

What's the Truth About... Women's Zimun?

By Rabbi Ari Z. Zivotofsky, Ph.D.

Misconception: Three or more women forming a *zimun* (responsive introduction to Grace after Meals), especially in the presence of one or two men, is the product of late 20th century feminism and has no basis in traditional *halachah*. When such a *zimun* is formed, the men present should leave.

Fact: Women participating in a meal in which there is a men's *zimun* are obligated to participate. If there is no male *zimun* of ten and there are three or more women, they may form their own *zimun*. If there is no male *zimun* at all, many authorities obligate the women to form a *zimun*.

Background:¹ The Talmud records a tanaitic statement (*Brachot* 45b) that women form a *zimun* amongst themselves and it (*Arachin* 3a) includes women in the statement that "all are obligated in *zimun*." In order to reconcile these statements with a seemingly contradictory one in *Brachot* (45a) that says that women may not have a *zimun* said over them, three approaches were adopted by the commentators. Tosafot views a woman's participation in any *zimun* as optional. The Beit Yosef (author of the *Shulchan Aruch*) and Shulchan Aruch Harav obligate women in *zimun* when a men's *zimun* exists, but regard an independent women's *zimun* as optional. The Rosh, Rokeach and Gra not only obligate women when a *zimun* of men exists but obligate three women who ate

together to form a women's *zimun*. Since the *Shulchan Aruch* requires women to participate in an existing men's *zimun*, at a meal where there is a *zimun* of men, the obligation of *zimun* devolves on all present and the women are equally obligated to respond and may not *bentch* on their own later. Rav Shmuel Halevi Vozner (*Shut Shevet Levi* 1:OC:38) *post facto* defends the converse. He justifies men who leave to go to a *rebbe's* table where they then *bentch*, thus leaving the women at home without a *zimun*. His justification is based on an otherwise rejected position of Rav Hai Gaon that it is the end of the meal that established the *zimun* obligation. This would not help in the case where all finish together and the women simply abstain from the *zimun*.

Women's participation in *zimun* is thus already recorded in the Talmud. There is no halachic opinion that prohibits women from forming a *zimun*, and many opinions require it. In addition, if three or more women form a *zimun* there is no reason why one or two men who are present cannot remain and answer to this *zimun*. This is according to Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach as quoted by his nephew in *Halichot Beisab*. This opinion is also found in *Toras HaYoledes* by Rav Yitzchok Silberstein [son-in-law of Rav Elyashiv] and Dr. Moshe Rothschild, 1987, translated by S. Ludmir, 1989, page 403. Rabbi Shlomo Pick (*Mail-Jewish* 18:77) reports that he personally asked Rav Auerbach, who praised the practice,

and Rav Elyashiv, who told him to stay and answer. Rabbi Aryeh Frimer (*Mail-Jewish* 21:59) quotes his brother Dov as having discussed this with Rav Aharon Lichtenstein who agreed, and stated that such was also his father-in-law's (Rav Yosef Ber Soloveitchik) opinion. The above all hold that the men should answer with the usual response. Rabbi Dovid Cohen (of Gvul Ya'avetz, Brooklyn) and Rav Dovid Feinstein (MTJ) say that the men should answer as "outsiders" by responding "*Baruch u'mevorach Shmo tamid le'olam va'ed*." It thus seems that a great deal of halachic firepower supports the men staying and answering. The idea that men must leave is cited without support in Rav Ellionson's *Ha'Isha V'Hamitzvot*.

The proper introduction for the women's *zimun* should probably be "*Gevivotai² nevarech... Bireshut (imi morati,) gevirotai nevarech...*" Since the men are not part of the *zimun*, there is no need to get their formal permission. **IA**

Notes

1. A more complete discussion of this topic can be found in Ari Z. Zivotofsky and Naomi T.S. Zivotofsky, "What's right with women and zimun," *Judaism, Fall 1993*, 42(4)454-464. See also the responsum by Rabbi Yehuda Herzl Henkin in *Bnei Banim, Volume 3, number 1* (5758).

2. Some women prefer the more informal "chaverotai" instead of "gevirotai."

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