of Rav. Rabbeinu Chananel (cited by Talmidei Rabbeinu Yona, Berakhot 41b s.v. u-le'inyan) rules like the stricter opinion and only allows one to wash in this manner in extenuating circumstances. Most Rishonim, however, including the Rosh (Chullin 8:12), the Rashba (Chullin 106b s.v. u-le'inyan), Talmidei Rabbeinu Yona (ibid.), and the Rambam (Hilkhot Berakhot 6:17) allow one to wash in this manner in any circumstance. The Shulchan Arukh (164:1) rules in accordance with the lenient opinions. Many Acharonim, however, including the Maharshal (Yam Shel Shlomo, Chullin 8:22, Teshuvot 94), permit one to rely upon Rav only in extenuating circumstances. Based upon the comments of Rabbeinu Peretz on the Semak (181), they consider a traveler to be in extenuating circumstances.

The Acharonim debate the nature of this “stipulation.” Some (see Magen Avraham 164:6) claim that there is actually no need to stipulate (tenai), but rather one must have the intention to keep one’s hands clean until he eats bread. Others assume that the Gemara does refer to a stipulated condition, and they debate whether one must verbalize this condition or whether it is sufficient to merely have this condition in mind. The Eliya Rabba (164:1) summarizes the opinions and concludes that one should merely have the condition in mind. The Arukh Ha-Shulchan (164:1), however, rules that one should verbalize the condition, in order that it be clear that he is washing in order to eat bread as well.

Furthermore, although Rav stated that “one may wash his hands in the morning and stipulate that it shall serve him all day long,” the Acharonim discuss whether this only works when one stipulates during the morning netilat yadayim. The Tur (164; see Rabbeinu Tam cited by Tosafot Chullin 106b s.v. notel) writes that this only works for the morning washing. R. Yoel Sirkis, in his commentary to the Tur, the Bayit Chadash (Bach), explains that since the blessing of “al netilat yadayim” is recited only in the morning, one may only use the morning washing for the rest of the day.

The Rema (164:1; see Beit Yosef 164), however, explains that there is nothing unique, per se, about the morning netilat yadayim. Rather, “[a stipulation] only works when the washing was not performed for the sake of eating, similar to the netilat yadayim of the morning. However, if he washed for the sake of eating then the stipulation does not work.” The Acharonim explain that when the washing is done with the intent of eating, one must eat immediately (see Pesachim 106b). However, when the washing is done for another purpose, such as for prayer, or after leaving the bathroom, then as long as one has in mind to keep one’s hands clean until he eats, the netilat yadayim can permit one to eat bread later in the day. In such a case, he would not recite the blessing of al netilat yadayim. The Magen Avraham (164:6) notes that one may certainly wash for one meal, and have in mind that it will serve for a meal later in the day as well.

The Shulchan Arukh writes that one should be careful “not to divert one’s thoughts

from them (i.e. his hands).” The Rema adds that one should be careful that they do not become soiled. The Mishna Berura (164:4) explains that one’s hands should not come into contact with feces, nor should they touch areas of the body which are normally covered and therefore often sweaty (see Shulchan Arukh 164:2).

Conclusion:

When one is unable to obtain water for netilat yadayim later in the day, one may wash his hands in the morning, or for prayer, or after leaving the bathroom, and stipulate, preferably verbally, that “with this washing I will be permitted to eat for the entire day.” He should not divert his attention from his hands, and should ensure that they are not soiled, by feces or by touching parts of the body which are usually covered, before he eats bread. Some even suggest wearing gloves (Mishna Berura 164:4).

The Eliya Rabba (164: 2) cites the Sheyyarei Keneset Ha-Gedola, who writes that “nowadays, it is not customary to stipulate... as even in extenuating circumstances one cannot be careful not to soil one’s hands, and therefore they refrain completely from employing this stipulation.” He cites the Agur, who expresses a similar sentiment. The Arukh Ha-Shulchan (164:2) concurs, and adds that indeed he has never heard of anyone adopting this practice. He concedes, however, that one who is traveling among non-Jews and cannot find water may rely upon this ruling. The Mishna Berura (164:4) also concludes that it depends upon the circumstance and the degree of need, and that under extreme circumstances one can rely upon this stipulation as long as he is careful not to be distracted from protecting his hands. He even suggests keeping one’s hands covered by his sleeves, and certainly if he finds water later in the day he should wash again.

Yam Shel Shlomo observed that many people mistakenly believe that one can wipe one’s hands on wet grass and then eat bread. The Chayyei Adam, in a similar vein, writes that this halakha is often misunderstood or misapplied, and many people wash their hands once and then eat the entire day, without properly protecting their hands, and often without reciting the birkat ha-mazon after eating.

Interestingly, **R. Eliezer Waldenberg, in his Responsa Tzitz Eliezer** (8:7) asks: which method discussed above is preferable for a person who knows that he will not have access to water later in the day – wrapping one’s hands in a cloth or stipulating that the morning netilat yadayim should be effective for the entire day? He opines that **wrapping one’s hands is the preferable method**, as the conditional washing of one’s hands is simply too difficult to perform properly. He notes that the Kaf Ha-Chayim arrived at a similar conclusion.

J) Talking in between Netilat Yadayim and Ha-Motzi

One must be careful not to soil one's hands after performing netilat yadayim. Therefore, one should eat immediately after washing one's hands. Although the gemara (Chullin 106b) rules that one may at times "wash his hands in the morning and stipulate in order that it shall serve him the whole day long," the Rishonim question whether this is limited to extenuating circumstances, and the Poskim explain that one must be very careful in order to ensure that his hands remain clean. However, when washing one's hands before eating bread, must one also be careful not to interrupt, or even not to talk?

The Talmud (Berakhot 42a) states: "**tekef le-netilat yadayim berakha**" – "the blessing immediately follows the washing of the hands." The Rishonim debate the meaning of this passage. Most Rishonim (**Rashi, s.v. le-netilat yadayim; Tosafot, s.v. tekef; Rambam, Hilkhot Berakhot 6:20; see also Hagahot Maimoniot**) explain that the gemara refers to mayim acharonim, the washing of the hands after the meal, before birkat ha-mazon. After washing one's hands, one should not eat before reciting birkat ha-mazon.

The Yerushalmi (Berakhot 1:1), however, states that one who "juxtaposes netilat yadayim with the blessing" will not be harmed for the entire meal. This passage clearly implies that the immediacy described by the gemara refers to the washing of the hands before the meal. Similarly, the Tur (166) cites his father, the Rosh, who "was accustomed even after the first washing (i.e. netilat yadayim) not to interrupt and not to speak, and when he would sit down to eat with others, he would wash his hands last, in order not to interrupt or to speak." The Tur explains that his father was accustomed both "not to interrupt" and "not to speak."

R. Shlomo Luria (1510–1573), in his Responsa (Maharshal 34), vehemently disagrees with the Rosh. He notes that not only do most Rishonim understand that the Talmudic passage ("tekef le-netilat yadayim berakha") refers to mayim acharonim, but that even the Yerushalmi, cited above, may be viewed as a stringency, or may even be disregarded altogether, as the halakha is in accordance with the Talmud Bavli. Furthermore, he harshly criticizes the Rosh's practice of washing his hands last in order not to interrupt. He wonders why the Rosh would be unable to avoid interrupting even if he washed first, and suggests allowing others, who may have greater difficulty not interrupting, to wash last. He even suggests that insisting upon washing last may even at times indicate haughtiness and may result in the degradation of the Torah (bizayon ha-Torah)!

He concludes that "is good to protect his hands and not to engage in other activities lest he will touch things which will require him to wash his hands [again], and therefore one who makes a fence and a hedge (gader ve-siyyag) and doesn't interrupt... how wonderful is he. However, if a person asks him regarding a Torah matter and he does not answer, it is a great sin; after all, I proved that one may

interrupt [after washing the hands]... And therefore I say that how good it is for a person to accustom himself not to interrupt with idle chatter ... but for words of Torah, which 'grant graciousness,' one should interrupt..."

Although the Tur rules in accordance with his father, the Rosh, the Beit Yosef concludes that "it is correct to be careful also regarding the first washing," implying that he views this as a stringency. Similarly, in the Shulchan Arukh (166), he writes: "Some say that one does not need to be careful not to interrupt between the washing and ha-motzi, and some say that one must be careful, and it is proper to be careful." The Magen Avraham (166:1) adds that even according to the more lenient opinion, one should not pour a cup of hot water or engage in activities that require precision, as this may be a distraction.

The Rema (166; see Tosafot, Sota 39a) adds that one should not delay reciting ha-motzi for more than the amount of time it takes to walk 22 amot (approximately 11 meters). The Acharonim (see Arukh Ha-Shulchan 166:2, for example) record that some are even careful to wash their hands close to their table in order not to walk a long distance between washing one's hands and reciting ha-motzi. This may have been more relevant before there was central plumbing. In any case, the Arukh Ha-Shulchan (ibid.) writes, "Truthfully, each case should be judged separately (ha-kol lefi ha-inyan), and in a situation in which it is necessary, it is not considered to be an interruption. For example, if the place for washing is farther than 22 amot ... it is only considered to be an interruption if he unnecessarily delays [saying ha-motzi]." The Arukh Ha-Shulchan also rejects the practice of washing near one's table, "ve-eino ikkar klal."

The Magen Avraham (165:4) writes that "two or three words is not considered to be an interruption, and certainly if one is asked about something, one can respond yes or no." The Mishna Berura (166:2), however, disagrees, and rules that one should not speak at all.

One may certainly speak if his words pertain to the betzi'at ha-pat, reciting the blessing over the bread. Therefore, one may ask for a knife, salt, or anything else relevant to the meal. Furthermore, if one is approached after washing the hands, he may respond briefly if nodding or signaling will not suffice (see Piskei Teshuvot 166, who cites Responsa Yeshu'ot Moshe 3:16). This is common when one washes in a public place and is then approached by those who may not understand his insistence on not answering. One may also answer amen when hearing berakhot recited by others.

Interestingly, the Acharonim cite the Zohar, which writes that one should pray for one's physical sustenance (mazon) each day before eating. The Shelah (Sefer Shnei Luchot Ha-Berit) records that some recite Mizmor Le-David (Tehillim 23) before washing. He adds that although one should preferably recite this prayer before netilat yadayim, one who forgets may recite it between netilat yadayim and ha-motzi. The Magen Avraham (166:2) records that this is the "minhag ha-olam"

(common custom), as does the Shulchan Arukh Ha-Rav (166:1), who attempts to justify this custom. R. Moshe Feinstein (Iggerot Moshe, OC 2:48) adds that one should not make up one's own prayer to recite between netilat yadayim and ha-motzi, and that this may even constitute an interruption between the netilat yadayim and ha-motzi. The Mishna Berura (166:3) writes that one should preferably say this prayer after ha-motzi, and others even harshly criticize this practice (see Arukh Ha-Shulchan 166:2).

Finally, although it is customary not to speak between netilat yadayim and ha-motzi, some have the practice on Friday night to wash their hands, and then recite Kiddush over wine, and only afterwards say the blessing over the bread. The gemara (Pesachim 106a), and subsequently the Rishonim, discuss this issue at great length.

The **Shulchan Arukh (271:12)** rules that one should wash his hands after reciting Kiddush and that one who washes his hands before Kiddush should recite the Kiddush on bread, and not wine. The Rema disagrees and cites those Rishonim who insist that Kiddush may and should be recited after netilat yadayim, and he records that this was the custom in Poland (ve-khen ha-minhag ha-pashut ba-medinot eilu), which should not be changed (ve-ein le-shanot). Other contemporary Polish Acharonim (Maharshal, Responsa 88; Levush 271:12) confirm this minhag.

Later Polish Acharonim (see Taz, 271:14, for example) question this custom, and other Acharonim rule that one should first recite Kiddush and then wash netilat yadayim. Indeed, R. Yosef Shaul Nathansohn (1808–1875) observes that the minhag to first wash completely disappeared from Eastern European practice (Responsa Sho'el U-Meshiv 5:18; R. Binyamin Shlomo Hamburger summarizes this issue, both halakhically and historically, in his Shorshei Minhag Ashkenaz, vol.2 pp. 258–307). Today, Jews of German descent (“Yekkes”) still wash their hands before reciting Kiddush.

K) Betzi'at Ha-Pat

1) Whole or Broken Loaf

The Talmud (Berakhot 39b) relates a debate regarding whether one should recite the blessing of ha-motzi over a whole loaf of bread:

It has been stated: If pieces and whole loaves are set before him, R. Huna says that the benediction can be said over the pieces (petitin), and this serves also for the whole loaves (sheleimin), whereas R. Yochanan says that the mitzva is better performed if the blessing is said over the whole one (sheleima mitzva min ha-muvchar).

R. Yochanan's position is consistent with the view of the Tosefta (Berakhot 4:15).

Apparently, since the “shalem” is considered to be more “chashuv” (important), it is appropriate to recite the blessing over the whole loaf.

How are we to understand the position of R. Huna, who maintains that one may recite the blessing over petitin?

Some Rishonim explain that although all agree that generally a whole loaf (shalem) is preferred, other factors may prevail. For example, the Ramban (Berakhot 39b) cites the Geonim, who explain that R. Yochanan and R. Huna disagree as to whether the quality of the flour should also play a role. They explain that the petitin are made from refined flour (pat nekiya) and the whole loaf is made from unrefined flour. R. Yochanan still prefers reciting the blessing over the whole loaf, while R. Huna believes that one should recite the blessing over the superior flour, the pat nekiya. If, however, both breads are made from the same flour, one should certainly recite the blessing over the whole loaf.

Rashi (Berakhot 39b) offers a different explanation. He explains that according to R. Huna, “If one wishes, he may recite the blessing over the petitin, and if the petitin are larger than the whole loaf, then one should say the blessing over them.” In other words, while R. Yochanan believes that the wholeness of the bread determines if it is preferred, R. Huna maintains that the size determines. Interestingly, Rabbeinu Tam (Tosafot 39b) insists that if both are the same size, even R. Huna would agree that one should recite the blessing over the whole loaf. They only disagree in a case in which the petitin are larger than the whole loaf.

The Ra’avad (see Katuv Sham, Berakhot 28a; see also Ra’ah, Berakhot 39b), however, explains the gemara in a completely different manner. He insists that R. Huna believes that the petitin may be preferred not because they are made from superior flour or because they are large, but precisely because they are petitin: “R. Huna refers specifically to petitin, as one enjoys them sooner (mekarva hana’ataihu).” They are easier to eat and do not need to be sliced first, and are therefore preferred.

The Talmud (**Berakhot 39a**), in the previous section, cites another view which may be relevant to our discussion:

R. Chiyya bar Ashi said: Over pat tzenuma be-ka’ara (a dry crust which has been put in a pot [to soak]), the blessing is ha-motzi.

As we shall see in a future shiur, some Rishonim maintain that this gemara teaches that the blessing of ha-motzi, as opposed to the blessing of mezonot, is recited over these pieces of bread placed in a pot to soak. Other Rishonim, however, as we shall see shortly, insist that while all agree that one should recite ha-motzi on this dish, R. Chiyya bar Ashi maintains that when given a choice between a whole loaf and these pieces, one may recite the blessing over these pieces. **Tosfot** suggest that R. Chiyya bar Ashi rejects the preference for a whole loaf altogether (see Rashba, s.v. amar); others explain that R. Chiyya bar Ashi refers to a case in which the pieces are “chaviv,” preferred.

The Talmud implies that the halakha is in accordance with those who rule that blessing should be recited over a whole loaf. However, the gemara brings two views as to when the blessing should be recited:

R. Chiyya said: The bread should be broken with the conclusion of the blessing. Rava demurred to this. [He said:] What is the reason [that ha-motzi should not be said] in the case of dry crust? Because, you say, when the blessing is concluded, it is concluded over a broken piece. But when it is said over a loaf, it finishes over a broken piece! The fact is, said Rava, that the benediction is said first and then the loaf is broken. The Nehardeans acted as prescribed by R. Chiyya, while the Rabbis acted as prescribed by Rava... The law is as laid down by Rava that one says the blessing first and afterwards breaks the loaf.

The gemara concludes, in accordance with Rava, that the blessing should be said first “and afterwards he breaks the loaf.” The Rambam (Hilkhot Berakhot 7:2) cites this passage, and rules that one should “conclude the blessing and then break the bread.” Tosafot (Berakhot 39b, s.v. ve-hilkhata) explains that although Rava disagrees with R. Chiyya, who says that one should finish the blessing as one is breaking piece from the loaf, Rava insists that one may only completely break the piece from the loaf after the berakha is finished. However, Tosafot adds, it is customary to begin breaking the bread before the blessing, as we are concerned that it may take too long after the blessing, and this will be a distraction (hesach ha-da’at).

It is interesting to note that although some Rishonim understand the debate between R. Chiyya and Rava as relating to the concern of a hefsek, an interruption, between the blessing and the breaking of the bread, some Rishonim (see Ra’avya, Hilkhot Lulav 691, for example) understand a parallel passage in the Yerushalmi (Berakhot 6:1) as suggesting that the blessing should be said as the breaking is performed, as in general, birkot ha-mitzva should be recited as the mitzva is being performed. This is seemingly in contrast to the Talmudic dictum (Pesachim 7b) that the birkat ha-mitzva should be said “oveir le-asiyatan” (before its performance). This topic of “oveir le-asiyatan” is beyond the scope of this shiur.

The Shulchan Arukh (167:1) rules that one should “cut a bit, so that if he holds the piece the entire loaf will remain attached... and then begin to recite the blessing, and after he finishes the blessing, he should separate them, so that the blessing is completed while the loaf is still whole.” Some Acharonim (see Arukh Ha-Shulchan 167:5) add that one does not need begin slicing a very soft or thin loaf, which cuts very quickly, before the blessing.

Interestingly, most Rishonim relate to this question as a “halakhic” preference. The **Rambam (Hilkhot Berakhot 7:1-2)**, however, writes:

The Sages of Israel were wont to follow many customs at meals. All these are

included in the realm of mannered behavior (ve-khulan derekh erez). Among them: When entering for a meal, the man of greatest stature should wash his hands first. Afterwards, all should enter and sit down, reclining on couches... The host should recite the blessing ha-motzi. When he completes the blessing, he should break bread.

The Rambam implies that these practices, including breaking the bread after reciting ha-motzi, are customary, forms of proper behavior.

2) Interrupting Between the Blessing and Eating

Shulchan Arukh rules, in accordance with the view of Tosafot, that one should be so careful not to delay between the blessing and the eating; he should begin breaking the bread before the blessing.

The Shulchan Arukh (167:6) rules that one should eat immediately after reciting the blessing. If one speaks, one must repeat the blessing, unless his speaking relates to the food. Furthermore, one should not delay eating longer than it takes to say "shalom alekha rabbi." However, if one did delay, he need not recite the blessing again.

When the ba'al ha-bayit recites the blessing of ha-motzi for others, those listening should not eat before the ba'al ha-bayit. The Rema (167:15) rules that the ba'al ha-bayit may give out pieces of bread before he himself eats, as this is considered part of the meal. The Mishna Berura (79) cites the Taz and other Acharonim, who advise the ba'al ha-bayit to first taste the bread and then distribute to the guests.

The Rishonim disagree regarding whether one who speaks after the ba'al ha-bayit has eaten, but before eating himself, must repeat the blessing. Most Rishonim, including Tosafot (Pesachim 101a, s.v. ve-Rabbi Yochanan) and the Rosh (Pesachim 10:5), maintain that if he interrupts between answering amen and eating, he must repeat the blessing. Others, including the Rema (167:6), rule that once the ba'al ha-bayit has eaten, the berakha takes effect; even if one interrupts, it is not necessary to repeat the blessing. Although the Mishna Berura (167:43; see Shemirat Shabat Kehilkhata 48:6) insists that almost all of the Acharonim rule that one must repeat the blessing, the Arukh Ha-Shulchan (167:16) rules that the blessing is valid. The Acharonim disagree regarding whether in the opposite scenario, in which the ba'al ha-bayit spoke before eating, the others must also repeat the blessing.

L) Eating Bread with Salt

The Talmud (**Berakhot 40a**) relates:

Rabba b. Shmuel said in the name of R. Chiyya: The one who is about to break the bread is not permitted to do so before salt or relish is placed before each one at table. Rabba b. Shmuel was once at the house of the Exilarch, and they brought him bread and he broke it at once. They said to him: Has the Master retraced his own teaching? He replied: This requires no condiment.

This passage raises a number of questions. Why does R, Chiyya rule that one should not perform betzi'at ha-pat until salt is "placed before each one at the table"? Second, why was there no need for salt in the Exilarch's house?

Rashi (Berakhot 40a, s.v. boshesh) explains that the bread served in the house of the Exilarch was made of a higher quality flour, "pat nikiya hi zu ve-ein tzerikha liftan," and therefore may be eaten without salt or a condiment. Tosafot (Berakhot 40, s.v. havei) apparently agree:

And we are not accustomed to bring salt or other condiments to the table, as our bread is important [chashuv], and it is similar to the case described further on [in which the Talmud concludes] "this requires no condiment (boshesh)."

Tosafot justifies the widespread custom of not bringing salt or condiments to the table when reciting the blessing. According to Rashi and Tosafot, it seems that the Talmud insisted that one "break bread" when there is salt or relish on the table so that one's blessing will be recited over edible, if not tasty bread. Seemingly, this is meant to honor the blessing. Apparently, by the Middle Ages, bread was already prepared in a manner that did not require that it be eaten with salt or other condiments, and therefore one could recite the blessing over the bread alone. Alternatively, the Gr"a (Bi'ur Ha-Gra 167:5) explains that one should not recite the blessing before salt is present lest he will have to wait in until the condiments are brought, causing an interruption between the blessing and the eating.

The Rambam (Hilkhos Berakhot 7:3) offers a slightly different understanding. He writes:

The person breaking bread is not permitted to do so until salt or relishes have been brought before each individual, unless their intention was to eat bread by itself (pat chareiva).

The Acharonim present different explanations as to why one who intends to eat the bread alone may recite the blessing without salt or condiments. The Kesef Mishnah, for example, simply explains:

Our teacher understood the passage as the Arukh explains. “Boshesh” is a type of condiment, and therefore [Rabba b. Shmuel] said that the bread didn’t need this condiment, and since he has no intention of eating with this condiment, he does not have to wait [for the blessing] until the condiment is brought.

According to the Kesef Mishnah, the Rambam maintains that if one intends to eat the bread with a condiment, then the bread eaten after reciting the blessing should be eaten as such. If, however, one does not plan on eating his bread with condiments, there is no reason that the blessing must be recited with condiments. This interpretation may also relate to the honor of the blessing.

The Arukh Ha-shulchan (167:11), however, offers a completely different explanation of this Rambam. He explains:

The Rambam did not mention that one should dip his piece of bread in a condiment, but rather that he [not recite the blessing until he] brings the salt or condiment to the table. In other words, that which he intends to eat during the meal should be brought to the table ... Since the blessing of ha-motzi exempts also the condiments served during the meal, they should be in front of him during the [blessing of] ha-motzi – not because he needs to dip his bread into them.

According to the Arukh Ha-shulchan, the Talmud is concerned not with the honor of the blessing, but rather with whether the blessing of ha-motzi will cover all items eaten during the meal.

According to the explanations given above, there seems to be no reason to recite ha-motzi and eat the bread with salt. Indeed, the **Shulchan Arukh (167:5) rules in accordance with Rashi and the Rambam:**

One should not break bread until salt or condiments are brought before him in order to eat with the bread. If the bread was clean [i.e. made from higher quality flour] or [the bread is] seasoned with spices or salt, like our bread, or he intends on eating the bread without condiments, he does not need to wait.

He rules that neither Rashi nor the Rambam would require one to dip the bread in salt if the bread is already seasoned and will be eaten without condiments.

However, there is an ancient custom, adhered to until today, to dip one’s bread in salt after reciting the blessing. What is the source of this custom?

Tosafot, cited above, cites another view:

However R. Menachem would be careful to bring salt to the table, as the Midrash says: When the Jewish people are sitting at their table and waiting for one another to wash their hands and they are without mitzvot, the Satan attempts to prosecute them, and the “covenant of salt” (berit melach) protects them.

R. Menachem believes that one should eat bread with salt after reciting the blessing of ha-motzi due to the “berit melach”. (Regarding this “berit melach,” see Bamidbar 18:19, Vayikra 2:13 and Rashi, Rashbam, and Ramban there, as well as the Malbim, Ha-Emek Davar, and Divrei Ha-Yamim II 13:5.) Interestingly, R. Shimshon Raphael Hirsch (Vayikra 2:13) explains that just as salt represents an unchanging experience, so to the covenant between God and the Jewish people is eternally unchanging.

The Shiblei Ha-Leket (141) offers a slightly different explanation for the custom to eat salt with bread:

The Geonim explain that it is customary to break one’s bread with salt, as we see that the table is called a mizbe’ach (alter) ... and it says regarding the mizbe’ach, “and with all your sacrifices you should offer salt” (Vayikra 2:13).

He explains that just as the table is compared to the mizbe’ach (alter) and the sacrifices are always offered with salt, so too we should always break our bread with salt.

The **Rema** cites these to views in his comments to the Shulchan Arukh:

However, it is a mitzva to bring salt to every table before breaking the bread because the table is compared to the altar and eating is comparing to offering a sacrifice, and it says “and with all your sacrifices you should offer salt” (Vayikra 2:13), and this protects us from tragedies.

Furthermore, the Magen Avraham (167:15) cites the “mekubalim” (mystics), who insist that although we are not accustomed to eat our bread with salt, one should still dip the bread eaten after the blessing in salt. The Mishna Berura (33) adds that according to the mystical tradition, one should dip the bread in salt three times, due to mystical considerations. Interestingly, the custom of R. Moshe Sofer (the Chatam Sofer), and his students was not to dip the bread in salt on Friday night, possibly because on Friday night the fats were not burned on the altar (see Piskei Teshuvot 167:5). The Kaf Ha-Chayyim (180:3) writes that one should leave the salt on the table until after birkat ha-mazon.

M) 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.”

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, Hilkhos 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.

N) 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, Hilkhhot 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, Hilkhhot 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 (Hilkhhot 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 are soiled (Sha'ar Ha-Tziun 181:32), or if one ordinarily washes one's hands after a meal (Shulchan 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:

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.