Misconception: Mayim achronim (washing before bentsching) 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 Erwin 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 achronim6—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 bentsching. 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 Wosner,15 mayim achronim is a stringency since there is no melach sedomit these days. This
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 idea\(^\text{16}\) that a ruach ra (evil spirit) appears on used water that is spilled onto the ground.\(^\text{17}\) 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.\(^\text{18}\)

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)\(^\text{19}\) 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 bentching. 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”\(^\text{20}\) —and therefore, must be removed. (This notion of the sitra achra is also mentioned by Rav Palache in the name of the Yalkut Reuvari, 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 Tsliusa 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 Tsliusa 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 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) decrees those who, while careful to wash, use only a few drops, leaving the hands insufficiently clean for bentching 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.”\(^\text{21}\) 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.\(^\text{22}\)

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 sedomim, 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 sedomim, 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 HaHaim 181:2; Ohr Letziyon 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).
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.
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 sedomim may have less reason to wash due to soiled hands.
13. Halichos Bas Yisrael (Hebrew) (5744) p. 58, footnote 11.
16. OC 181:2; based on Chullin 105b.
18. However, Kaf HaHaim 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.
19. There is no danger of washing into a sink with a drain either (Yabia Omer 5:OC:2 and Ohr Letziyon 2:13:1:sources).
20. 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 achna” means, there are at least two other examples of this concept that I am familiar with. The first example involves the seir hamishlalay-ach, the scapegoat of Yom Kippur (Zohar, Shemot 184b). See Siddur Tsiusa 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 achna 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 achna 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.