

What's the Truth about... Birkat Hamazon over Wine?

By Ari Z. Zivotofsky

Misconception: *Birkat Hamazon* (Grace after Meals) is said over a cup of wine only on special occasions, such as *Sheva Brachot* or a *brit milah*. Those who are particularly meticulous use wine whenever there is a *minyan* “*bentching*” together.

Fact: It is meritorious to *bentch* over wine whenever there is a *zimun*.¹

Background: Wine has a significant place in rabbinic literature, and Chazal established the well-known principle of enhancing important *mitzvot* by performing them over wine. A wedding, *brit milah*,² and *pidyon haben* are celebrated over wine, and in talmudic times even comforting mourners was done with wine.³ It was also ordained that *Birkat Hamazon* be said over a glass of wine, known as a *kos shel brachah*⁴ (*Pesachim* 105b)⁵. This is most familiar from the Passover Seder where all four major *mitzvot* of the night are performed over wine. Despite all of these precedents, regularly *bentching* over wine seems to have fallen out of custom.

There are three basic opinions among the early sources regarding the use of a *kos shel brachah*. 1) The *Rambam*, *Rif*, *Rashba*, *Meiri*, and *Smag* hold that *Birkat Hamazon* never requires wine and it is merely a meritorious action.⁷

They would explain the statement in *Pesachim* as either being praiseworthy, but not obligatory; or as being one opinion, which we do not accept. 2) The *Rosh*, *Tur*, *Tosafot*, *Rashbam* and *Rabbeinu Yonah* require wine even for an individual *bentching*. Some of them go so far as to say that one should not eat if he knows he will not have a cup of wine for *Birkat Hamazon*. Their logic is compelling; the Talmud stated that *Birkat Hamazon* requires wine, not that a *zimun* needs wine. 3) The *Hagahot Maimoniot*, *Zohar*, *Kol Bo* in the name of *Midrash Rut ha-Néelam*, and others require wine whenever a *zimun* of men is *bentching*.

The *Ramah* (OC 182:1) notes that even those who do not view a *kos shel brachah* as an obligation, certainly agree that it is commendable. Thus, when there is a *zimun* present, two of the three opinions require *bentching* over a cup of wine and the third opinion agrees that it is commendable and enhances the *mitzvah*.

An important practical difference between these three opinions occurs at the third Shabbat meal, *Shalosh Seudos*: when *bentching* after dark on a *kos* may one drink the wine? Normally it is forbidden to eat or drink anything after sunset before *Havdalah*. The *Magen Avraham* (299:7) says that, according to the strict *halachah*, one may drink it because that wine is considered part of the meal that was started

before dark.⁹ However, he adds, one who is normally not careful to *bentch* on a *kos* apparently is of the opinion that it is not obligatory; hence the wine is not really part of his meal and the person should therefore not drink it after *Shalosh Seudos*. The *Mishnah Berurah* (*Sha'ar Hatziyun* 299:24) and *Ben Ish Chai* (*Shana Bet*, *Vayetze* 20) rule that one who normally does not *bentch* with a *kos* may still take a taste. Despite this, the custom seems to be not to drink it at all. This also affects the question of drinking the wine from *Sheva Brachot* at *Shalosh Seudos*. The *Tzitz Eliezer* (10:45) rules that the *chatan*, *kallah*, and the person leading the *Birkat Hamazon* may all drink wine from both the *bentching* and *Sheva Brachot* cups; Rav Moshe Feinstein (*Igrot Moshe* OC 4:69) argues that only the bride and groom should drink, and combined, they should drink “only a cheekful.”

The *Aruch Hashulchan* bemoans the fact that wine is expensive in his region and hence people can never *bentch* on wine. However, as a *hiddur mitzvah* and with the assurance of Divine blessing, he strongly advocates that those who live in regions where wine is readily available should use wine when *bentching* with a *zimun* of three.¹⁰ This seems to be the accepted Ashkenazic practice.¹¹

Rav Ovadia Yosef (*Yalkut Yosef* 3:182:1) notes the current Sephardic

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practice is not to use wine¹², but one who does is commended. The *Aruch Hashulchan* (OC 182:1), who notes that the principal drink in his locale is water, says that some people try to *bentch* with wine when they have a *zimun* on Shabbat and Yom Tov¹³ if they are able to procure wine. Certainly, he urges (in 182:3), in places where wine is available it is proper for all those who “fear God” to use wine. The *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* (45:1) and the *Ben Ish Chai* (*Shlach*:16) likewise urge one to *bentch* over wine if there is a *zimun* of three, but say that an individual should not use wine. It would seem that if wine was a part of the meal, indicating its availability and desirability, it would be inappropriate to then *bentch* with a *zimun* and not use wine.

Drinking from the *kos shel brachah* is considered auspicious. The one who led the *Birkat Hamazon* should drink first. After that, he should give some to his wife (*Shulchan Aruch*, OC 183:3), even if she was not at the meal. Following that, some should be offered to the rest of the family, a guest should offer some to his host, and a host to his guests, so that all present drink (*Mishnah Berurah* 183:19; OC 190:1).

I have been unable to find any source that on halachic grounds distinguishes between a *zimun* of three and a *zimun* of ten with regard to this law, and it seems that being scrupulous to use wine only with a *zimun* of ten (and not three) is an error.¹⁴ Today, unlike the Lithuania of the *Aruch Hashulchan* 120 years ago, wine is relatively easy to come by, and this seems to be a practice that is worthy of reviving.¹⁵ 

Notes:

1. This is certainly true for a *zimun* of at least three men. For a women’s *zimun*, most opinions hold that wine is not used (*Sha’ar Hatziyun* 199:6). See, however, the opinion cited in *Kaf Hachaim* 199:19 (in the name of the *Zohar*) that women should also use wine, although he admits that this is not the custom.

2. For a discussion regarding if the circumcision of a convert needs wine see *Shoot Har Tzvi* YD 221.

3. See *Ketubot* 8b; Rambam, *Hilchot Avel* 13:8. See also *Eruvim* 65 that wine “was created in order to comfort mourners.”

4. There are numerous laws relating to the way to treat the cup and wine used for *bentching*. For details see *Berachot* 51-52 and *Shulchan Aruch*, OC 182-183.

5. A link between a bread meal and wine is hinted at by their juxtaposition in Psalms 104:14-15.

6. *Kiddush* telling the story of the Exodus, *bentching* and reciting *Hallel*. See *Igrot Moshe* OC 4:69 for a discussion of the rationale behind the four cups of wine.

7. *Ran to Pesachim* 117 quoted in *Beit Yosef* 182; *Meiri*.

8. See *Beit Yosef Shulchan Aruch*, and *Aruch Hashulchan* beginning of OC 182 for summaries of these opinions.

9. Rav Moshe Feinstein (OC 4:69, 4th paragraph) offers two alternatives for understanding the *Magen Avraham*, and links them to whether only the one leading the *bentching* may drink or if others may also. He concludes that one should be strict, and only the one leading should drink.

10. The *Mishnah Berurah* and the *Kaf Hachaim* both note that the custom is to *bentch* with wine only with three people, but for an individual there is no need to *bentch* over wine.

11. See Rav Kanievsky in *Shoneh Halachot* 182:1. However, Rav Moshe Feinstein (*Igrot Moshe* OC 4:69), in explaining the current practice, states that we hold like the Rambam and Rif that *bentching* does not require a *kos*.

12. Although the *Mishnah Berurah* (182:4) states that the *Shulchan Aruch* did not take sides in the three-way debate, Rav Ovadia Yosef believes that the *Shulchan Aruch* held like the Rambam — that a *kos* is not required.

13. There is clearly no halachic difference between a *zimun* of three on Shabbat versus one on Tuesday, but the *Rivevot Ephraim* (1:150) nonetheless tries to explain this custom based on the fact that people are not preoccupied with work on Shabbat and Yom Tov.

14. *Tzitz Eliezer* (ibid) notes that the custom seems to be that everyone is careful to use a *kos* when there are ten people. He does not offer a judgment of the practice.

15. This would also enable one to drink the wine from *bentching* and *Sheva Brachot* at Shalosh Seudot without hesitation.