**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**THE LAWS OF THE BERAKHOT**

**Rav David Brofsky**

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Dedicated in loving memory of Yehuda Nattan Yudkowsky *z”l* whose yahrzeit is 17 Cheshvan

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**Shiur # 40: Interruptions (1)**

**Introduction**

This week, we will begin our discussion of “interruptions” (*hefsekim*) that may or may or may not invalidate a blessing. We will investigate three types of interruptions: during a blessing, after a blessing but before eating, and during the meal. This *shiur* will focus on interruptions during the blessing, between the blessing and eating the food, and between *netilat yadayim* and eating bread.

**Interruptions During the Blessing**

The Rambam (*Hilkhot Tefilla* 10:16) writes:

One who began reciting the *Shemoneh Esrei* … should not interrupt his prayers [to] respond to *Kedusha* with [the congregation]. Similarly, one should not respond *Amen, yehei shemei rabba mevarach...* while in the midst of *Shemoneh Esrei*. Needless to say, [this also applies regarding responding "*Amen*"] to other blessings.

R. Yosef Karo, in his Kesef Mishna (ad loc.), adds that “since one is not permitted to interrupt during prayer even between blessings, how much more so one is not permitted to interrupt in the middle of any of the other blessings, such as the *birkot ha-nehenin* and the *birkot ha-mitzvot*.”

R. Avraham Danzig (1748–1820), in his Chayei Adam (5:13), cites this ruling and insists that if one does interrupt during a blessing, he must repeat the blessing even if he interrupted for the sake of the meal. He asserts that this principle applies to “short blessings,” but not to “long blessings.” Regarding short blessings, “when one interrupts between saying *Barukh ata Hashem* and the conclusion of the blessing, there is no way for the beginning of the blessing to connect to the conclusion of the blessing.” He questions, however, whether one who interrupts in order to answer *Amen* to a blessing or to *Kaddish* or *Kedusha* must also repeat the blessing, as “one might say that he is merely adding praise for God [in the middle of the blessing]; or [alternatively, one might say] that they [the two parts of the blessing] still do not join.” Finally, the Chayei Adam (5:14) questions whether one who begins a blessing and realizes that he is unsure how to conclude may interrupt and ask someone. The Bi’ur Halakha (66:3) cites and discusses this Chayei Adam.

Not only should one not speak while saying a blessing, but one should also refrain from other activities. For example, one should not work while saying a blessing (Yerushalmi, *Berakhot* 2:5; see Shulchan Arukh 183:12 and 191:3). One might assume that this is due to the concern that this constitutes an interruption. The Taz (191:1), however, explains:

One should not mistakenly think that this applies to *Birkat Ha-Mazon* but not to other blessings or prayers. Rather, it certainly applies to all *mitzvot* (*milei de-mitzvot*) [that] one should not engage in another conversation… and the fact that one should not do them [*mitzvot*] and engage in other things, certainly [this applies to] to all. This is what is referred to in our Torah as “and if you treat Me as happenstance” (*Vayikra* 26:21), meaning, even if you follow in my ways with the performance of *mitzvot*, as this [performing other actions at the same time] demonstrates that one performs the *mitzvot* without intention, but rather in a random and haphazard manner. It seems to me that this includes not learning at that moment… and even if one is engaged in one *mitzva* while performing another *mitzva*, that is not proper; rather, one pushes aside the other.

The Taz maintains that it is simply improper to engage in another activity while performing a *mitzva* or reciting a blessing, even if that activity is another *mitzva*. The Shulchan Arukh Ha-Rav (183:14) warns that one should not do even a small task while performing a *mitzva*. One should not even motion, gesture, or engage in other non-verbal communications while saying a blessing. (See Sha’arei Teshuva 104:1, who permits gesturing in order to quiet a child who is disturbing one’s prayer.)

Unlike one who talks during a blessing, one who engages in any of the activities described above while saying a blessing does not have to repeat the blessing.

One should also avoid pausing in the middle of the blessing, but if one did pause, the blessing is still valid. (See Chayei Adam 5:12, who discusses whether one must repeat the blessing if he pauses because he becomes halakhically unable to conclude the blessing, such as one who experiences incontinence or discovers that the place is filthy and unfit for a blessing.)

**Interruptions Before Eating**

After reciting the blessing, one must not speak until eating the food. The Talmud (*Berakhot* 40a) discusses whether and when one who interrupts between the blessing and eating must repeat the blessing.

Rav said: [If the host says to his guests,] “Take, the blessing has been said; take, the blessing has been said,” he [the host] need not say the blessing [again]. If he said [between the blessing and the eating], “Bring salt, bring relish,” he must say the blessing [again]. R. Yochanan, however, said that even if he said, “Bring salt, bring relish,” the blessing need not be repeated. If he said, “Mix fodder for the oxen, mix fodder for the oxen,” he must repeat the blessing. R. Sheshet, however, said that even if he said, “Mix fodder for the oxen,” he need not repeat. For R. Yehuda said in the name of Rav: A man is forbidden to eat before he gives food to his beast, as it says, “And I will give grass in your fields for your cattle, and then you shall eat and be satisfied” (*Devarim* 11:15).

The Talmud assumes that if one interrupted for no reason, one must say the blessing again. If, however, one’s interruption relates to the meal, the blessing is not repeated. These Sages debate what interruption is considered to be related to the meal and therefore does not constitute an interruption. Accordingly, the Shulchan Arukh (167:6) rules:

One should eat immediately and not speak between the *berakha* and eating. If he spoke, he most repeat the blessing unless he spoke regarding that which he said the blessing. For example, if he said the blessing over the bread and before he ate he said, “Bring the salt or relish, give the food to this person, give the food to the animal, etc.,” one need not repeat the blessing.

Therefore, if one interrupts after saying the blessing and asks for salt or asks his guest to wash his hands, one need not repeat the blessing. The Rema adds that preferably, one should not interrupt at all.

The Chayei Adam (5:11) asks whether even a word or two are considered to be a *hefsek*. In his longer commentary, the Nishmat Adam (12), he questions whether an interruption that is shorter than “*tokh kedei dibbur*” (the amount of time is takes to say “*shalom alekha rebbe*”) constitutes an interruption. He is inclined to believe that even a short interruption is a *hefsek* and one must say the blessing again. The Mishna Berura (167:36) rules that even one word is considered an interruption.

Not only is one not permitted to speak before eating, he may not answer *Amen* or respond to *Kaddish* or *Kedusha* (Mishna Berura 206:12). The *Acharonim* disagree regarding whether one who responded to *Kaddish* before eating must repeat the blessing (see Bi’ur Halakha 25:10 and Kaf Ha-Chaim 167:61).

One should not interrupt until one swallows some of the food. The Mishna Berura (167:35; see also Shulchan Arukh Ha-Rav 167:9) questions whether one who speaks after chewing, but before swallowing, must repeat the blessing. In the Bi’ur Halakha (167, s.v. *ve-lo*), he cites *Acharonim* who debate this question. He suggests that one follow the view of the Chayei Adam (49), who rules that certainly one who swallows the taste in his mouth from the chewing does not need to repeat the blessing.

Due to the concern of *hefsek*, one should prepare the food to be eaten before saying the blessing. For example, one should crack a nut before saying the blessing (Shelah, cited by Magen Avraham 206:4). Similarly, one should open and remove food from a package, wash it, and ensure that it is the proper temperature before saying the *berakha*.

The fear of *hefsek* also affects the manner in which the blessing is recited. For example, as we discussed previously, Tosafot (*Berakhot* 39b, s.v. *ve-hilkhata*) testifies that 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*). 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.”

**Talking Between *Netilat Yadayim* and *Ha*-*Motzi***

We learned above that one must not interrupt during a blessing or between the blessing and eating the food. Similarly, one should eat immediately after performing *netilat yadayim*.

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. Although 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*, the *Yerushalmi* (*Berakhot* 1:1) 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 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 at times indicate haughtiness and may result in the degradation of the Torah (*bizayon ha-Torah*)! He concludes:

It is good to protect his hands and not to engage in other activities lest he will touch things that will require him to wash his hands [again], and therefore one who makes a fence and a hedge (*gader ve-siyyag*) and does not 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…

The Shulchan Arukh (166) 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* upon hearing *berakhot* recited by others.

Next week, we will discuss interruptions during the meal.