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Halachos of Mayim Acharonim

Beha'aloscha 5784

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## Mayim Acharonim Is a Chiyuv

### Reasons for Mayim Acharonim

1. There is a chiyuv to wash the hands at the end of a meal, before Birkas HaMazon (גמ' חולין דף ק"ה ע"א, שו"ע או"ח סי' קפ"א ס"א). Several reasons are given for this, as will be explained.
2. **Clean hands.** The Gemara (שם) says the reason is so that one's hands are not dirty with food for Birkas HaMazon. We wash them with water so that they will be fit for the bracha.
3. **Sedom salt.** Another reason given in the Gemara is that salt is used during a meal, particularly at the end of the meal, as the Gemara says (ברכות דף מ' ע"א), "After anything you eat, eat salt." There is a concern that there was "Sedom salt" – salt which comes from the Dead Sea area – mixed in. This is possibly dangerous, for if one touches his eyes after touching Sedom salt, there is a concern he will blind himself, ח"ו, (גמ' שם ע"ב).
4. **"היייתם קדושים"** The Gemara also says that it is for kedusha: "היייתם קדושים" – *this is mayim rishonim*; "היייתם קדושים" – *this is mayim acharonim*; "כי קדוש אני" – *this is fine oil*; "אני ה' אלקיכם" – *this is [the] bracha* (ברכות דף נ"ג ע"ב). In other words, before Birkas HaMazon one must purify himself as he does with netilas yodayim before the meal. Although the posuk is just an asmachta (תוס' חולין דף ק"ה ע"א ד"ה מים), it still shows that the reason is for kedusha.
5. **Based on sod.** The Zohar HaKadosh also explains that there is a great *sod* in mayim acharonim: "היצוניים" [harmful spiritual forces] chase a person to harm him, and mayim acharonim gives them their portion, causing them to leave him alone and not draw him after them (זוה"ק תרומה קנ"ד ע"ב, זוה"ק רות דף פ"ז). It is as if the water used is given to the sitra achra, which calms it and causes it to stop chasing the person. Hence, the poskim write that even if the other reasons are not so relevant today (below, 16), one should still make sure to do mayim acharonim for the Kabbalistic reasons based on *sod* (מג"א, מהרש"ל, ברכי יוסף הובאו במ"ב סק"ב).

### Does Not Have Mayim Acharonim

6. If one does not have mayim acharonim, the halacha is the same as when one does not have water for netilas yodayim before a meal, i.e., he must go look for water – he must travel four mil forward, on the way, or one mil backward, out of the way (מ"ב סק"ב). If there is no water at all, one should clean his hands with anything that can clean them (כף החיים סק"ז), e.g., a towel, napkin, or tissue.
7. **Gets water mid-Birkas HaMazon.** If one gets water later, in the middle of Birkas HaMazon, he should pause and wash his hands. This is not an interruption in Birkas HaMazon since it is for the mitzva and it is a small action (מור"ר בשו"ת שבט הקהתי ח"א סי' צ"ד). Also, it is better to wait before bentsching to be able to wash mayim acharonim than to start bentsching with the mezamen and the tzibbur or the Rebbe (שו"ת שבט הקהתי ח"ג סי' פ"א). Even if one bentsched without washing mayim acharonim and afterward he got water, he should still wash for the reason of Sedom salt (3).

## Ruach Ra'ah on Mayim Acharonim

### On the Ground Where People Walk

8. Ruach ra'ah comes onto water used for mayim acharonim, and there is a concern one might be harmed if he walks over it. Thus, mayim acharonim is done into a dish, not over the ground (שו"ע קפ"א ס"ב). It seems ruach ra'ah does not come onto water in a dish.

9. **Under the table.** However, one may wash onto the ground where people do not walk. Thus, one may wash under the table. Even though a table is sometimes moved, usually the water is already evaporated by then (מ"ב סק"ד). That notwithstanding, there are those who are careful to wash mayim acharonim specifically into a dish (ליקוטי מהרי"ח, קב הישר פ"ג בשם השל"ה, הגר"א במעשה רב אות פ"ד).
10. **Flooring.** Some poskim say it is only a problem to wash onto the actual ground, i.e., the earth, but if something is over the ground, e.g., one is in a house with flooring, there is no problem, as ruach ra'ah does not come (מג"א סק"ב, פמ"ג שם).
11. However, others say one may not even wash over flooring (לבוש). Thus, l'chatchila one should be careful to refrain from this if possible (ע"פ מש"כ בשער הציון סק"ז).

### Removing the Mayim Acharonim Dish from the Table

12. It is proper to remove the dish with the used mayim acharonim water from the table before Birkas HaMazon, as one should l'chatchila avoid saying words of kedusha in front of water with ruach ra'ah (כף שע"ת) (החיים סק"ה), as we find regarding netilas yodayim in the morning (הסטיפלר, ארחות רבינו ח"א עמ' פ"ג) (סי' ד' סק"ה בשם ברכ"י).
13. However, if it is hard to do it, there is no need to remove it from the table, as strictly speaking, it is not a problem to make a bracha in front of water with ruach ra'ah (שול"ת שיה יצחק או"ח סי' ב' בשם החת"ס) (לגבי נט"י שחרית, פסק"ת סי' ב' בשם בעל דברי חיים, שו"ת באר משה ח"ה סי' ל"ט).

### Wiping Mouth and Mustache

14. Some hold one should not wipe his mouth or mustache with hands moist with mayim acharonim water to wash off the grime from the food, as there is ruach ra'ah on them (כף החיים סוף סק"א) (בן איש חי פ' שלח אות ה', כף החיים סוף סק"א).
15. However, many people do clean residual grime from food around their mouths with the mayim acharonim on their hands (רש"י יומא) (דף פ"ג ע"ב ד"ה מים אחרונים הרגו). This is based on the concept that ruach ra'ah only comes onto the water that dripped off the hands. That water is given to the היצוניים based on *sod* (5), not the water that remains on the fingers. This is certainly true according to the assumption of many poskim that ruach ra'ah is only on water spilled onto the ground, not water in a dish (8). Many gedolim did this (שו"ת התעוררות תשובה ח"א סי' פ"ג).

## Halachos Based On the Different Reasons

### Nowadays

16. Some of the above reasons obligating mayim acharonim do not apply today. Accordingly, the poskim discuss whether there is a chiyuv to wash mayim acharonim in various situations.
17. **Sedom salt.** We do not have Sedom salt among us today. Thus, some do not wash mayim acharonim (ומ"ב סק"ב). However, the Gra's view is that Sedom salt is still relevant today. Thus, mayim acharonim is a chiyuv even today (הובא במ"ב שם).
18. **Cleanliness.** People today are not usually careful to wash the grime from the food off their hands at the end of a meal. This is likely because people today eat with a knife, spoon, and fork, so their hands do not get as dirty from eating (מור וקציעה להיעב"ץ). Hence, their hands are not considered filthy to the extent that they would not be able to say Birkas HaMazon in a state of cleanliness. For this reason too some people do not wash mayim acharonim.

19. The Gra's view with respect to this too is that even today our hands get dirty, so mayim acharonim is a chiyuv (שם).
20. **Istenis.** If one is an istenis and normally washes his hands after eating because he is very particular about cleanliness, his hands are considered to be dirty at the end of a meal, and even today he must wash before Birkas HaMazon according to all poskim (שו"ע ס"י).
21. **Based on sod.** Even if the above reasons do not apply today, this halacha certainly still applies based on sod. Thus, everyone should be careful about mayim acharonim even today (בשם המקובלים, (מהרש"ל, ברכי יוסף הובא במ"ב סק"ב).

**Women's Chiyuv in Mayim Acharonim**

22. Strictly speaking, women must also wash mayim acharonim. Thus, the baal habayis should urge his family to do it (ערוה"ש סוף ס"ה). They are also included in the chiyuv of cleanliness for a bracha (above, 2), and they should also be careful about the concern of Sedom salt (3) ש"ת שלמת חיים השלם סי קע"ז, הגרש"א בהליכות בת ישראל פ"ג הע"י א, (הגר"ש"א הע"י על חולין קה;; הזאת הברכה פ"ל, מו"ד בש"ת שבת הקהתי ח"א סי צג).
23. However, some say the common custom is for women not to wash their hands. This is because hands today do not get as dirty as they once did (18); many poskim say the concern of Sedom salt does not apply today (17); and the main reason to be careful is for Kabbalistic reasons (21) and only men took it upon themselves to act according to the Kabbalistic reason, not women (סי כ"ג).
24. **Female istenis.** However, if a woman's hands got dirty during a meal or if a woman is an istenis and always washes her hands after eating, she must wash mayim acharonim according to all poskim (20).
25. **Children.** It is proper to train chinuch-aged children to wash mayim acharonim (שמירת שבת לבעל דברי יואל עמ"ק ט, הגר"ח קנייבסקי אוצר המים) (פ"ד הע"י ט).

**How to Wash Mayim Acharonim**

**Washing with a Utensil**

26. **Sticking hands into water.** One should not stick his hands into a utensil with water to wash them. He should pour water onto his hands so that it falls into a dish (מ"ב סק"ג).
27. **Under the faucet.** Strictly speaking, one may wash with water from the faucet. This washes the hands well, and a utensil is not specifically required (מ"ב סק"א). However, some are careful based on the Kabbalistic reason to specifically wash their hands using a utensil (above, 9). Also, based on the derivation of the chiyuv of mayim acharonim from "והייתם קדושים" (4) "והייתם קדושים" שלטי גיבורים הובא בשער (4) "והייתם קדושים", it is preferable, if possible, to wash mayim acharonim using a utensil, not directly under the faucet.
28. **Into the sink.** Strictly speaking, one may wash mayim acharonim into the sink [with or without a utensil (see 27 above)]; the main thing to avoid is washing over the ground where people walk (8) (לציון ח"ב פ"ג). Still, some are careful, based on Kabbala, to specifically wash into a dish, not into the sink (23 הע"י א, פסקי תשובות סי קפ"א).
29. However, one should be careful that the mayim acharonim water used to wash his hands does not spill onto dishes in the sink that are used with food, as that presents a danger due to the ruach ra'ah on the water. If mayim acharonim water was spilled onto dishes, they should be rinsed well before being used [כפה"ח סק"ח] [some say three times, some say seven times (טעמי מנהגים ציצית אות ב'), and some say eleven times (בשם מוה"ר"א מבעלזא, שערי שלום על קיצושו"ע סי מ"ז)].

**Washing Both Hands**

30. One must wash both his hands, with the water going from a utensil into a dish. It is not enough to wash one hand and use it to moisten the other hand – they must both be washed directly and specifically (בן איש חי שם). This is contrary to the practice of many people who wet the fingers of one hand and then transfer the moisture onto the second hand.

**Dish into Which Mayim Acharonim Is Poured**

31. Some people specifically use a simple, inexpensive dish to pour the mayim acharonim into based on the Kabbalistic reason for mayim acharonim, that the water that enters the dish is the portion of the sitra achra (above, 5), so there is no reason to show honor for this water (א"א ב"א בוטשאטש, ליקוטי מהר"ח). Some are careful that it should at least not be silver (בעל דברי חיים, דרכי חיים הנהגות הגה"ק מצאנז) but most people are not particular about this.

**How Much of the Fingers Must Be Washed?**

32. **Second knuckle.** The fingers must be washed until the second knuckle (מ"ב סק"י), and the thumb until the first knuckle (מ"ב סק"י). More than that does not require washing, as the grime from the food usually does not reach higher (מ"ב סק"י). If the fingers did get dirty above the second knuckle, one must also wash above there (שם).
33. **The entire fingers.** Some hold l'chatchila one should wash his hands until the ends of the fingers, where they connect to the palm (ביאור הגר"א). L'chatchila if one has enough water it is proper to do this to satisfy all opinions (פרק עד פרק).
34. **Just the fingertips.** The poskim write that some are lax and only wash the fingertips, with the water not even reaching the first knuckles. Sometimes people just touch the water with their fingertips, leaving their hands as dirty as they originally were – this does not fulfill the chiyuv of mayim acharonim at all (מ"ב סק"י). Thus, one much make sure to at least wash until the second knuckles (above, 32); it is not enough just to moisten the fingertips.

**Amount of Water**

35. **Revi'is.** Some hold one must wash mayim acharonim with a revi'is of water, just as one needs a revi'is for netilas yodayim before the seuda (הגר"א במעשה רב אות פ"ד הובא במ"ב סק"ט).
36. **Less than a revi'is.** However, most poskim hold one does not need a revi'is even l'chatchila (הובאו במ"ב שם, חזו"א בארהות) (ב"י, א"ר בשם כל בו, הובאו במ"ב שם, חזו"א בארהות) (רבינו ח"א עמ"ק פ"ג שאין לסמוך על מה שהובא מהגר"א נהג כן).
37. **Minimal water.** Some are careful based on the Kabbalistic reason (above, 5) to specifically not use a lot of water so as not to give a big portion to the חיצונים (דרכי חיים ושלום אות) (חיצונים (ש"ג). However, there must be at least enough water to wash until the second knuckles (above, 32); moistening the fingertips is not enough (above, 34).

**No Interruptions after Mayim Acharonim**

38. **Waiting.** L'chatchila one should not delay between mayim acharonim and Birkas HaMazon to whatever extent possible, as "immediately after netilas yodayim is the bracha" (טור סי קס"ו ע"פ) (הגמ' ברכות דף מ"ב ע"א). Thus, l'chatchila one should not wait longer than the amount of time it takes to walk twenty-two amos – twelve or fourteen seconds (אוצר הלכות סי קפ"א אות י"ט).
39. **Speaking.** One should also not interrupt with speech, not even a single word (מ"ב סי קס"ו ע"פ). Some say that two or three words is not an interruption (מ"ב סי קס"ו ע"פ).
40. **Words of Torah.** One should not even interrupt with words of Torah (מ"ב סק"ד). However, if one usually says words of Torah at the table but forgot until after washing mayim acharonim, he can be meikel to say words of Torah (סדר היום). Even so, he can fulfill this by saying the halacha "מים אחרונים חובה" (בן איש חי פ' שלח אות ז'), which is only three words.
41. **Shir haMekilat.** L'chatchila, one should say שיר המעלות or שיר הנרות בבל על before washing mayim acharonim so as not to make an interruption. B'dieved, one may also say it afterward (חיד"א). Similarly, the cup of wine for the one bentsching should l'chatchila be poured before mayim acharonim so as not to interrupt between washing and bentsching (מ"א בהקדמה לסי קפ"א).
42. **Interrupted.** If one interrupted after mayim acharonim, he should l'chatchila wash mayim acharonim again (קצות סי קע"ט ס"ה, השלחן שם).

**Miscellaneous Halachos**

**Washing for a Bracha during the Meal**

43. The poskim write that based on the reason for mayim acharonim of cleanliness for Birkas HaMazon (above, 2), the same applies when making a bracha mid-meal, e.g., on wine during the meal, a bracha on a fruit dessert at the end of the meal, or the like (see Issue 298), and one should wash his hands before making the bracha. Just as Birkas HaMazon must be said with cleanliness, so too every bracha requires cleanliness. Hands are usually assumed to be clean for a bracha, but just like mayim acharonim is a chiyuv during a meal for cleanliness, it is also a chiyuv for other brachos during a meal (מ"ב סק"ג).
44. Nowadays that people's hands are usually clean even during meals, there is no chiyuv to wash the hands before making a bracha unless one knows with certainty that his hands are in fact dirty. However, an istenis who washes his hands at the end of meals (above, 20) must also wipe his hands before making a bracha on food in the middle of the meal (43) (שם).

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