


# HALOCHOSCOPE



**This week's question:**

**Is it appropriate for a group of people eating a meal together, to answer *amein* to each others' *brocha* on the bread, some of them before partaking of their own bread?**

**The issues:**

- A) *Tekef linetilah seuda*, one should eat right after washing *netilas yadayim***
- B) *Hefsek*, interrupting with words that are not relevant**
- C) The importance of saying *amein***
- D) *Berov am hadras melech*, the advantage of a group *mitzvah* or *brocha***

**A) *Tekef linetilah seudah***

The Talmud debates the order of pouring one's cup of wine and washing *netilas yadayim*. In addition to the main argument, which involves the laws of ritual impurity, Bais Hillel, who require pouring the wine first, invoke this rule: *netilas yadayim* should immediately precede the *seudah*. The interruption of pouring wine violates this rule.

There is another Talmudic dictum: there are three *tekifos*, things that must be done in immediate proximity: *semicha*, leaning on an offering, must be done immediately before slaughtering it; *geulah*, the *brocha ga'al Yisroel* must be said immediately before the *amidah* prayer; *tekef linetilas yadayim brocha*, washing the hands must be immediately before the '*brocha*.' Why are there not four *tekifos*, including *tekef linetilas yadayim seuda*? Some answer that this list does not include those with well known sources, only the slightly more obscure ones. Another view is that the list includes those that have a Scriptural connection. In one view, the word '*brocha*' in the list could mean one of two *brochos*. The list could be saying that one must not interrupt between the *netilas yadayim* of *mayim acharonim*, washing at the end of the meal, and *bircas hamazon*. It could refer to the *brocha rishona*, *hamotzie*. It could also refer to both. Thus, this is one of the *tekifos*. Some say that if the *tekifah* refers to *mayim acharonim*, there is no rule that one may not interrupt between *netilas yadayim* and *hamotzie*, provided that one sits at the table. One may not go about a different activity, such as getting wine and pouring or mixing it.

One answer distinguishes between the *tekifos*. The three on the list must be juxtaposed immediately. The fourth *tekifa* refers to avoiding an interruption. Pouring wine is considered an interruption. However, one need not say *hamotzie* immediately. Some point out that there is a time limit for the three, based on the time taken to walk a certain distance. One of the offerings had to have its *semicha* at the gate of the temple courtyard, and then needed to be slaughtered in another location in the courtyard. The distance was 22 cubits. Therefore, any break taking longer than the time taken to walk this distance is no longer considered *tekef*. Some say that the debate between *Bais Shamai* and *Bais Hillel* is about *kiddush*. By making *kiddush* between *netilas yadayim* and *hamotzie*, one

would be making a major interruption. Smaller interruptions are not an issue. Therefore, it does not belong with the other three *tekifos*. The question is, why is *kiddush* a major interruption? Is it because of how long it takes, or because it is an extended *brocha*? Or is it because *kiddush* is a separate item, having little connection to the *netilas yadayim* and the *hamotzie*? Therefore, one should not digress with it! In another view, *kiddush* is not considered an interruption, since it is merely a *brocha*. The word for pouring wine really refers to mixing it with water. When wine was used as a beverage, it was diluted with warm or cold water. This was a major activity.

The questions about the meaning of this *tekef* and reconciling it with the others, coupled with its being added as a secondary argument, lead the poskim to debate whether it applies *halachically*. Some say that it is an ideal. It should not be ignored when instituting the order of the *seudah*. However, it is not imperative *halacha*. Some say that it is not conclusive. Others maintain that it is indeed *halacha*. Regarding *kiddush*, some poskim say that if one washes first, he must recite *kiddush* on bread. Others maintain that the correct *minhag* is to wash before *kiddush* on wine, and then to say *hamotzie*. The poskim conclude that it is highly recommended to avoid interruption (during the week). Nonetheless, if one did not say *hamotzie* immediately, he need not wash again. If one made a major interruption, he has been *masiach daas*, losing attention to the cleanliness of his hands. In this case, he would be required to wash again. [See Brochos 42a 52b, Poskim. Tur Sh Ar OC 166 271:12, commentaries.]

## **B) Hefsek**

One may not interrupt the recital of any *brocha* or *tefilah*. There are certain specific exceptions to this rule, and the rule does not apply equally to all *brochos* and *tefilos*. For example, *shemone esrai* is considered so intense that one may not interrupt for anything short of *pikuach nefesh*, danger to life. During *krias shema* one may interrupt for greetings. However, there is a hierarchy of greetings, depending on the prominence of the person being greeted and on whether one is initiating or responding. There is also a difference between the middle of a passage and the points between the passages. There is a similar hierarchy to the interruptions permitted for a congregational response. When *amein* is not a congregational response, but for a private *brocha*, it is on a lower level.

Between a *brocha* before food and eating, one may not interrupt, unless he needs to ask for something related to the eating. If one did interrupt, he has broken the connection between the *brocha* and the eating. He is required to repeat the *brocha*. The same applies to the *brocha* before a *mitzvah*. Generally, a *hefsek* breaks the continuity. In cases where it is permitted, it is considered as though the continuity has not been broken. Usually, this is due to the insignificance of the interruption, or to the level of importance, or lack thereof, of the continuity. In addition, by interrupting one often causes *hesech daas*, a distraction from the matter at hand. This can be conscious, subconscious, or overt. By doing something totally unrelated, such as holding a conversation or getting involved in an activity, one loses his focus on the matter at hand. By sleeping in the middle, or by allowing himself to be distracted, he also loses the focus.

*Hefsek* can fracture the continuity. Sometimes this invalidates the activity or *brocha*, especially if it requires completeness. *Hefsek* can be considered *hesech daas*, a distrac-

tion. This can be considered a break in concentration, and would invalidate something, depending on how essential the concentration is to the activity. It could be considered a competing activity. One could not fulfill his obligation to the first activity while occupied in the second. The Talmud describes three types of *hefsek*. Speaking or communicating with signals and gestures is the most common *hefsek*. A break of silence can be considered a *hefsek*. Preoccupation with a separate activity is also *hefsek*.

In our case, there is a consensus that a minor *hefsek* will not invalidate the *netilas yadayim*. It might interrupt the *tekifah*. The question is whether responses that are somewhat connected to the *seudah* may be said without invalidating the *tekifah*. If they may not, ideally, one should rather not initiate a round of *ameins* that some people will answer before eating the bread. If the *ameins* are deemed benign in this respect, it would be a positive ideal to have people respond many times.

Even between *hamotzie* and eating, some do not consider answering *amein* to another's *hamotzie* an interruption. Some allow this *lechaltchilah*, ideally. Some even consider *amein* on a different *brocha* no *hefsek*. Based on this, in our situation, where the listeners are not in-between their *brocha rishona* and the food, but might interrupt the *tekifah*, it seems that this should be permitted. [See Brochos 12a-13b 30b 32b-33a 40a Yuma 19b Psachim 100b-102b Menachos 36a Chulin 87a, Poskim. Tur Sh Ar OC 25:9 63:6 65:1 104:5-6 167:6 183:6 193:1 202:1 206:3 213:3 271:13-15 424:3, commentaries.]

### **C) Amein**

The word *amein* occurs in the Torah. *Amein* as a response includes three meanings: as a response to a *shvua*, oath, administered by a judge, it means that the respondent agrees to be bound by the oath; as part of a negotiated deal, it means that the respondent undertakes to do what the other person has just said; as a response to a prayer, it means that the respondent agrees and also wishes to see the realization of the wish. In the context of a *brocha* or *kaddish*, it is this last meaning that is expected of the respondents. In addition to agreeing to the wishes, it indicates the 'approval' of the respondent to the praises, both of which are based on the same basic idea. *Bircas hanehenin*, said before eating, are praises as well as requesting permission to benefit from the food that Hashem granted. This meaning of *amein* is connected to a *passuk* in the Torah. However, it is unclear whether this means that it is a Scriptural obligation or concept, or Rabbinical.

Under normal circumstances, answering *amein* is presumed by the poskim to be an obligation and not an option. Assuming that what we have discussed in the last section is true, in our case this obligation applies. *Amein* is very powerful. It is possible that the respondent is considered greater than the one reciting the *brocha*! One who responds *amein* properly will have the gates of *Gan Eden* opened for him. Hashem finds nothing greater than the *amein* answered by Yisroel. One should try to have others respond *amein* by saying his *brochos* loudly. In this way, the one reciting the *brocha* gains some of the merit as well. The respondent should concentrate on the meaning of the *brocha* and his *amein*. [See Brochos 32b 45a-b 47a 53b Shabbos 119b Devarim Raba 7:1 Sifri 32:3, Poskim. Tur Sh Ar OC 124:6-12 215:2, commentaries.]

### **D) Berov am**

There is one additional issue in our case. Since the group is assembled together, and

they will all be eating the same food, the question arises: is it preferable for them to recite individual *brochos*, or should they rather all hear the *brocha* recited by one person?

One need not recite a *bircas hanehenin* himself. He may fulfill his obligation by listening to another person saying it, in accordance with the principle of *shomaia keoneh*, one who hears is considered the same as one who says it. However, a knowledgeable person should not rely on this, except in unusual circumstances. It is generally considered better to perform a *mitzvah* personally than through the help of another.

On the other hand, if it is a large group of people doing the *mitzvah* together, there is an added advantage. The term used is based on a *passuk*, *berov am hadras melech*, the glory of a king is measured by the multitudes of his people. There are three ways this is manifested. A *mitzvah* can be shared between many participants. The temple service includes taking certain items from place to place. Many *kohanim* can take it a short distance in relay. A *mitzvah* can be performed by many people at the same time. The *bikurim* offering was brought to *Yerushalayim* in a large procession. Each farmer brought his own, but he teamed with the others to actually perform this part of the *mitzvah*. Some *mitzvos* are done in a public way. Those who come to watch fulfill this ideal.

The poskim debate whether there is also an advantage to having a group listening to one person recite the *brocha* and then each person do his *mitzvah* or his eating. The Talmud cites a debate about reciting *borei meorei haeish* at *havdalah*. In one view, everyone should say it separately, to avoid wasting time from Torah study. The other view maintains that one should recite it on behalf of the rest, due to *berov am*. The poskim debate the final ruling on this, and it comes down to *minhag*. Some people have the practice that all participants recite their own *brochos*, except when it involves publicizing a miracle. In addition, listening to another person always carries the risk that one will not hear everything. [See Brochos 21b 37a-b 53a Tosefta 6:20 Bikurim 3:2 Rosh Hashana 29a-b Yuma 26a-b Sukah 38b, Poskim. Rambam Brochos 1:12, Mishne Lemelech. Tur Sh Ar OC 8:5 213:1-3 298:14 YD 18:8 (Tevuos Shor) 19 265, commentaries. Mabit 117 180. Avnei Nezer OC 381:1. Be'er Moshe VI:75-77.]

In conclusion, the group may recite separate *brochos* and answer *amein* to each other between washing and reciting their own *hamotzie*.

**On the Parsha ...** *Those who bless you, he will be blessed, and those who curse you, he will be cursed .. [24:9]* Bilam switched from the plural to the singular [see *Ibn Ezra*, *Orach Chaim*]. Perhaps there is a hint here to those who say *brochos* together as a group. It may be considered as though they said it as one. Or perhaps there is a hint that if one person said a *brocha* on behalf of the group it counts as though they all said the *brocha* individually.

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