

What's the Truth about...

Mayim Achronim? *By Ari Zivotofsky*

Misconception: *Mayim achronim* (washing before *bentching*) is a *chumrah* (stringency) in which women need not participate. The water used for *mayim achronim* needs to either be covered or removed from the table.

Fact: *Mayim achronim* is an obligation equally incumbent upon men and women. There is scant basis for covering or removing the water.

Background: An old ritual, *mayim achronim* is discussed in the Mishnah (*Brachot* 8:4) where Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai debate its proper timing in the meal. The Talmud discusses it as well, (*Brachot* 53b and *Chullin* 105a-b) and it is accepted by medieval halachic decisors as an obligation.¹

The Talmud offers two reasons for *mayim achronim*: to remove the *melach sedomit* (Sodomite salt)²—a type of fine

salt used in the Talmudic period that was deemed dangerous if it got in the eye (*Chullin* 105b and *Eruvin* 17b); and to clean one's hands before saying a blessing, a requirement based on the verse³ "*vihyitem kedoshim*" "You shall be holy" (*Brachot* 53b).⁴

Tosafot⁵ ruled—perhaps in defense of the prevailing laxity in observing *mayim achronim*⁶—that since *melach sedomit* did not exist in medieval Europe, it was no longer mandatory to wash *mayim achronim*.⁷ This opinion is cited by the *Shulchan Aruch* (OC 181:10) as well. The *Mishnah Berurah* (181:22), however, notes that the Gra was strict about washing *mayim achronim*. Similarly, the Magen Avraham advises one to wash. The *Aruch Hashulchan* (181:5) states that despite Tosafot's ruling concerning *melach sedomit*, one should be exceedingly careful to wash *mayim achronim* and to admonish one's family to wash as well.

Yet, even Tosafot, who ruled that *melach sedomit* no longer applied in his day, maintained that the Talmud's second reason was still relevant: blessings should not be recited if one's hands are unclean.⁸ Therefore, a person whose hands are dirty after eating or who regularly cleans his hands after eating is obligated in *mayim achronim*. Based on the Tosafot, however, one who has clean hands and is not accustomed to washing his hands after a meal is not required to wash *mayim achronim* (*Aruch Hashulchan* 181:4).

This more lenient view of the Tosafot is rejected by the Shla, a latter day commentator, (*Piskei HaShla, Hilchot Netilat Yadayim*:2) who held that one should be diligent to *always* wash before *bentching*. The Chida, who also maintained that *mayim achronim* should be scrupulously observed, based his opinion on a kabbalistic reason, and encouraged people to wash "lest one's life be shortened" (*Bircei Yosef* OC 181:7).

In light of the opinions cited, many people are careful to observe the practice of *mayim achronim*. Yet, even among those who are scrupulous about washing, there is a general laxity regarding women washing. Since all the reasons given for this obligation are equally applicable to men and women, this negligence is inexplicable. Many significant authorities—including Rav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld,⁹ Rav Shlomo Chaim Hakohen Aviner,¹⁰ the Mor Uktziah,¹¹ and Rav Ovadia Yosef¹²—insist that the obligation to wash is obvious. Rav Yitzchak Yaacov Fuchs¹³ records that Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach personally told him that there is no basis for women not to wash, and in a place where men wash, women must as well. Rav Moshe Sternbuch¹⁴ records that the Gra also held that women are obligated to wash.

I have found only one justification for woman not washing; according to Rav Shmuel Halevi Vosner,¹⁵ *mayim achronim* is a stringency since there is no *melach sedomit* these days. This

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stringency, he claims, is one which women never adopted.

The common custom is to pour the *mayim achronim* into a vessel. This is based on the idea¹⁶ that a *ruach ra* (evil spirit) appears on used water that is spilled onto the ground.¹⁷ However, if the water is poured into a utensil, vessel or even onto a pile of twigs which is on the ground, there is no danger of inviting a *ruach ra*.¹⁸

I have found only a small number of references in the sources to removing the water, and no mention at all of the need to cover it. One halachic authority who refers to removing the water is the Kaf HaChayim Soffer (181:8). He quotes the Kaf HaChayim Palache (25:3)¹⁹ who says that if one does not have a special bowl for *mayim achronim*, or is too lazy to get the particular bowl, one can pour it into a food bowl, but then should be careful to remove it from the table before *benching*. Why the need to remove it? According to the kabbalistic interpretation of the Kaf HaChayim Soffer, *mayim achronim* is an “offering” to the *sitra achra*—the “other side”²⁰—and therefore, must be removed. (This notion of the *sitra achra* is also mentioned by Rav Palache in the name of the Yalkut Reuvani, who states that Iyov (Job) suffered because he neglected to perform *mayim achronim*.) Thus, it seems that the only *poskim* (halachic authorities) who maintain that the water should be removed are those who are of the opinion that *mayim achronim* constitutes an offering to “the other side.” As already seen, however, most authorities draw on the Talmudic view that *mayim achronim* is for the sole purpose of cleanliness. Thus, according to the majority of halachic authorities, there is no basis for removing the water.

Many people mistakenly believe that the water must be removed due to the presence of a *ruach ra*. This misconception is dealt with in the *Siddur Tslusa d'Avraham*, where the commentary *Shirusa d'Avraham* (page 362) states that since there is no danger of inviting

a *ruach ra* if the water is poured into a utensil, there is no reason to remove the water.

Interestingly, the concept of the *sitra achra* also serves as the basis for people washing only the tips of their fingers. It should be noted, however, that according to most authorities, washing only the fingertips is insufficient to properly clean one's hands prior to saying a *brachah*. In the *Siddur Tslusa d'Avraham*, the commentary *Shirusa d'Avraham* (pages 361-362) points out that even if *mayim achronim* is an offering to the *sitra achra*, one should use a *revi'it* (which according to the *poskim* varies between 3 and 5.3 fluid ounces), the amount equivalent to what is used for *mayim rishonim* (the water used to wash one's hands before eating).

When the Gra would wash *mayim achronim* (*Ma'aseh Rav* 84), he would wash all the way up to his palm, using at least a *revi'it* of water. The *Mishnah Berurah* (181:10) decries those who, while careful to wash, use only a few drops, leaving the hands insufficiently clean for *benching* and thereby not truly fulfilling their obligation. One should wash, he states, at least until the “second knuckle.” The *Aruch Hashulchan* (OC 181:8) writes that he has seen some people intentionally use less than a *revi'it*, but there is no justification for this, and “many *gedolei hador* [leaders of the generation] are careful to use more than a *revi'it*.”²¹ According to the Rif (see footnote 4) one should even wash the area around one's mouth.

It should be noted that, unlike the washing before the meal, *mayim achronim* is for the purpose of cleanliness and therefore, is not a ritual washing. Thus, there is no need for *koach gavrah* (pouring by a person) or to wash from a *keli* (utensil). Hence, one may certainly wash straight from the faucet.²² **JA**

Notes:

1. Rambam, *Hilchot Brachot* 6:2; *Shulchan Aruch* OC 181:1. The *Shulchan Aruch* later (181:10) acknowledges the opinion of Tosafot, discussed below, that there are

some who have a custom not to wash *mayim achronim*.

2. For a discussion of the identity of *melach sedomit*, see the article by Israel Rosenson and Israel Zack in *Tchumin* 8 (5747):417-428.

3. Leviticus 20:7 or, according to the Gra, Leviticus 11:44.

4. The Rif (*Chullin* 37b) suggests that even if one did not use *melach sedomit*, one must wash *mayim achronim* based on the story found in *Yoma* 83b (compare to *Yerushalmi Challah* 2:3) where a man ended up killing his wife due to his not washing *mayim achronim*.

Some authorities further rule that if one merely measured out salt, ate salted vegetables that were salted by hand, or ate pickled foods, he is also required to wash *mayim achronim* (*Ben Ish Chai, Shlach*:13; *Kaf Hachaim* 181:2; *Ohr Letzion* 2:46:19).

5. *Brachot* 53b, s.v. *vihyitem kedoshim*; *Chullin* 105a, s.v. *mayim rishonim*.

6. See *Aruch Hashulchan* OC 181:5.

7. This leniency is also found in the responsa of the *geonim* (*Otzar Geonim, Brachot* 53b, 347-351).

8. See Rav Shlomo Chaim Hakohen Aviner, *Am Kelavi* (1983) 1:83.

9. *Salmat Chayim*, letters at the beginning of book, no. 2 and vol. 4 no. 3:2 where he says that women should be told that they are not exempt from *mayim achronim* and have the same obligation as men.

10. *Am Kelavi*, vol. 1, 1:83.

11. End of *siman* 181 where he says that women should be so instructed. He also suggests that the laxity evolved since women are more careful to eat neatly with utensils and thus in the absence of *melach sedomit* may have less reason to wash due to soiled hands.

12. *Yalkut Yosef*, vol. 3, 181:2.

13. *Halichos Bas Yisrael* (Hebrew) (5744) p. 58, footnote 11.

14. *Teshuvos veHanhagas* 1:174.

15. *Shevet Halevi*, vol. 4, OC, no. 23.

16. OC 181:2; based on *Chullin* 105b.

17. *Magen Avraham* 181:2; *Kaf Hachaim* 181:13; *Aruch Hashulchan* 181:7.

However, *Kaf Hachaim* 181:12 brings another opinion, also cited in *Biur Halacha* to OC 181:2, that there is a *ruach ra* even when a utensil is used.

18. There is no danger of washing into a sink with a drain either (*Yabia Omer* 5:OC:2 and *Ohr L'Tzion* 2:13:1:sources).

19. There are two *Kaf Hachaim's*; the

more common one by Rav Yaakov Chayyim Soffer (1870-1939), and another by the great Sephardi authority of the last century Rav Chayyim Palache (b. Izmir, 1788-1869, published in 1859).

20. Based on *Zohar* (*parshat Terumah*). Although I cannot explain what the concept of an “offering to *sitra achra*” means, there are at least two other examples of this concept that I am familiar with. The first example involves the *seir hamishtalay-ach*, the scapegoat of Yom Kippur (*Zohar*, Shemot 184b). See *Siddur Tslusa d’Avraham*, commentary *Shirusa d’Avraham* (page 361).

The second example pertains to hairs that protrude from the head *tefillin*. These hairs are explained (*Zohar* Shemot [Pekudei] 237b) as constituting an offering to the *sitra achra* so that it will not make accusations against our performance of the *mitzvah* of *tefillin*. If the hairs do not protrude, the *tefillin* are still kosher, but inquiry is made concerning whether the *sofer* (scribe) had been lax in his work. (See *Magen Avraham* OC 32:61; *Mor U’ktzi’a* OC 32; *Measef L’Kol HaMachanot* on *Shulchan Aruch* OC 32:44).

The identity of the *sitra achra* and the idea of “throwing a bone to the dog” is discussed by Rav Menachem M. Kasher in chapter 15 (pages 282-292) of his monumental *hashkafic* work on the meaning of the current events in Israel, *Hatekufa Hagedolah*.

21. For additional sources on how much water to use, see *Minhag Yisrael Torah*, OC 182:3.

22. *Aruch Hashulchan* OC 181:8. See also: *Kaf Hachaim* 181:10 in the name of the Kol Bo, Raavad, Levush, and Eliyahu Rabba; *Mishnah Berurah* 181:21.