**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**THE LAWS OF THE BERAKHOT**

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***Shiur* #58: *Zimun* (6)**

**The *Mezamen***

This week we finish our study of the laws of *zimun*. (I collected and compiled the shiurim into one [file](http://etzion.org.il/en/shiur-zimun). Enjoy!)

**Introduction**

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).

This week, we will discuss whether certain people precede others in leading the *zimun*. We will also discuss the formula of the *Birkat Ha-Zimun* and its development throughout the years.

**Who Should Lead the *Zimun*?**

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.

With this, we conclude our discussion of the *Birkat Ha-Zimun*. Next week, we will begin our study of the *Birkat Ha-Mazon*.