**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**THE LAWS OF THE BERAKHOT**

**Rav David Brofsky**

**Shiur #54: *Zimun* (3)**

**Women and *Zimun***

Last week, we studied the obligation to participate in a *zimun* and the prohibition of separating from a group of three, and even from a group of ten or more. We discussed the point at which a person is considered to have eaten with a group, and thus obligated in the group *zimun*. We also questioned whether one may forgo the reciting of the *shem* *Hashem* in a *zimun* of over ten people in order to form a smaller *zimun* of three, as well as whether one may even forgo a *zimun* of three in extenuating circumstances. These questions are extremely common and relevant, especially when attending a wedding, *sheva berakhot*, or other festive meals.

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. This week, we will discuss whether women may join or form a *zimun*.

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

Women are obligated to recite *Birkat Ha-Mazon*. As we will learn in a future *shiur*, the Talmud (*Berakhot* 20b) 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* (as we will discuss next week).

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* 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*. 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*, as we will discuss in a separate *shiur*, 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? 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 but should rather say the *zimun* himself, 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.

Next week we will continue our discussion of those who join the *zimun*.