

Mayim Achronim, Chova?

By Rabbi Yehuda Spitz

In Parshas Lech Lecha, we are introduced to an interesting personality named Bera, Melech S'dom, the King of S'dom. While he was certainly not known for his morality and impeccable character, nonetheless, his title, as well as the destruction of his hometown using salt, described in Parshas Vayera[1], seemingly references a catalyst to a Mitzvah that many are wholly unfamiliar with: its homonym, 'Melach S'domis' or S'dom Salt. The Mitzva I am referring to is Mayim Acharonim, the handwashing before Birchas HaMazon[2].

Mitzva?!

I am sure that many readers are shaking their heads in disbelief, wondering how I can call this known chumra a Mitzva. This common, but slightly mistaken, belief was made evident to this author when a neighborhood housewife recently asked an interesting sheilah. Apparently, after hosting several friends and relatives for a Shabbos Seudah, she washed Mayim Acharonim along with the men, earning her much scorn and ridicule. The incredulous men commented that their washing Mayim Acharonim was only a chumra, and there obviously was no basis for a woman to do it as well. Our distraught domestic denizen wanted to know who acted correctly, and was astounded when I replied that technically speaking they both were.

A Bit of Background

Mayim Acharonim has an interesting background, as it actually has two entirely different sources and rationales mandating it. The first, in Gemara Brachos[3],

discussing the source for ritual handwashing, explains that one can not make a bracha with dirty hands, and cites the pasuk in Parshas Kedoshim[4] "V'hiskadeeshtem, V'heyisem Kedoshim", "And you shall sanctify yourselves, and be holy". The Gemara clarifies that "And you shall sanctify yourselves" refers to washing the hands before the meal, Mayim Rishonim, and "and be holy" refers to washing the hands after the meal, Mayim Acharonim. In other words, by washing our hands before making a bracha (in this case before Bentching), we are properly sanctifying ourselves.

The second source, Gemara Chullin[5], on the other hand, refers to Mayim Acharonim as a "chova", an outright obligation. The Gemara elucidates that there is a certain type of salt in the world, called 'Melach S'domis', (actually one of the additions needed to make the Ketores properly[6]) that is so caustic that if it gets into a person's eyes, it can cause blindness r"l. Since one is supposed to have salt at his table at every meal[7], Chazal were worried that this specific type of salt may have found its way onto our tables and consequently could cause someone to become blind if he rubs his eyes after eating. Therefore, as a way to mitigate this salt's potentially devastating effects, they mandated handwashing after eating, known colloquially as Mayim Acharonim.

In fact, the Gemara's words are codified as halacha by the Tur and Shulchan Aruch[8], stating simply "Mayim Acharonim Chova". The Rambam as well writes that it is an obligation due to the potential Sakana involved[9]. As an aside, the Ben Ish Chai[10] posits that when eating, one should say this three word formula, and that way fulfill the halacha of speaking Divrei Torah at a meal[11].

Chova?

Well, if the Gemara, and even the Shulchan Aruch, consider washing Mayim Acharonim an actual obligation, then why do many treat it as a mere stringency? Furthermore, there are those (many of Germanic origin) who claim that their custom is to specifically not wash Mayim Acharonim! Additionally, if it is a binding halacha, why don't women generally observe this washing?

The answer lies in the commentary of the Ba'alei Tosafos to both aforementioned Gemaras[12]. Tosafos comments that 'nowadays, when 'Melach S'domis' is no longer found amongst us, we no longer are accustomed to washing Mayim Acharonim, and one may Bentch without first washing his hands'. In other words, Tosafos maintains that although washing Mayim Acharonim used to be an obligation, since the problematic S'dom Salt was no longer prevalent already in their days, one is no longer required to wash Mayim Acharonim. In fact, not washing for Mayim Acharonim is cited as the common minhag by several Ashkenazic Rishonim, as well as the Levush and the Rema[13].

An additional rationale for leniency is put forward by the famed Rav Yaakov Emden[14]. He points out that ever since the advent of cutlery, most civilized people (hopefully) do not do the bulk of their eating with their hands, rather with a fork and spoon. Therefore, he explains, one who eats with silverware (or even plasticware) and did not actually touch his food, has no need to wash Mayim Acharonim.

Interestingly, the Shulchan Aruch[15] cites Tosafos' lenient view as well, at the end of the very same siman where he rules that "Mayim Acharonim Chova"! Several authorities explain his seemingly contradictory intent that indeed nowadays one is no longer mandated to wash Mayim Acharonim. Yet, the

Shulchan Aruch is telling us that, nevertheless, we still should strive to do this important Mitzvah[16].

This view is cited by many halachic decisors including the Chayei Adam, Shulchan Aruch HaRav, Kitzur Shulchan Aruch, Aruch Hashulchan, and Mishna Berura, who relate that although Mayim Acharonim may no longer be obligated by the strict letter of the law, nonetheless, one still should be very stringent with its adherence[17]. Other authorities cite Kabbalistic reasons to be strict with its observance[18]. The Vilna Gaon was known to be extremely makpid on this halacha, referring to it as both a "Chova" and a "Mitzva", even nowadays[19].

Wash This Way!

Interestingly, authorities debate the proper way to perform washing Mayim Acharonim. One machlokes involves how much water to use. The basic halacha is that this handwashing has no set limit or minimum; rather even a small amount of water is sufficient[20]. However, the Kabbalistic approach mandates using only a small amount of water[21]. Conversely, the Vilna Gaon was makpid to use a full Reviis of water, as he considered Mayim Acharonim a full washing, akin to the Netillas Yadayim required before eating bread (Mayim Rishonim)[22].

Another machlokes revolves around how much of the hand must be washed by Mayim Acharonim. Although the basic halacha only requires from the finger tips to the second knuckle[23], nevertheless, Kabbalistically speaking, one should wash the entire fingers[24]. A third opinion, that of the Vilna Gaon, is that the whole hand should be washed, as he considered Mayim Acharonim a full Netillas

Yadayim[25]. The unifying thread of these disparate shittos is their mandating adherence to the strict performance of Mayim Acharonim.

Women's Role

Yet, so far, none of this explains why women commonly do not wash Mayim Acharonim. This "custom" seems to be an anomaly, as, technically, women and men share the same obligation in this Mitzvah, and we do not find a halachic codifier making such a distinction.

Several contemporary authorities, including Rav Shmuel HaLevi Vosner and Rav Moshe Sternbuch[26] offer a possible justification. They explain that although women and men were both equally obligated in this Mitzvah, nevertheless, since it is no longer mandated as a strict requirement due to the dearth of 'Melach S'domis', but rather as a proper "minhag", it is entirely possible that women collectively never accepted this stringency upon themselves. Therefore, nowadays they are not required to wash Mayim Acharonim[27]. Indeed, Rav Yonah Merzbach (pronounced Mertzbach; Founder and Rosh Yeshivas Kol Torah) was quoted as stating that the common minhag for women in Ashkenaz, even among 'Chareidim L'Dvar Hashem', was not to wash Mayim Acharonim[28].

However, many other contemporary halachic decisors, including Rav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld, Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, Rav Chaim Pinchas Scheinberg, Rav Ovadia Yosef, Rav Mordechai Eliyahu, Rav Moshe Sternbuch, the Rivevos Efraim, and the Shevet HaKehasi[29], all rule that regardless of the rationale, women still should be vigilant with washing Mayim Acharonim.

To Wash or Not to Wash?

Back to our dilemma. This background is why I informed that harried housewife that technically speaking both she and her relatives were correct. She undeniably had what to rely upon not to wash Mayim Acharonim. Yet, she was definitely correct in making sure to do so anyway. As the Pele Yoetz explains, even if there no longer is a danger posed from salt that blinds our eyes, nevertheless, we still have an obligation to listen to the words of our Chachamim, and not blind ourselves to their wisdom[30].

Postscript: Although the Vilna Gaon is the machmir shitta in the three separate Mayim Acharonim related machlokasim cited above, there is one regarding Mayim Acharonim where he is quoted as being the lenient opinion: talking between Mayim Acharonim and Bentching. This issue of talking before Bentching is a large topic in its own right. The Gemara Brachos (42a) writes that one may not be mafsik (make a separation) between the washing and the Birchas Hamazon. There is a machlokes Rishonim how to understand the Gemara. Rashi (ad loc.), as well as the Rambam (Hilchos Brachos Ch. 6, 20) understand that this means that one may not eat [there is a whole separate machlokes Rishonim whether or not this includes drinking] and this is how the Tur and Shulchan Aruch cite the halacha as well (Orach Chaim 179, 1). According to the Kessef Mishna (on Rambam ad loc.) - this understanding excludes talking - meaning the only problematic hefsek is eating and / or drinking; ergo talking would be permitted.

Yet, the Rosh (in Brachos ad loc.) understands the Gemara's rule as meaning that once one performs Mayim Acharonim, it is as if he answered the zimun (i.e.

akin to have started Bentching). If so, then talking would be proscribed as well. Other Rishonim seem to accept the Rosh as well.

What is interesting is that in his Beis Yosef commentary (Orach Chaim 179 s.v. yesh lidakdek), the Kessef Mishna retracted his opinion, ruling akin to the Rosh - that even speaking in between Mayim Acharonim and Bentching is prohibited.

On that, the Magen Avraham (Orach Chaim 181, 1) takes him to task for his retraction, and seemingly ruling like the Kessef Mishna that talking between Mayim Acharonim and Bentching is permitted. Yet, there is some confusion as to whether or not this was his actual maskana lemaaseh. In fact, that is how the Ba'er Heitiv (Orach Chaim 179, 1) cites the Magen Avraham - as ruling leniently; yet, the Mishna Berura (Shaar Hatziyun 179, 1) argues, maintaining that the Magen Avraham's conclusion was truly like the Beis Yosef, to be machmir - like the Rosh, and not like what he wrote in Kessef Mishna like the Rambam.

Most poskim in fact rule this way, that is therefore assur to talk between Mayim Acharonim and Bentching, including the Bach (Orach Chaim 181, 4), Elya Rabba (ad loc. 9), Chayei Adam (vol. 1, 44, 1), Ben Ish Chai (Year 1, Parshas Shelach 15), Mishna Berura (179, 1 and 181, 24), and Kaf Hachaim (Orach Chaim 179, 1 and 181, 20). In fact, the Mishna Berura implies (Shaar Hatziyun 179, 7) that talking might be considered a bigger problem than eating - as if one eats - we seem to follow the synthesis opinion of the Pri Megadim (Orach Chaim 179, Eshel Avraham 1) that it cancelled out the first Mayim Acharonim - but we can simply wash again before Bentching; whereas since it is not so clear cut that talking is a hefsek, it is unclear whether one is allowed to wash again to Bentch - he might now not be allowed to Bentch! [Although it is important to note that

this is not the normative halacha.] The Mishna Berura also seems to hold that talking after Mayim Acharonim is more strict than talking after Mayim Rishonim (for Hamotzie).

An additional factor is that the Arizal (Shaar Hamitzvos, Parshas Eikev) was machmir with this and drove the point home with an interesting tale about one who had unexplained shoulder pain. The Arizal instructed him not to talk between Mayim Acharonim and Bentching and the pain subsequently went away. He explained that "Netilla Teikef L'Bracha" (washing immediately prior to Bentching), is connected to Katef and therefore one should be stringent. The Chida (Birkei Yosef, Orach Chaim 181, 3), quoting his ancestor, Rav Avraham Azulai, citing the Yeushalmi) avers that regarding one who is makpid on reciting Bentching immediately after Mayim Acharonim, the Satan will not have the ability to level accusations against him during that meal.

A middle-ground opinion is found in the Shulchan Aruch HaRav (Orach Chaim 181, 6), who writes that a few necessary words are permitted, as 'Hefsek' is only referring to only Divrei Torah or a conversation.

So where does the Gr"a fit in? In Biur HaGr"a (Orach Chaim 179, 2) he cites the whole background to the machlokes, citing the many Rishonim and the shakla v'tarya. Yet, he concludes simply that in Chullin (Ch. 6, 2 s.v. d'amar) the Rosh seems to have been chozer from his stringent position and concludes that "v'chein daas kol haposkim". In other words, the Vilna Gaon held that since there is a seeming contradiction in the Rosh, and all of the machmir opinions are based on his shitta, one need not be machmir with the no talking before Bentching rule.

However, and although the Aruch Hashulchan (Orach Chaim 181, 1) seems to rule this way and declares that talking is not the hefsek that the Rishonim were debating, he nevertheless concludes (Orach Chaim 181, 9) that "lechatchilla aino kedai lehafsik" as "Teikif L'Netilla Bracha" and therefore "mikol makom aino kedai laasos kein", it is not worthwhile to do so.

This article was written L'Iluy Nishmas R' Chaim Baruch Yehuda ben Dovid Tzvi, L'Refuah Sheleimah for R' Shlomo Yoel ben Chaya Leah, Rochel Miriam bas Dreiza Liba and I'Zechus Shira Yaffa bas Rochel Miriam v'chol yotzei chalatzeha for a yeshua sheleimah!

For any questions, comments or for the full Mareh Mekomos / sources, please email the author: yspitz@ohr.edu.

Rabbi Yehuda Spitz, author of MiShulchan Yehuda on Inyanei Yoreh Deah, serves as the Sho'el U' Meishiv and Rosh Chabura of the Ohr Lagolah Halacha Kollel at Yeshivas Ohr Somayach in Yerushalayim. He also currently writes a contemporary halacha column for the Ohr Somayach website titled "Insights Into Halacha". http://ohr.edu/this_week/insights_into_halacha/.

[1] See Parshas Vayera (Bereishis Ch. 19, verses 24 & 25) and Parshas Nitzavim (Devarim Ch. 29, verse 22), which, as part of the tochacha Moshe Rabbeinu gives Bnei Yisrael warning them of the dire consequences of not listening to the word of Hashem, states "gafris v'melach sereifah kol artzah...k'mahpeichas S'dom", "Sulfur and salt will burn your whole land... just as (it did) in the turning over (destruction) of S'dom". According to the author of the Zera Gad on the

Haggada, Rav Tzvi Hirsch of Horodna, in his glosses to Targum Rav Yosef on Divrei HaYamim (II, Ch. 13, 5; as cited by the Mareh Yehoshua on the Maaseh Rav - 84), who explains Dovid HaMelech's eternal 'Bris Melach' with Hashem as parallel to the salty seas never becoming sweet, this is the true source of Melach S'domis. Rav Tzvi Hirsch explains that the current Yam HaMelach (Dead Sea) sits upon the former site of S'dom and its sister cities. Since all of the seas and oceans are connected, the salty destruction of S'dom is what turned them all salty. Accordingly, 'Melach S'domis' is still extant, if highly diluted. He therefore maintains that washing Mayim Acharonim is still actually obligatory nowadays, akin to the opinion of the Vilna Gaon (see footnote 19). The wording of the Aruch Hashulchan (Orach Chaim 181, 5) implies that he concurs with this understanding as well.

[2] While Bera's personal connection to the Mitzva of Mayim Acharonim is tenuous at best, relying on homonyms and clever wordplay, on the other hand and quite interestingly, due to Avraham Avinu's famous "thread and shoelace" rebuttal to his "largesse", Bera unwittingly became the catalyst for the Mitzvos of Tzitzis and Tefillin. See Gemara Sota (17a) and Chullin (89a).

[3] Gemara Brachos (53b).

[4] Vayikra (Chapter 20, verse 7).

[5] Gemara Chullin (105a-b) and Gemara Eruvin (17b).

[6] See Gemara Krisus (6a) and Rambam (Hilchos Klei HaMikdash Ch. 2, 3).

[7] There is a Mitzvah to have salt on the table when having a meal, which is directly based on the requirement to have salt on every Korban (Vayikra Ch. 2, verse 13), as our tables are compared to the Mizbe'ach (Altar) and our food to a sacrifice. See Gemara Brachos (55a), Tosafos (ad loc. s.v. haba), Beis Yosef (Orach Chaim 167, quoting the Shibolei Leket 141), Shulchan Aruch and Rema (Orach Chaim 167, 5), Magen Avraham (ad loc. 15), Machatzis Hashekel (ad loc. 15), Ba'er Heitiv (ad loc. 7; citing the Arizal), Aruch Hashulchan (ad loc. 12), Mishna Berura (ad loc. 30), and Kaf Hachaim (ad loc. 40). See also Shla"h (Shaar HaOsiyos, Eimek Bracha 66), Kiryas Chana Dovid (49), and Halachic World (vol. 2, pg. 151, "Table Salt"). L'maaseh, although nowadays our bread is considered 'nekiya' and would not have a requirement to dip it into salt me'ikar hadin, nevertheless, due to Chazal's comparison of our tables to the Mizbe'ach, one should still have salt on the table while eating. Additionally, Kabbalistically speaking, one should still dip their bread into salt three times. See also R' Zvi Ryzman's recent Ratz KaTzvi on Maagalei HaShana (vol. 1, 3, Ch. 2, 10) who adds a potential reason based on the Baal HaTurim (Vayikra Ch. 2, verse 13) regarding the three times that salt is mentioned in said pasuk. For more on this topic, see previous article titled "Salting With Sugar?!".

[8] Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 181, 1), based on the opinions of many Rishonim, including the Rif (Chullin 37b), Sefer HaChinuch (Parshas Eikev, Mitzva 430 s.v. mayim), and Tur (Orach Chaim 181).

[9] Rambam (Hilchos Brachos Ch. 6, 3). The Rambam implies that he holds that 'Melach S'domis' is still extant.

[10] Ben Ish Chai (Year 1, Parshas Shelach 7), quoting his esteemed father and grandfather.

[11] See Pirkei Avos (Ch. 3, Mishna 3).

[12] Tosafos (Brachos 53b s.v. v'heyisem; Chullin 105a s.v. mayim; Eruvin 17b s.v. Mayim Acharonim).

[13] Including the Rosh (Brachos Ch. 8, 6), the Ohr Zarua (vol. 1, 72), the Agur (235), the SMA"G (Positive Mitzva 27), the Levush (Orach Chaim 181, 9) and the Rema in his Darchei Moshe glosses on the Tur (ad loc. 2). See also Shu"t Hisorerus Teshuva (vol. 1, 63), who defends the "common custom" of not washing Mayim Acharonim.

[14] Mor U'Ketzia (end 181 s.v. daf). This is l'shitaso, as the Ya'avetz rules similarly by the handwashing requirements of a davar hateebulo b'mashkeh – as explained in a previous article titled see previous article titled 'The Coffee Dipping Conundrum'. However, the Kaf Hachaim (ad loc. 27) cites several authorities who do not agree with the Ya'avetz's leniency and concludes that even if one ate exclusively with utensils, he must still wash Mayim Acharonim. Similarly, regarding a different halacha related to handwashing, we find that although according to the letter of the law it need not be required, nevertheless, many authorities rule that one should still wash his hands, as hand washing does not usually entail too much effort - see previous article titled 'The Halachic Power of a Diyuk'.

[15] Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 181, 10).

[16] Shu"t Nechpeh B'Kessef (vol. 1, pg. 154, 4th column), Yalkut Yosef (vol. 8, 181, footnotes 1 and 2), Halichos Olam (Parshas Shelach, 1), Halacha Berura (vol. 8, Orach Chaim 181, Birur Halacha 1 s.v. v'hinei).

[17] Chayei Adam (46, 1), Shulchan Aruch HaRav (Orach Chaim 181, 9), Kitzur Shulchan Aruch (44, 1), Aruch Hashulchan (Orach Chaim 181, 5), Mishna Berura (181, 22). Other poskim who rule this way include the Rashal (Yam Shel Shlomo, Chullin Ch. 8, 10), Magen Avraham (Orach Chaim 181, 10), Elyah Rabbah (Orach Chaim 181, 9), Pri Megadim (Orach Chaim 181, Mishbetzos Zahav 1, citing several reasons for stringency), Maharsham (Daas Torah, Orach Chaim 181, 10; quoting the Toras Chaim), Ben Ish Chai (Year 1, Parshas Shelach 6), Shoneh Halachos (vol. 1, 181, 1), Shu"t Ohr L'Tzion (vol. 2, pg. 303), Yalkut Yosef (ibid.) and Halacha Berura (ibid.). Many of these authorities suspect that even though actual 'Melach S'domis' might no longer be prevalent, still other types of common salt that would be harmful if rubbed into eyes nonetheless are. [This chashash was first mentioned by Talmidei Rabbeinu Yonah (Brachos 40b in the dapei HaRif) in the name of the Rambam (ibid.), 'shema yesh bo Melach S'domis oh melach sheteva k'Melach S'domis'.] Additionally, even if salt was no longer an issue, still, one fulfills the Mitzvah of "V'heyisem Kedoshim" by washing Mayim Acharonim.

[18] The Kaf Hachaim (Orach Chaim 181, 1) states that the words of Chazal are really "Sod" wrapped in "Peshat". Therefore even if the "Peshat" is no longer relevant, the hidden meanings still are. He then cites that the Zohar (Parshas Terumah pg. 154b and Parshas Pinchas pg. 246a) and the Arizal (Shaar Hamitzvos, Parshas Eikev) write that one should be extremely vigilant with Mayim Acharonim due to Kabbalistic reasons. This zehirus with Mayim Acharonim based on Kabbalistic reasons is also cited by the Shlah (Shaar HaOsiyos, Os Kuf s.v. u'ksheim), the Magen Avraham (ibid.), the Chida (Birkei Yosef, Orach Chaim 181, 7), the Pele Yo'etz (Os Nun, Netillas Yadayim s.v. v'yeish), Shulchan HaTahor (181, 1 and footnote, who calls it a 'chova gamur'),

Rav Chaim Fala'ji (Kaf Hachaim 25, 2, 8 & 9, quoting the Yalkut Ruveini on Vayikra), the Matteh Moshe (vol. 2, 306), Ben Ish Chai (ibid.), and in Shu"t Min Hashamayim (57). See mv"r Rav Yosef Yitzchok Lerner's classic Shemiras HaGuf VeHanefesh (vol. 1, Ch. 56) at length.

[19] See Biur HaGr"a (Orach Chaim 181, 12) who was extremely stringent with this halacha, as he rejects the common leniencies offered by Tosafos and the Rosh. Additionally, Maaseh Rav (84) and Piskei HaGr"a (Orach Chaim 181, 10) mutually in the Gr"a's name, refer to Mayim Acharonim as both a "Chova" and a "Mitzva", even nowadays. This is also how it is cited in Kesser Rosh (82, 1), as how the Gr"a's prime talmid, Rav Chaim Volozhiner, held as well. See also Mishna Berura (Orach Chaim 181, 22) who explains that according to the Gr"a the sakana of 'Melach S'domis' still applies nowadays. This also seems to be the Rambam's understanding (Hilchos Brachos Ch. 6, 3), and is cited by the Aruch Hashulchan (Orach Chaim 181, 5) as well, that those who use sea salt should still be wary of 'Melach S'domis', which would fit in with the explanation of the Zera Gad (see footnote 1).

[20] The Kol Bo (23), quoting the Raavad, as well as the Beis Yosef (Orach Chaim 181 s.v. mashma) citing the opinion of Rabbeinu Bachya (Shulchan Shel Arba, Shaar 1 s.v. v'yesh hefesh), ruled that there is no shiur for the amount of water needed for Mayim Acharonim, and even a small amount will do. The Elya Rabbah (ad loc. 3) and Aruch Hashulchan (ad loc. 8) wrote that this is indeed the halacha. This seems to be the common custom - see Mishna Berura (ad loc. 19). Similarly, several contemporary authorities, including the Chazon Ish (cited in Orchos Rabbeinu vol. 1, 70), Rav Yosef Eliyahu Henkin (Shu"t Gevuros Eliyahu vol. 1, 53, 4), and Rav Shmuel HaLevi Vosner (Kovetz M'Bais Levi vol.

17, pg 22, 3) wrote that the prevalent minhag is that one only needs to use a small amount of water.

[21] See Ben Ish Chai (Year 1, Parshas Shelach 8), Kaf Hachaim (Falaj'i; 25, 2), and Kaf Hachaim (Orach Chaim 181, 6). See next footnote.

[22] Maaseh Rav (84), cited by the Mishna Berura (Orach Chaim 181, 19). This is also how it is cited in Kesser Rosh (82, 1), as how the Gr"a's prime talmid, Rav Chaim Volozhiner, held as well. The Aruch Hashulchan (ad loc. 8) notes that many Gedolim washed with a full Reviis, and he personally does not see any reason to be makpid on only using a small amount of water. However, the Chazon Ish is quoted (Orchos Rabbeinu vol. 1, 70; citing the Steipler Gaon; and in the new print of Maaseh Rav, Weinreb edition; Miluim pg. 320, s.v. u'l'inyan; quoting Rav Chaim Kanievsky) as not believing that the Gr"a was actually makpid on a shiur Reviis for Mayim Acharonim. However, see Shu"t Teshuvos V'Hanhagos (vol. 1, 173 s.v. v'achshav) who writes that this shemua is tzarich iyun gadol, as why should this rule in Maaseh Rav be any less reliable as to the Gr"a's personal hanhaga than any other one in the sefer, especially as his talmidim were known to be stringent for washing this way. He attempts to answer that perhaps the Chazon Ish was referring to washing only to the second knuckle (as opposed to the whole hand) with a Reviis, that he did not believe was the Gr"a's true shitta. However, he reiterates, washing the whole hand with a Reviis (meaning a full Netillas Yadayim) was indeed the Gr"a's opinion.

[23] Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 181, 4), quoting the Tur (ad loc.) and Rashba (Toras HaBayis, Bayis 6, Shaar 1, Ch. 9), Levush (ad loc.), Magen Avraham (ad loc. 4), Pri Megadim (ad loc. Eishel Avraham 4), Chayei Adam (vol. 1, 46, 1), Kitzur Shulchan Aruch (44, 1), and Aruch Hashulchan (ad loc. 7).

Indeed, in his Beis Yosef commentary (ad loc. 4), the Shulchan Aruch explicitly rules against Rabbeinu Bachya's opinion (Shulchan Shel Arba pg. 466) of mandating whole finger washing. Several contemporary authorities, including Rav Yosef Eliyahu Henkin (Shu"t Gevuros Eliyahu vol. 1, 53, 4), and Rav Shmuel HaLevi Wosner (Kovetz M'Bais Levi vol. 17, pg 22, 3) wrote that the prevalent minhag is that one only needs to wash until the second knuckle. The Mishna Berura (ibid. end 10) writes that he sees people who are scrupulous with washing Mayim Acharonim, yet only wash the tips of their fingers, not realizing that they must wash until the second knuckle to fulfill the Mitzva. He calls this minute washing a 'Maaseh Ra', and exhorts everyone to wash at least until the second knuckle.

[24] The Arizal (Shaar HaKavannos pg. 72b) and the Siddur HaRashash maintain that Kabbalistically, the entire fingers must be washed during Mayim Acharonim. The Kaf Hachaim (Orach Chaim 181, 17) rules this way as well. [In Orach Chaim 157, 22 the Kaf Hachaim explains the Arizal's reasoning for this.] He adds a rule, that anytime a halacha is not specifically mentioned in the Gemara, but its practical application is debated by Poskim, we should follow the practice of the Kabbalists. He adds that certainly, if the Shulchan Aruch would have seen the ruling of the Arizal, he would have mandated whole finger washing as well. As mentioned in a previous footnote, requiring the whole fingers to be washed was also the opinion of Rabbeinu Bachya (Shulchan Shel Arba pg. 466). The Mishna Berura (181, 4, Biur Halacha s.v. ad) concludes that lechatchilla one should try to be machmir for this opinion. [Interestingly, he refers to it as the Gr"a's shitta. On this, see Shu"t Teshuvos V'Hanhagos (vol. 1, 173) who explains that the Gr"a's true shitta was washing the full hand. See next footnote.]

[25] See Biur HaGr" a (Orach Chaim 181, 12, s.v. yesh), Chidushei HaGr" a Imrei Noam (on Brachos 15a and 53b), Maaseh Rav (84), and in many glosses on the Maaseh Rav, including Damesek Eliezer, Ohr Chodosh, and Biurei Rav Naftali Hertz HaLevi. This was also attested to by the Gr" a's talmid, Rav Zundel Salant (HaTzaddik Ri" Z M' Salant pg. 115), and was the personal hanhaga of the Brisker Rav [see Shu" t Teshuvos V' Hanhagos (vol. 1, 173) at length on the Gr" a's shitta of Mayim Acharonim].

[26] Shu" t Shevet HaLevi (vol. 3, 23, 3 s.v. l'inyan) and Shu" t Teshuvos V' Hanhagos (vol. 1, 174). However, Rav Sternbuch concludes that nevertheless women still should wash Mayim Acharonim. He notes that certainly according to the Gr" a and others who maintain that even nowadays that Mayim Acharonim is obligatory, there would be no difference between men and women in this aspect. He adds that he has seen many 'Chassidim and Anshei Maaseh' whose wives were careful to wash Mayim Acharonim. He concludes that while women should do so, it is preferable that they should wash unobtrusively to not fall into the category of 'giving an impression of showing off' (mechezi k'yuhara).

[27] There are several other possible justifications for women's general lackadaisicalness with Mayim Acharonim: The Ya'avetz (Mor U'Ketziyah ibid.) posits that since women are generally more rigorous regarding hygiene and cleanliness they certainly would make sure not to eat with their hands, and l'shitaso not be required in Mayim Acharonim [however, he concludes that barring that, women and men have equal obligation in this Mitzvah]. Others [see Shu" t VaYevarech Dovid (vol. 1, Orach Chaim 30) and Yalkut Yosef (ibid.)] opine that since men are only makpid due to Kabbalistic reasons and not because of actual halachic concerns, women are not beholden to keep it.

[28] Cited in Halichos Bas Yisrael (pg. 58, end of footnote 11).

[29] Rav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld (Shu"t Salmas Chaim, new print, Orach Chaim 174), Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach (cited in Halichos Bas Yisrael Ch. 3, footnote 11), Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv (Ha'aros B'Maseches Chullin 105b), Rav Chaim Pinchas Scheinberg (cited in the Artscroll Ohel Sarah Siddur, endnote 105), Rav Ovadia Yosef (Halichos Olam vol. 2, Parshas Shlach 1), Rav Mordechai Eliyahu (Darchei Halacha glosses to Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 44, 1), Rav Moshe Sternbuch (Shu"t Teshuvos V'Hanhagos vol. 1, 174), the Rivevos Efraim (Shu"t vol. 1, 140, 3), and the Shevet HaKehasi (Shu"t vol. 1, 94). Others contemporary sefarim who rule that women should wash Mayim Acharonim include Halichos Baysa (Ch. 12, 2), Yalkut Yosef (ibid. and his Kitzur Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 181, 2), and Halacha Berura (ibid.). In fact, the Aruch Hashulchan (Orach Chaim 181, end 5) already mentioned that one should make sure that 'kol bnei baiso' wash Mayim Acharonim.

[30] Pele Yo'etz (Os Nun, Netillas Yadayim s.v. v'yeish). There are several additional reasons to be vigilant with Mayim Acharonim. In Shu"t Min HaShamayim (ibid; cited by the Aruch Hashulchan ibid.) he explains that 'kol hameikil b'Mayim Acharonim mekilim lo mezonosav min HaShmayim'. Additionally, the Chida (Birkei Yosef idid.) cites that his saintly grandfather was told in a She'elas Chalom that 'hameikil b'Mayim Acharonim mekilin lo yamav u'shnosav'! Definitely excellent reasons to observe this washing. For more on the topic of She'elos Chalomos in general, see Rabbi Eliezer Brodt's Lekutei Eliezer (ppg. 59 - 63).

Disclaimer: This is not a comprehensive guide, rather a brief summary to raise awareness of the issues. In any real case one should ask a competent Halachic authority.

L'iluy Nishmas the Rosh HaYeshiva - Rav Chonoh Menachem Mendel ben R' Yechezkel Shraga, Rav Yaakov Yeshaya ben R' Boruch Yehuda.