**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**THE LAWS OF THE BERAKHOT**

**Rav David Brofsky**

***Shiur* on *Zimun* (6 Installments Combined)**

***Birkat Ha-Zimun***

***Birkat Ha-Zimun* – Source and Definition**

There are two aspects of the original practice of the *zimun*.

First, when three people eat together, they become obligated to say the *Birkat Ha-Zimun*: “If three people have eaten together, it is their duty to invite [one another to say grace]” (*Mishna*, *Berakhot*45a). The *gemara* asks:

From where is this derived? R. Assi says: Because Scripture says, “Magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt His name together” (*Tehillim* 34:4). R. Abbahu derives it from here: “When I proclaim the name of the Lord, ascribe [plural] greatness unto our God” (*Devarim* 32:3).

Similarly, the Talmud (*Berakhot* 48b) teaches:

Our Rabbis taught: Where is the recitation of *Birkat Ha-Mazon* intimated in the Torah? In the verse, “And you shall eat and be satisfied and bless” (*Devarim* 8:10) – this signifies the benediction of “*Ha-Zan*” (“He who feeds”); “the Lord your God” – this signifies the benediction of *zimun*. (See Tosefta 6:1 and Hagahot Ha-Gra).

Although both passages seem to refer to the source of the *zimun*, Rashi (ibid. 45a s.v. *mena*) explains that the second source teaches that there is an obligation of *zimun*, while the first source teaches that a *zimun* is said with three people.

            The Ra’avad (Rif, *Berakhot* 44b) assumes that the *zimun* is a Biblical obligation. Most other *Rishonim* (see, for example, Ra’ah, s.v. *mena*, and Ritva, s.v. *de-khtiv*; see also Rashba 50a, s.v. *ve-levarkhu*) insist that *zimun* is only a Rabbinic obligation.

What is the nature of this *Birkat Ha-Zimun*? The Rambam (*Hilkhot Berakhot*5:2) implies that the *zimun* is merely an additional blessing said before *Birkat Ha-Mazon* in the company of three or more people. When three people eat together, they become obligated to recite five blessings instead of four. Rashi (*Berakhot* 45b, s.v. *ve-amar*) offers a different understanding. He explains that when three eat together, “they combine their blessings together in the plural language, such as ‘and we bless.’” Rashi implies that the *zimun* in not an additional blessing; rather, the three or more people who eat join together to offer one blessing on behalf of the group.

This brings us to the second aspect of the *zimun*. The original practice of the *zimun* entailed the leader reciting the entire *Birkat Ha-Mazon* on behalf of the other participants. Indeed, Rashi (ibid. 45b, s.v. *ve-amar*) further implies that although one person may say the *Birkat Ha-Mazon* for another and fulfill his obligation through the mechanism of *shome’a ke-oneh*, when three people ate together, the *Birkat Ha-Mazon* said by the leader of the *zimun* is actually the *Birkat Ha-Mazon* of the entire group. The Rambam may also have adopted this understanding of the mechanism of the *zimun*, in addition to his understanding of the obligation of the *zimun* (see *Shiurim Le-Zekher Abba Mari*, vol. 2, p. 105). Although nowadays it is not customary for the leader to say *Birkat Ha-Mazon* for the entire group, the leader should say at least the entire *zimun* (see below) out loud, and the participants should preferably say the words along with the leader, ending each blessing slightly before the leader in order to answer “*amen*” (Shulchan Arukh 183:7 and Mishna Berura 27-28).

            The *Rishonim* discuss the definition of the *Birkat Ha-Zimun*. The *zimun* traditionally begins when the leader says “*Rabbotai nevarekh*” (see below). Based upon different understandings of a Talmudic discussion (*Berakhot* 46a, “*ad heikhan birkat ha-zimun*”), the *Rishonim* debate the length of the *Birkat Ha-Zimun*. The Rambam (*Hilkhot Berakhot* 5:2) and Rif (*Berakhot* 34b) rule that the *Birkat Ha-Zimun* includes only the *zimun* itself, until “*barukh she-akhalnu mi-shelo*.” Other *Rishonim*, including Tosafot (ibid. 46a, s.v. *le-heikhan*), the Rosh (ibid, 7:12) and the Tur (200), rule that the entire first blessing, *Ha-Zan*, is part of the *Birkat Ha-Zimun*. Once again, the *Rishonim* seem to debate whether the *Birkat Ha-Zimun* is an additional, introductory blessing, or whether it integrates into the *Birkat Ha-Mazon*, transforming an individual’s blessing into a group blessing.

The Shulchan Arukh (200:2) rules in accordance with the Rif and Rambam, while the Rema rules like the Tosafot, Rosh, and Tur. Therefore, according to Ashkenazic practice, it is proper for the *mezamen* to say at least the first blessing out loud, and one who stops eating in order to listen to the *zimun* of his friend should not resume eating until after the blessing of *Ha-Zan*.

 **Saying *Birkat Ha-Mazon* Without a *Zimun***

The Talmud (*Berakhot* 45b) teaches:

Abaye said: We have a tradition that if two people have eaten together, it is their duty to separate. It has been taught similarly: If two people have eaten together, it is their duty to separate.

The *gemara* first rules that when two people have eaten together, they should recite *Birkat Ha-Mazon* separately; one should not recite it for the other. Interestingly, the Rosh (*Berakhot* 7:6) notes that although Rashi (s.v. *mitzva*) explains that preferably one should not even say the *Birkat Ha-Motzi* for another person, it is not customary to act in this manner, and even Rashi apparently did not insist that one person not say the *Birkat Ha-Motzi* for another.

In any case, the *gemara* qualifies this statement:

When is this case? When they are both educated men. But if one is educated and the other illiterate, the educated one says the benedictions and this exempts the illiterate one.

If one is not able to recite *Birkat Ha-Mazon* for himself, another may say it on his behalf, employing the principle of “*shome’a ke-oneh*.”

In this context, the *Rishonim* disagree as to whether one may fulfill the obligation for another even if he does not understand Hebrew. Historically, this question often referred to women, who were generally not educated and did not understand Hebrew. Tosafot (*Berakhot* 45b), as well as the Rosh (*Berakhot* 7:6), ask whether a man may recite *Birkat Ha-Mazon* for a woman who does not understand Hebrew.  They cite Rashi, who proves from the *gemara* (*Megilla* 17a) that just as someone who does not understand Hebrew fulfills his obligation of *Kriat Megilla* through hearing it read in Hebrew, even one who does not understand Hebrew may fulfill his obligation of *berakhot* and *tefilla* through hearing the recitation of another. Tosafot refute this comparison, explaining that since *pirsumei nisa* is the central element of *Kriat Megilla*, one can fulfill his obligation even without understanding; the same is not true in the case of *berakhot*.

The Shulchan Arukh (193:1) rules that one may only recite *Birkat Ha-Mazon* for another person if that person understands Hebrew. R. Moshe Isserlis (*Darkhei Moshe* 193, *Rema* 199:7), however, notes that the custom follows the position of Rashi, who rules that one may fulfill an obligation through listening to another recite a Hebrew text even without understanding the meaning. The Mishna Berura (193:5) concurs, pointing out that common custom is for one to fulfill the obligation for another, regardless of whether the second person understands Hebrew.

Incidentally, the Shulchan Arukh (183:7) writes that nowadays, each person recites *Birkat Ha-Mazon* to himself, even in the presence of a *zimun*, as it is difficult to listen and concentrate for the entire *Birkat Ha-Mazon*. The Mishna Berura, citing the Magen Avraham (193:2), adds that similarly, those who do not understand Hebrew should preferably repeat the text, even of *Kiddush*, word for word after the reader, as it is difficult to concentrate and listen to someone else’s recitation. Common practice does not concur with this view.

***Birkat Ha-Mazon* with a *Zimun***

Under certain circumstances, when three people eat bread together, they become obligated to say the *zimun*. In other cases, they may pursue a *zimun*, although it is not obligatory. Regarding three people who ate together, the Talmud (ibid.) states:

If three people have eaten together, it is their duty to invite one another [to say *Birkat Ha-Mazon*], and they are not permitted to separate.

The *gemara* rules that when three people eat together, they must say the *Birkat Ha-Zimun* and they may not separate. If there are six or more people, they may divide into groups of three. However, if there are ten people, they should say *Birkat Ha-Mazon* with the special *zimun* of ten, which mentions the name of God (see *Berakhot* 50a).

            The *Rishonim* discuss the circumstances in which the people who eat together are considered to be a group that becomes obligated in the *zimun*. The Tur cites a debate between Rabbeinu Yona and the Tur’s father, the Rosh. Rabbeinu Yona (*Berakhot* 31a, s.v. *ve-omer*) implies that only when a group of people *begin* eating together do they incur the obligation of *zimun*; if they did not begin their meal together, they say *Birkat Ha-Mazon* separately. The Rosh (7:29) writes that as long as they ate part of the meal together, they become obligated in the *Birkat Ha-Zimun* and may not separate. The Shulchan Arukh (193:2) rules that as long as the people finish eating together, they become obligated to say the *zimun*. Therefore, the Mishna Berura (19) rules that if one begins to eat after the others and finishes first, he does not become obligated in the *zimun*, and he may say *Birkat Ha-Mazon* before the others finish. The Rema, however, adds, that even if one is exempt from forming a *zimun*, it is preferable to join with the others to fulfill the verse, “*be-rov am hadarat melekh*” (Mishlei 14:28; see Magen Avraham 8 who disagrees).

            What if one wishes to say *Birkat Ha-Mazon* and separate? The *gemara* (*Berakhot* 45b) teaches that if two people need to leave, the third should interrupt his meal and answer the *zimun* of the other two. In contrast, two of the people are not obligated to stop their meal so that the third may say *Birkat* *Ha-Mazon* (see Shulchan Arukh 200). Furthermore, if two groups of more than three ate, but not together, since the individuals from each group became obligated in the *Birkat Ha-Zimun*, they may join together with members of the other group who have become obligated to say a *zimun* in order to say the *zimun* together. If, however, the members of the original groups have already said the *zimum*, those members of the group who did not participate in that *zimun* are now exempt and cannot group together with others in order to say the *zimun* (see Shulchan Arukh 193:5-6).

As mentioned above, although someone who did not eat bread with others is technically not obligated in the *Birkat Ha-Zimun*, it is meritorious to join other people in order to say the *zimun*. The Talmud (*Berakhot* 48a) even states:

R. Yehuda the son of R. Shmuel b. Shilat said in the name of Rav: If nine people have eaten… and another [eats] vegetables, they may combine. R. Zeira said: I asked R. Yehuda: What of eight, what of seven? And he replied: It makes no difference. Certainly if six [were eating] I did not need to ask. Said R. Yirmiyahu to him: You were quite right not to ask. What was the reason there [in the first case]? Because there is a majority; here too there is a majority. He, however, thought that perhaps an easily recognizable majority is required.

Although the *gemara* states that as long as six people at bread together, another three may join in order to say the *zimun* even if they only ate a vegetable. The *Rishonim* discuss whether this applies to a *zimun* of three as well, and which foods the minority must eat. The Shulchan Arukh (197:3) rules that even if the third person has a drink, he may join together with the other two to from a *zimun*.

**Separating from or Avoiding a *Zimun***

            The *Acharonim* discuss whether one who eats with others may leave before participating in the *Birkat Ha-Zimun*.

            Some *Acharonim* note that if one is unable to participate in the *zimun* of ten, during which the *Shem HaShem* is mentioned, he is permitted to break into a group of three and say the regular *zimun*. They base this ruling on a passage in the Talmud (*Berakhot* 50a):

Rava said: When we take a meal at the house of the Exilarch, we say grace in groups of three. Why not in groups of ten? Because the Exilarch might hear them and be angry. But could not the grace of the Exilarch suffice for them? Since everyone would respond loudly, they would not hear the one who says grace.

Accordingly, the Shulchan Arukh (193:1) rules that if one fears that he will not hear the *Birkat Ha-Zimun*, and by assembling ten men in order to say the proper *Birkat Ha-Zimun* he will disrupt the meal and anger the host, he may form a smaller *zimun* and forgo the *zimun* of ten.

            The Mishna Berurua (193:16) adds that even if one must leave early in order to perform a mitzvah he may form a smaller *zimun*. Similarly, the Arukh Ha-Shulchan (193:9) writes that even if one wishes to leave early (*kasha la-hem ha-yeshiva*), and certainly if he must leave in order to fulfill a *mitzva*, and he is unable to gather a group of ten for a *zimun*, he may participate in a *zimun* of three and then leave. Furthermore, the Taz (200:3) insists that one who finishes early is certainly permitted to form a *zimun* of three, and the Talmud referred to a case in which everyone finished eating together.

            What if he is unable to gather even three for a *zimun*? The Arukh Ha- Shulchan (ibid.) suggests that if he is leaving in order to perform a *mitzva*, he may be exempt due to the principle of *osek be-mitzva patur min ha-mitzva* (one who is engaged in the performance of one *mitzva* is exempt from another). He concludes, however, that in this case, he is not exempt and that he must stay for the *zimun*.

            Some suggest that in this scenario, one should avoid becoming obligated at all in the *zimun*. As we mentioned above, the *Rishonim* discuss the circumstances in which the people who eat together are considered to be a group that becomes obligated in the *zimun*. The Shulchan Arukh (193:2) rules that as long as the people finish eating together, they become obligated to say the *zimun*. Accordingly, the Mishna Berura (19) rules that if one begins to eat after the others and finishes first, he does not become obligated in the *zimun*, and he may say *Birkat Ha-Mazon* before the others finish. If so, we might suggest that one who plans on leaving early should avoid beginning or ending the meal with others.

            Some *Acharonim* suggest that although one who eats with others becomes obligated to participate in the *Birkat Ha-Zimun*, if one has explicit intention when eating not to “join” together with the others, he is not obligated in the *zimun* and he may say the *Birkat Ha-Mazon* alone. The Shulchan Arukh Ha-Rav (OC 168:18), for example, writes that people are permitted to “sit together with the intention of not joining together.”

Similarly, R. Moshe Feinstein (Iggerot Moshe, OC 1:56) writes:

In my humble opinion, there is a simple solution for those who do not wish to wait until the end of the meal and the *Sheva Berakhot*. They should say explicitly before they sit down to ear that they do not intend on joining with the other people who are eating, and then, although they are sitting at one table, they are not obligated in the *zimun*.

R. Feinstein proves this from an interested comment in the Rema (193:3), who writes that it is not customary for those who eat in the house of a non-Jew to say the *zimun*. He explains that although they sit down to eat, it is as if they did not eat together. Similarly, the Magen Avraham (492:9) explains that even when three people eat together for the *Se’uda Ha-Mafseket* before *Tish’a Be-Av*, they should not say the *zimun*, as they clearly did not have in mind to join together, since it is customary not to eat with others at the final meal before the *Tish’a Be-Av*fast. However, R. Avraham David b. Asher Anshel Wahrman (1770–1840), in his Eshel Avraham (Buczacz), rules that having intention not to join others for the meal does not exempt one from becoming obligated in the *zimun*.

            Despite the difficulties with the above suggestions, many authorities state simply that in extenuating circumstances, one may leave early even at the cost of missing the *Birkat Ha-Zimun*. For example, R. Yosef Hahn (Frankfurt am Main, 1570-1637) writes in his Yosef Ometz (159):

Although three or ten [who ate together] are not permitted to separate, it seems to me that at large meals which last a long time, and some find the length difficult due to health, or due to the waste of time, or their fear that they will be unable to wait up the next morning for learning or prayer, they have permission to say the blessing (i.e. *Birkat Ha-Mazon*) without a *zimun*… And I have relied upon this numerous times. However, if my friends and acquaintances are sitting with me, I say the *zimun* with then.

He bases his practice on the passage cited above (*Berakhot* 50a), in which three may break away from a group of more than ten in order to make a *zimun*. He argues that similarly, when necessary, one may forgo the *zimun* of three as well (see Arukh Ha-Shulchan above, who disagrees). The Minchat Yitzchak (2:43) concurs that one may leave and even skip the *zimun* altogether in extenuating circumstances.

            The *Acharonim* also discuss, in addition to the *Birkat Ha-Zimun*, whether one who participates in a wedding meal is obligated to stay for *Birkat Ha-Mazon* in order to hear the *Sheva Berakhot*. While some believe that the participants of the meal are obligated to hear the *Sheva Berakhot* (see Iggerot Moshe, AE 87), others claim that the only those who participate in the *zimun* at the end of the meal are obligated (see Minchat Yitzchak 2:43 and Tzitz Eliezer 11:84). Some even suggest that the obligation of *Sheva Berakhot* does not fall upon the participants; rather, there is an obligation that the meal itself must conclude with *Sheva Berakhot*, regardless of whether everyone participates in the *Zimun*.

**Who is included in the *Zimun*?**

**Men and Women and Forming a *Zimun***

The first *mishna* of the seventh chapter of *Massekhet* *Berakhot* (45a) enumerates those who may be included in a *zimun* and those who may not be included. Those discussed include one who ate prohibited food, a servant, a non-Jew, women, children, and slaves.

Regarding women, the Talmud (*Berakhot* 20b) rules that women are obligated in Birkat Ha-Mazon, yet discusses whether their obligation is of Biblical or Rabbinic origin. However, all agree that under certain circumstances, a woman may even fulfill a man’s obligation of *Birkat Ha-Mazon*. Are women obligated in *zimun* as well? May women join or form a *zimun*, with or without men?

The *gemara* (*Arakhin* 3a) teaches:

What does “All are obliged to arrange *zimun*” mean to include? It means to include women and slaves, for it was taught: Women arrange a *zimun* amongst themselves, and slaves arrange a *zimun* amongst themselves. What does “All may be joined to a *zimun*” mean to include? That includes a minor who knows to Whom one pronounces a blessing. For R. Nachman said: One may arrange a *zimun* with a minor who knows to Whom one pronounces a blessing.

This source states that women are obligated, but it does not indicate under which circumstances. It also implies that even a child may join with others to form a *zimun*.

On the other hand, the *mishna* in *Berakhot*(45a) states: “Women, children, and slaves may not be counted in the three.” Furthermore, the Talmud teaches (45b):

Come and hear: Women by themselves invite one another, and slaves by themselves invite one another, but women, slaves, and children together – even if they desire to invite one another – may not do so. Now a hundred women [regarding this issue] are no better than two men, and yet it says: Women by themselves invite one another and slaves by themselves invite one another? There is a special reason there, because each has a mind of her own.

This passage implies that women cannot form a “quorum” with men and are always viewed as “individuals” regarding *zimun* (*me’ah nashi ke-trei gavrei damyan*). On the other hand, they may join together to form their own *zimun*, as “each as a mind of her own” (“*de-ika de’ot*”).

Despite the apparent contradiction between these sources, the overwhelming majority of *Rishonim* assume that a woman cannot join two other men to form a *zimun*. However, some *Rishonim* did suggest (and even implemented) that a woman *may* join two men to form a *zimun*. For example, the Maharam Mi-Rotenburg (Responsa, Prague, 227) records that R. Yehuda Ha-Kohen said that a woman can join to a *zimun* of three, whereas the Maharam himself disagreed. Both opinions are cited by the Tur (199). The Mordekhai (*Berakhot* 158) records that Rabbeinu Simcha would add a woman to nine men in order to mention the name of God in the *zimun*. Although the *Rishonim* reject these opinions, the *Acharonim* (see Bach 199:7, Taz 199:2, Derisha 199:5) attempt to reconcile their view with that of the *mishna* (*Berakhot* 45a).

According to the majority view, why does the *mishna* preclude a woman from joining two men in order to form a *zimun*? The Talmud does not provide an explanation, and it is especially difficult to understand in light of the *gemara*’s ruling that a minor can join a *zimun* (see below). Furthermore, as R. Yehuda Ha-Kohen noted (as cited by the Maharam), even one who eats only a vegetable joins a *zimun* of three! The *Rishonim* offer different approaches to explain this anomaly.

            Some suggest that since men and women carry different obligations of *Birkat Ha-Mazon* – a man’s obligation is *mi-de’oraita*, while a woman’s a woman’s obligation is possibly *mi-derabannan* – they may not join together for a *zimun*. Indeed, this appears to be the rational of the Maharam in his objection to R. Yehuda’s view. Similarly, the Sefer Ha-Michtam (*Berakhot* 45a) writes:

Women, slaves, and children do not form a *zimun* together with men. The explanation is that they are not obligated like men… It is subject to doubt whether they are Biblically obligated or Rabbinically, while men are obligated from the Torah.

This rationale appears in the writings of R. Yehonatan of Luneil (Hilkhot He-Rif,*Berakhot* 45a) as well.

It is not clear whether this reason assumes that the group leader fulfills the obligation of the participants, in which case this reason may not be applicable nowadays, or whether the potential to become Biblically obligated enables one to join together to form the *zimun* of three.

            Others suggest that men and women may recite different texts of the *Birkat Ha-Mazon*. Rashi (*Arakhin* 3a, s.v. *mezamnot*) writes:

But two women or two slaves cannot join a man [to form a *zimun*], because an element [of *Birkat Ha-Mazon*] is present for men which is not present for women and slaves, in that women do not mention “*berit*”…

Rashi refers to the reference to “*berit*” in the second blessing of *Birkat Ha-Mazon*: “*ve-al beritkha she-chatamta be-vsareinu*,” a reference to the *berit mila*. The Me’iri (*Berakhot* 47b) mentions this as well. Some suggest that these *Rishonim* refer to a technical problem – that is, the leader cannot fulfill the obligation of the group when its members say different texts of the *Birkat Ha-Mazon*. Indeed, the Or Zaru’a (*Hilkhot Megilla* 368) notes that if women did mention “*berit*,” they would be able to join men in forming a *zimun*. Others explain that participants who say different versions of the *Birkat Ha-Mazon* cannot join to form a unified group that becomes obligated to say the *zimun*. R. Yechezkel Landau, in his Tzlach (*Berakhot* 47b; see also Chatam Sofer, OC 1:48), suggests that one woman may join two men, as the majority of the group will be saying the same text. Nowadays (see Mishna Berura 187:9), women recite the full text of *Birkat Ha-Mazon*, and therefore this reason, as well, may not be relevant.

Finally, many *Rishonim*, with different nuances, suggest that the limitation regarding women may be related to another passage in the *sugya*, which precludes joining together with a slave to form a *zimun* because of “*peritzuta*” (immorality). The *gemara* (*Berakhot* 45b) teaches:

Women and slaves together, even though they desire to invite one another, may not do so. Why not? Each has a mind! There is a special reason in that case – because of immorality.

The Talmidei Rabbeinu Yona (*Berakhot* 33a, s.v. *nashim*) cites Rashi (in a comment that is not found in the commentary of Rashi that we have on the *gemara*), who explains that “women do not join a *zimun*, even with their husbands, as their ‘fraternizing is not pleasant’ (*ein chavratam na’eh*).” Rabbeinu Yona further connects the *gemara* cited above to women as well. Other *Rishonim*, including the Ritva (*Hilkhot Berakhot* 7:2), the Ran (*Megilla* 6b), and the Mei’ri (*Berakhot* 47b), cite this reason as well. (As we will see, many *Rishonim* are only concerned about “*peritzuta*” if women complete the *zimun*. Women who eat with three men may actually incur an obligation to participate in the *zimun*.)

            The Talmidei Rabbeinu Yona extend and apply this notion even to a husband and wife, well beyond social gatherings of men and women, as they apparently maintain that any mixed gathering of men and women should, by definition, be viewed as unseemly. Interestingly, the Peri Megadim (Mishbetzot Zahav 199:2) insists that these reasons fundamentally do not apply to a family, and that is why R. Yehuda Ha-Kohen (as cited by the Maharam) would form a *zimun* with his wife.

The Shulchan Arukh (199:6-7) rules:

Women, slaves, and children do not join to form a *zimun*; rather, they form a *zimun* for themselves. A group of women, slaves, and children should not join together due to the immoral behavior of the slaves. Rather, women should form their own *zimun*, as should slaves, and they should not pronounce the name of God.

The Mishna Berura (12) explains that these three groups do not join together with men to form a *zimun*.

Aside from the opinion of R. Yehuda Ha-Kohen and Rabbeinu Simcha (cited above), which was rejected by the *Rishonim*, some *Acharonim* question whether under certain circumstances women and men may join together to form a *zimun*, especially in the context of a family. For example, R. Yosef Shaul Nathansohn (1808–1875), in his Responsa Sho’el U-Meshiv (Mahadura Kama 1:155) writes:

And at a party in which men are sitting with members of their households, when men are sitting with their wives and servants, how is “immorality,” God forbid, possibly relevant?

He notes that the Shulchan Arukh’s ruling does not mention men and women joining together (as the Mishna Berura understands), and he therefore suggests that women may join together with men to form a *zimun*. He admits that this question requires further research, as he only “briefly looked into the matter” (*ve-tzarikh iyun ki lo ra’iti ela be-ha’avara be-alma*).

Similarly, the Sha’arei Teshuva (199:1) cites R. Avraham ben Mordekhai Ha-Levi (17th century, Egypt), the Gan Ha-Melekh, who relates that a certain scholar would form a *zimun* with his daughter and son-in-law. However, he subsequently rejects this custom.

            Despite these interesting testimonies, as well as recent [articles](http://www.bmj.org.il/userfiles/akdamot/26/gershon.pdf) advocating that men and women should join to form a *zimun*, especially family members, it is not customary for one or two women to join a man or two men in making a *zimun*.

***Zimun Nashim***

As we saw previously, the Talmud (*Berakhot* 45b) teaches:

Come and hear: Women by themselves invite one another, and slaves by themselves invite one another, but women, slaves, and children together – even if they desire to invite one another – may not do so. Now a hundred women [regarding this issue] are no better than two men, and yet it says: Women by themselves invite one another and slaves by themselves invite one another? There is a special reason there, because each has a mind of her own.

How are we to understand this passage?

Some *Rishonim* explain that the *gemara* still distinguishes between the *zimun* of men and that of women. Rashi (s.v. *de-ika*), for example, explains that although three women are not obligated to form a *zimun*, “the *de’ot* of three [women] count more than two men in praising, as [it fulfills the principle of] ‘O magnify the Lord with me’ (*Tehillim* 33:4).” This is the view of Tosafot (s.v. *shani*) as well. In fact, Tosafot relate that the daughters of the Tosafist R. Avraham would form their own *zimun*. Tosafot note, however, that it is not customary for women to form a *zimun*, as it is only a *reshut* (optional), and not obligatory to do so.

Others (see Rosh, *Berakhot* 7:4; see also Talmidei Rabbenu Yona 33a) explain that although women do not join in forming a quorum of ten, at which the name of God is added to the *zimun* (“*nevarekh le-Elokeinu*”), they do join together to form groups of three, which are obligated, like men, to say the *zimun*. Indeed, the Rosh notes, the *gemara* (*Arakhin* 3b) says explicitly that women are obligated in*zimun*. Finally, the Rosh concludes, since women are obligated in *Birkat Ha-Mazon*, they should certainly be obligated no less than men in the *zimun*.

The Shulchan Arukh (199:7) rules that “*nashim mezamnot le-atzman reshut*” – women may, but are not obligated, to join together to form a *zimun*. Interestingly, the Mishna Berura (16) suggests that the Rabbis did not wish to obligate women to form a *zimun*, as it was not common for women to be literate in *Birkat Ha-Mazon*. He further suggests (Sha’ar Ha-Tziun 6) that a *zimun* preferably entails saying *Birkat Ha-Mazon* over a cup of wine, and requiring women to say *Birkat Ha-Mazon* over wine was viewed as inappropriate. Interestingly, the Bi’ur Halakha cites the Vilna Ga’on, who rules in accordance with the Rosh.

Although the Arukh Ha-Shulchan (199:2) relates that “we have never heard that women say the *zimun* amongst themselves,” R. Ari Zivotofsky (Letter to the Editor, *Jewish Action*, Summer 5762/2002) relates:

Regarding women’s *zimun*, R. Elazar Mayer Teitz, *morah de-atra* of Elizabeth, NJ, told me the following: In 1954, when R. Teitz was a student in Ponevetz, his maternal grandmother, Rebbetzin Frieda Preil, founder of Neshei Ezras Israel, visited the Sara Schneirer school in Bnei Brak.  R. Teitz was invited by Rebbetzin Preil to join her at the school for Friday night Shabbat dinner. At the conclusion of the meal, the girls *bentched* with a *zimun* with Rabbi Teitz present. Rabbi Teitz also told me that his wife, a native *Yerushalmit*, attended the Spitzer girls school, where the girls would *bentch* with a *zimun* (there were no males present).

Similarly, the Ben Ish Chai (Korach 13) writes: “It is appropriate for every man to instruct the women of his household that they should say the *zimun* amongst themselves when three [women] eat together.”

The women’s *zimun* has become increasingly popular in Modern Orthodox and Religious Zionist seminaries and communities in Israel and the United States. It is viewed as a halakhically rooted and sanctioned opportunity for greater ritual participation.

What if one or two men eat with three or more women? Some suggest that a man should lead the zimun for women. For example, R. Yehuda Herzl Henkin (*Responsa on Cotemporary Jewish Women’s Issues* [Ktav, 2003], chapter 6) notes that while the Ritva (*Hilkhot Berakhot* 7:2) does not allow a man to lead a *zimun* for three women, the Sefer Ha-Me’orot (*Berakhot* 45a) and the Sefer Ohel Mo’ed (*Sha’ar Berakhot* 7:1) disagree and allow a man to lead a *zimun* for women. R. Henkin further writes (p. 48) that although he later discovered that R. Shlomo Zalman Auerbach (*Halikhot Beita*, p. 94, n. 14) disagreed and maintained that a man should not lead a *zimun* for women, he still believes that a man may lead such a *zimun*.

Assuming that one of the three women leads the *zimun*, should one or two men who are present respond? Surprisingly, R. Elyakim Elinson writes (*Ha-Isha Ve-Ha-Mitzvot*, vol. 1, p. 77), without citing a source, that “in the presence of men, women do not form a *zimun* at all.” R. Dovid Auerbach (*Halikhot Beita*, p. 94), cites his uncle, R. Shlomo Zalman Auerbach *z”l*, who ruled that “[when] three women are eating with one or two men, it is proper for one of them to say the blessing [i.e. the *zimun*] and not the man, but the man is certainly permitted to answer.” I heard this from R. Aaron Lichtenstein as well. R. Zivotovsky (cited above) cites R. Dovid Cohen (of Gvul Ya’avetz in Brooklyn) and R. Dovid Feinstein (MTJ), who rule that “men should answer as ‘outsiders’ by responding ‘*baruch u-mevorach shemo tamid le’olam va’ed*.’”

**Women Who Eat with Three or More Men**

            The Semag (Aseh 27; see also Teshuvot Ha-Rosh 4:16 and Ran, *Megilla* 6b, s.v. *matnitin*) explains that *zimun* is only a *reshut* (optional) when three women join together. However, when women eat with three or more men, “they are obligated and fulfill their obligation with them, and they do not say the blessings for themselves.” The Beit Yosef (199) understood that the Talmidei Rabeinu Yona disagree and rule that a women does not join the *zimun* of three men.

            The Shulchan Arukh (199:7) rules that women who eat with at least three men are obligated in the *zimun*. The Shulchan Arukh Ha-Rav (199:6; see also Mishna Berura 199:18) writes that in this case, three women may separate to form their own *zimun*, if they wish to do so.

Contemporary authorities attempt to justify the practice of not insisting that women participate in the *zimun*. For example, R. Moshe Feinstein (Iggerot Moshe, OC 5:9) explains that during the week, women may be busy preparing and serving the meal, and they therefore may not become obligated to join the *zimun*. He adds that this is not the case on Shabbat, and “men who wish to hurry on Shabbat and say the *Birkat Ha-Mazon* with a *zimun*, and do not want to wait for the women, and do not even call them – that is certainly prohibited on Shabbat, and often even during the week.”

Interestingly, R. Shmuel Wosner (Shevet Ha-Levi 1:38) discusses the practice of Chassidic men to leave their Shabbat meals without saying *Birkat Ha-Mazon* and join their *rebbe* for the end of the meal, without saying the *Birkat Ha-Zimun* at home with their wives.

**One Who Eats Prohibited Food**

The Talmud also mentions that one who eats prohibited food does not join together to form a *zimun*. The *mishna* (*Berakhot* 45a) teaches:

One who has eaten *tevel* (food that was not tithed), or *ma’aser rishon* from which *teruma* has not been removed, or *ma’aser sheni* or sanctified food that has not been redeemed … may not be counted.

Apparently, one who eats prohibited foods may not join with others to form a *zimun*.

            The *Rishonim* debate the reason for this law. The Rambam (*Hilkhot Berakhot* 1:19; see also Rashba, *Berakhot* 45a) explains:

When a person eats a forbidden food – whether consciously or inadvertently – he should not recite a blessing beforehand or afterward. What is implied? If one eats *tevel*, even food that is classified as *tevel* by Rabbinical decree, the first tithe from which *teruma* was not separated, or the second tithe or sanctified foods that were not redeemed in the proper manner, one should not recite a blessing. Needless to say, this applies if one ate meat from an animal that was not ritually slaughtered or was *treifa* or if one drank wine used as a libation for idol worship.

The Rambam maintains that the *mishna* refers to a broader, universal principle: one does not say a *berakha* before or after eating prohibited foods, and therefore one certainly does not say the *zimun*. The Ra’avad (ibid.; see also Rosh 7:2) disagrees, explaining that after eating non-kosher food, one must still say the appropriate blessing. However, since one who eats non-kosher food lacks “*kevi’ut,*” he cannot join others to participate in the *zimun*.

            Interestingly, the Ra’ah (*Berakhot* 45a) notes that the Rambam most likely derived this principle from the Talmud (*Bava Kama* 94a), which states that if one steals wheat, grinds it, and then separates *challa*, he should not say a blessings, as “he is not saying a blessing, but rather being blasphemous.” He adds that eating prohibited foods does not provide *hana’ah* (benefit), but rather *tza’ar* (discomfort), and therefore a blessing is not recited.

The Beit Yosef (196) cites the view of the Ramah, brought by Rabbeinu Yerucham, who rules that even one who eats a prohibited food due to health concerns does not say a blessing. However, the Beit Yosef assumes that the Rambam maintains that one who is permitted to eat prohibited foods due to health concerns should say the appropriate blessings. Interestingly, the Ra’ah suggests that only one who eats foods that are prohibited *mi-derabanan, be*-*heter* (i.e. with permission), should say the appropriate blessing.  This *may* point to a fundamental distinction between food which are Biblically prohibited (*issur cheftza*) and those which and Rabinically prohibited (*issur gavra*).

The Shulchan Arukh (196:1-2) rules:

One who eats something which is prohibited, even it is only prohibited *mi-derabanan*, is not included in the *zimun*, and he should not say a blessing before or after [eating]. If he eats a prohibited food due to [health] danger, he says the blessing.

The Taz (1) adds that one who inadvertently ate non-kosher food should say a *berakha acharona*, although he may not join others to form a *zimun*.

Although all agree that if one ate a prohibited food he may not join with others to form a *zimun*, the *Rishonim* discuss whether three people who cannot eat the same food can join together for a *zimun*. The Talmud (*Arakhin* 4a) teaches:

All may be joined for a *zimun*, even *Kohanim*, *Levi’im*, and *Yisra’elim*. Is that not self-evident? No, it is necessary for the case where the *Kohanim* eat of *teruma* or of consecrated foods, whilst the non-priest eats of profane foods. I might have assumed that since the commoner, even though he desired to eat with the *Kohen* [of the latter's food], he could not do so, therefore he could not be joined to him [for the *zimun*] either, so we are informed that granted that the non-priest may not eat together with the priest, the priest could surely eat together with the non-priest.

The *gemara* explains that when a *Kohen* eats with a *Yisrael*, although the *Yisrael*cannot share the *Kohen’s* food (*teruma*), since the *Kohen* can eat the *Yisrael’s*food, they may join for a *zimun*. The *Rishonim* (see, for example, Tosafot, 45a s.v.*akhal*) rules that if one who is careful not to eat bread baked by a non-Jew (*patakum*) eats with someone who is not stringent, they may join together to join a*zimun*, as the they may both eat from the *pat Yisrael*. However, if none of the people can eat from the food of the other – for example, if they took a vow not to eat of each other’s food – they cannot join together to form a *zimun*.

The Mishna Berura (9) adds that if two of the people are eating meat and one is eating dairy, since the one eating dairy may simply rinse his mouth and then eat meat, they are considered to be eating together and may form a *zimun*. He adds that according to the custom to wait after eating hard cheese before eating meat, if two eat meat and the third eat hard cheese, they may not form a *zimun*. If, however, they began their meal by eating *pareve* bread, they may join together for the *zimun*.

***Am Ha-Aretz* and the Contemporary “*Chiloni*”**

The Talmud (*Berakhot* 47) teaches that one does not invite an “*am ha-aretz*” to be part of the *zimun*. The phrase *am ha-aretz* generally refers to Jews during the late Second Temple period through the Mishnaic era who were either uneducated and/or not scrupulous regarding the performance of certain *mitzvot*. The Talmud relates that not only were there halakhic ramifications which stemmed from the different levels of knowledge and observance, at times, there were even ill feelings and animosity (*Pesachim* 49b) between the groups.

Regarding joining a *zimun*, the Talmud teaches that one should not invite an*am ha-aretz* to join a *zimun*. The *gemara* also attempts to define an *am ha-aretz*:

It has been taught: An *am ha-aretz* is not reckoned in for *zimun*…  Who is an*am ha-aretz*? Anyone who does not eat non-sacred food in ritual cleanness. So said R. Meir. The Rabbis, however, say: Anyone who does not tithe his produce in the proper way. Our Rabbis taught: Who is an *am ha-aretz*? Anyone who does not recite the *Shema* evening and morning. This is the view of R. Eliezer. R. Yehoshua says: Anyone who does not put on *tefillin*. Ben Azzai says: Anyone who has not a fringe (*tzitzit*) on his garment. R. Nathan says: Anyone who has not a *mezuza* on his door. R. Natan b. Yosef says: Anyone who has sons and does not bring them up to the study of the Torah. Others say: Even if one has learned Scripture and Mishna, if he has not served Torah scholars, he is an *am ha-aretz*. R. Huna said: The *halakha*is in accordance with the “Others.”

Furthermore, the *gemara* relates:

Rami b. Chama refused to count to *zimun* R. Menashiah b. Tachalifa, who could repeat Sifra, Sifre, and *halakha*. When Rami b. Chama died, Raba said: Rami b. Chama died only because he would not count R. Menashiah b. Tahalifa for *zimun*. But has it not been taught: Others say that even if one has learned Scripture and Mishnah but has not served Torah scholars, he is an *am ha-aretz*? R. Menashiah b. Tahalifa was different because he used to minister to the Rabbis, and it was Rami b. Chama who did not make proper inquiries about him.

            Why is the *am ha-aretz* excluded from the *zimun*? The Me’iri (*Berakhot* 47b) explains that he is not included in a *zimun* “since this person does not behave appropriately and in a manner in which it is fitting for a Torah scholar to join him, and to sit permanently at his meal.” However the *am ha-aretz* is still obligated to join a *zimun*. Therefore, when sitting with similar people, they are obligated to form a*zimun*.

            Interestingly, the *Rishonim* relate that after the days of the Talmud, this stringency was not observed. Thus, early authorities such as R. Hai Gaon (see Rashba, *Berkahot* 47b) and Rabbeinu Chananel (see Tosafot R. Yehuda 47b) testify that it is common for Torah scholars and the *am ha-aretz* to join together for a*zimun*. Some (R. Shemaya, cited by Tosafot R. Yehuda) even suggest that those who allow a child to join a *zimun* would certainly allow an *am ha-aretz* to participate.

            The *Rishonim*, based upon a passage in *Chagiga* (22a), offer two reasons why this stringency is no longer observed. Some (see Tosafot, *Berakhot* 47b, s.v.*amar*) suggest that we fear that if we separate from the *ame ha-aretz*, ultimately they will separate from the Jewish People, which is not the intended result. Alternatively, the Ri (Tosafot, *Chagiga* 22a, s.v. *ke-man*) explains that it is not proper to hold oneself as a “*talmid chakham*” and to separate from the *am ha-aretz*. In other words, the *Rishonim* differ as to whether we fear that the *am ha-aretz* or the scholar will separate from the rest of the community; both would be unfortunate and undesirable consequences of this stringency.

The Shulchan Arukh (199:3) rules that “nowadays, we join with a complete *am ha-aretz* in forming a *zimun*.”

Despite this lenient ruling of the Shulchan Arukh, the Magen Avraham (199:2) writes that “one who is a *rasha* in public, and transgresses many prohibitions, and so much more so one who has rejected Judasim (*mumar*), is not included in a*zimun*, as this person is no better than the *am ha-aretz* in the time of the Talmud.” The Mishna Berura (199:2) cites this view, and in the Be’ur Halakha (s.v. *am*) he notes that the laws of *zimun* are apparently stricter than the laws pertaining to reciting *devarim she-bikedusha* in a *minyan*. He writes that while regarding *devarim she-bikedusha*, only one who has actually been excommunicated (see Shulchan Arukh 55:11-12) cannot be counted towards a *minyan*; regarding *zimun*, “the obligation comes about because [three people] join together to eat and therefore afterwards they must come together to say *Birkat Ha-Mazon* … and regarding this the Magen Avraham said that if he is a *rasha* and violates the Torah publically it is certainly inappropriate to join with him for a *zimun*.”

Interestingly, he further suggests that this stringency may only apply to a *zimun* of three, while the standards of a *zimun* of ten may be similar to those of *devarim she-bikedusa*, as described by the Shulchan Arukh elsewhere (ibid.). (See Tosafot R. Yehuda and R. Ha-Rosh, who imply that the Talmud refers to a *zimun* of ten as well).

The *Acharonim* discuss whether *nowadays* an individual who does not observe Torah and *mitzvot* may join with others to form a *zimun*. Some *Acharonim* (see, for example, Sefer Sha’arei Berakhah 5:17) maintain that all those who publically violate Torah prohibitions, such as violating the Shabbat and eating non-kosher food, may not join together to form a *zimun*. Alternatively, R. Shlomo Zalman Auerbach (cited in *Sefer Ve-Zot Ha-Berakha*, p. 132; see also *Sefer Piskei Teshuvot* 199:2) asserts that nowadays, most Jews are considered to be “children taken captive among the non-Jews” (*tinok she-nishba*) regarding the *mitzvot*, and therefore one may include them in a *zimun*. Furthermore, even if they do not answer to the *zimun*, we only require that one, in addition to the *mezamen*, must answer to the *zimun*. When there is a *zimun* of ten, only six need to actively answer.

**The “*Mezamen*”**

The Talmud (*Berakhot* 53b) relates that is it a great *mitzva* to lead the *zimun*:

Rav said to his son Chiyya: My son, snatch [the cup of wine] and say grace. And so said R. Huna to his son Rabba: My son, snatch and say grace.

A person should not turn down the opportunity to lead the *zimun* (*Berakhot* 55a; see Mishna Berura 201:14).

 When three or more men eat bread and then form a *zimun*, who should lead the *zimun*? The Talmud (*Megilla* 28a) implies that a *kohen* and a *talmid chakham* (Torah scholar) are generally honored to say *Birkat Ha-Mazon*:

R. Peridah was asked by his disciples: In virtue of what have you reached such a good old age? He replied: Never in my life have I allowed anyone to be before me at the house of study, nor have I said grace before a *kohen*… “Nor did I say grace before a *kohen*” - this implies that this is a meritorious action. But has not R. Yochanan said: If a *talmid chakham* allows even a high priest who is an ignoramus to say grace before him, that *talmid chakham* commits a mortal offence … When R. Yochanan made this remark, he was thinking of equals.

The *gemara* implies that it is proper for a *talmid chakham* to lead the *zimun*. Similarly, it is also proper for a *kohen* to lead, as “there is a *mitzva* to honor *kohanim* in matters of holiness” (see *Gittin* 59b and Magen Avraham 201:4). The *talmid chakham* may allow others to say the *zimun*, but if he is both a *kohen* and a *talmid chakham*, he should lead the *zimun* (see Shulchan Arukh 201:2).

 The *Acharonim* debate whether a *levi* should precede others as well. The Tur (201) derives from the Yerushalmi that a *levi* should also be honored with leading the *zimun*, but the Maharam Mi-Rutenburg disagrees.

 Some *Acharonim* raise other considerations. For example, the Mishna Berura (201:2) records that one should offer a mourner over a parent during the twelve months of mourning to say the *zimun*. This may be similar to the practice of mourners to lead the service and say *kaddish*, as it is especially meritorious to bring others to sanctify God’s name during the period of *aveilut*. The Kaf Ha-Chaim (201:9) cites the Zohar, which mentions that one who said a *dvar Torah* at the meal “should take the cup and say the blessing.”

 The Rema (183:7) writes that one should “give the cup,” i.e. honor with the leading of the *zimun*, a person with a “*tov ayin*.” The Mishna Berura (183:29) explains that the Rema refers to a person who is generous and who spurns improperly obtained money.

**The Guest**

The Talmud (Berakhot 46a) teaches that the guest should be honored with leading the *zimun*:

That expressed by R. Yochanan in the name of R. Shimon b. Yochai: The host breaks bread and the guest says *Birkat Ha-Mazon*. The host breaks bread so that he should do so generously, and the guest says *Birkat Ha-Mazon* so that he should bless the host.

The *gemara* rules that the host should honor the guest with saying *Birkat Ha-Mazon*, which refers to saying the *zimun* and the *Birkat Ha-Mazon* for the entire group, in order that he should bless the host. The Talmud then relates the content of this blessing:

How does he bless him? “May it be God's will that our host should never be ashamed in this world nor disgraced in the next world.” Rabbi added some further items: “May he be very prosperous with all his estates, and may his possessions and ours be prosperous and near a town, and may the Accuser have no influence either over the works of his hands or of ours, and may neither our host nor we be confronted with any evil thought or sin or transgression or iniquity from now and for all time.”

The Beit Yosef (201) cites the *sefer* Ohel Mo’ed, which qualifies this statement: If the guest is not worthy (*hagun*), the host does not honor him with the *zimun*. Furthermore, the Rosh (7:11) adds that if the host wishes to forgo his blessing and lead the *zimun* himself, he is permitted to do so.

Some *Acharonim* (see, for example, Mishna Berura 201:5, who cites the Lechem Chamudot in his notes to the Rosh, Ma’adanei Yom Tov 7:11:9) bemoan that common custom is to omit this blessing and to suffice with a shorter version added after the fourth blessing of *Birkat Ha-Mazon*: “May the Merciful One (*Ha-Rachaman*) send abundant blessing into this house and upon this table at which we have eaten.” Some (see Teshuvot Ve-Hanhagot 2:122) note that the Rambam (*Hilkhot Berakhot* 2:7) writes, “When a guest recites grace in the home of his host, he should add a blessing for his host in this blessing. What should he say? ‘May it be Your will that [my] host not be disgraced in this world or shamed in the world to come’ - He may add to the blessing for [his] host and extend it [as he desires].” The Rambam implies that we are not particular regarding the specific wording of the blessing. It is, however, proper to say the original version, and it is unfortunately omitted in most *birkonim*.

 The *ba’al ha-bayit* (host) may choose to lead the *zimun* himself (Shulchan Arukh 201:1) or to honor any of the guests (Rema, Mishna Berura 4).

 Interestingly, the Arukh Ha-Shulchan (201:3) writes that nowadays, since everyone recites his own *Birkat Ha-Mazon*, each person should say the blessing for the *ba’al ha-bayit* (*Ha-Rachaman*). Furthermore, he suggests that there may therefore no longer be a *mitzva* to let the guest lead the *zimun*, as everyone blesses the host.

**The *Zimun***

The original text of the *Birkat Ha-Zimun* differed slightly from the current *nusach*. The Mishna (*Berakhot* 49b) teaches:

What is the formula for *zimun*? If there are three, he [the one saying grace] says, “Let us bless” (*nevarekh*)... If there are ten, he says, “Let us bless our God” (*nevarekh le-Elokeinu*)… Corresponding too his invocation, the others respond… R. Akiva said: What do we find in the synagogue? Whether there are many or few, the reader says, “Bless ye the Lord…”

The Talmud only relates to the leaders invite, “*Nevarekh she-akhalnu me-shelo*,” and the group’s response, “*Barukh she-akhalnu mi-shelo*.” The *Acharonim* discuss the addition of “*u-vetuvo chayyinu*.”

 The *zimun* commonly said today has additional parts.

First, as the Magen Avraham (182) records in the name of the Zohar, “All matters of *kedusha* require invitation.” It is therefore customary to open the *zimun* with a call to bless, to which the group responds, “*Yehi shem Hashem mevorakh me-ata ve-ad olam*.” The Magen Avraham mentions the Yiddish opening: “*Rabbosai mir vellen bentshen*.” It is customary nowadays to begin with “*Hav lan u-nevarekh*” or “*Rabbotai nevarekh*.”

Second, the leader customarily says “*Birshut*,” asking permission before beginning the actual *zimun* – “*nevarekh she-akhalnu mi-shelo*.” This practice does not appear in the Talmud, but is found is some *Rishonim*. For example, the Shibolei Ha-Leket (13th century) writes:

I found in the name of R. Hai Gaon *zt”l* that if there are two or more, aside from the one leading the *zimun*, the leader should say “*birshut mori*” or “*birshut rabbotai*”... I know that if you agree then *Ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu* [certainly] agrees. And they respond “*Birshut shamayim*,” in other words, we agree that they will agree in Heaven that you are pleasant and proper.

The Shibolei Ha-Leket explains that in essence, the leader is verifying that he has God’s permission to lead the *zimun*.

The Kol Bo (14th century) views the asking for permission not as an expression of religious humility, but rather as proper manners. He writes: “It is an expression of etiquette (*mi-derekh ha-musar*) that one who blesses should [first] ask permission from those older sitting there, and he says *birshut rabbotai nevarekh*, and if he wishes do ask permission from only one, he says *birshut mori* (with the permission of my teacher).”

Finally, the Shibolei Ha-Leket adds (see also Rav Po’alim, OC 4:22) that the *birshut* may simply be calling the participants attention to the *Birkat Ha-Mazon*, so that they should say the blessing with the proper intention.

 According to our practice, it is customary to ask permission of the members of the group (*maranan ve-rabanan*), the host (*birshut ba’al ha-bayit*), a *kohen*, a teacher (*birshut ha-rav*), and even one’s parents (*birshut aba mori ve-ima morati*). Seemingly, there are different types of “*birshut*.” When one says “*birshut ha-kohen*,” one may be asking permission from a *kohen*, who has the right to lead the *zimun* himself; however, saying “*birshut, maranan verbanan*” is merely a statement of humility (see Mishna Berura 167:75). Asking permission from one’s parents appears to be out of respect.

When one says “*birshut ba’al ha-bayit*,” does one ask the host for permission to lead the group because the host himself really has the right to lead the *Birkat Ha-Mazon*, or simply out of respect and proper etiquette? A difference between these two understandings may be whether it is appropriate to add “*birshut ba’alat ha-bayit*.” On the one hand, since the *ba’alat ha-bayit* cannot lead the *zimun*, there may be no value in asking for her “*reshut*.” On the other hand, if “*birshut*” is a gesture of respect and gratitude, seemingly this would apply to the “*ba’alt ha-bayit*” as well. Of course, this is certainly true according to those Sephardim who insert “*birshut Shabbat malkta*,” or on Sukkot, “*birshut shiva ushpizin ila’in*,” which proves that the “*birshut*” serves as a polite gesture and not simply for halakhic reasons. In many circles, it is customary to say *birshut ba’alat ha-bayit* as well.

When eating with ten or male males, the name of God (*Elokeinu*) is added to the *zimun*. Although some are accustomed to slightly raise their body when the name of God in mentioned, this is considered to be a “*middat chasidut*” and not obligatory (see Piskei Teshuvot 192:4).

The Tur (192) mentions that upon finishing the *zimun*, one says “*barukh hu u-mevarukh shemo*” before beginning *Birkat Ha-Mazon*. R. Moshe Isserles (Darkhei Moshe 192:2) notes that this custom does not appear in the Rif, Rambam, or Rosh, but suggests that this may be in order to separate between the *zimun* and the *Birkat Ha-Mazon*. The Perisha (192) notes that although his teacher R. Shlomo Luria (Maharshal) did not say this line, others record that the participants should end the *zimun* by answering the leader and saying “*barukh hu u-mevarukh shemo*” (see Mishna Berura 192:4). The Arukh Ha-Shulchan (187:2) opposes this practice and considers it a mistake.

As we mentioned previously, nowadays, Ashkenazim should say the entire first blessing out load, as that it considered to be part of the *zimun*. Sephardim consider only the introduction to be the *zimun*. Some insist that the leader say the entire *Birkat Ha-Mazon* out loud, as the original intention of the *zimun* was to say the *Birkat Ha-Mazon* for the entire group.