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Halachos of Mayim Acharonim

Beha'aloscha 5784

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Mayim Acharonim Is a Chiyuv

Reasons for Mayim Acharonim

1. There is a chiyuv to wash the hands at the end of a meal, before Birkas HaMazon (גמ' חולין דף ק"ה ע"א, שו"ע או"ח סי' קפ"א ס"א). Several reasons are given for this, as will be explained.
2. **Clean hands.** The Gemara (שם) says the reason is so that one's hands are not dirty with food for Birkas HaMazon. We wash them with water so that they will be fit for the bracha.
3. **Sedom salt.** Another reason given in the Gemara is that salt is used during a meal, particularly at the end of the meal, as the Gemara says (ברכות דף מ' ע"א), "After anything you eat, eat salt." There is a concern that there was "Sedom salt" – salt which comes from the Dead Sea area – mixed in. This is possibly dangerous, for if one touches his eyes after touching Sedom salt, there is a concern he will blind himself, ח"ו, (גמ' שם ע"ב).
4. **"היייתם קדושים"** The Gemara also says that it is for kedusha: "היייתם קדושים" – *this is mayim rishonim*; "היייתם קדושים" – *this is mayim acharonim*; "כי קדוש אני" – *this is fine oil*; "אני ה' אלקיכם" – *this is [the] bracha* (ברכות דף נ"ג ע"ב). In other words, before Birkas HaMazon one must purify himself as he does with netilas yodayim before the meal. Although the posuk is just an asmachta (מים ד"ה מים), it still shows that the reason is for kedusha.
5. **Based on sod.** The Zohar HaKadosh also explains that there is a great *sod* in mayim acharonim: "היצוניים" [harmful spiritual forces] chase a person to harm him, and mayim acharonim gives them their portion, causing them to leave him alone and not draw him after them (זוה"ק תרומה קנ"ד ע"ב, זוה"ק רות דף פ"ז). It is as if the water used is given to the sitra achra, which calms it and causes it to stop chasing the person. Hence, the poskim write that even if the other reasons are not so relevant today (below, 16), one should still make sure to do mayim acharonim for the Kabbalistic reasons based on *sod* (מג"א, מהרש"ל, ברכי יוסף הובאו במ"ב סק"ב).

Does Not Have Mayim Acharonim

6. If one does not have mayim acharonim, the halacha is the same as when one does not have water for netilas yodayim before a meal, i.e., he must go look for water – he must travel four mil forward, on the way, or one mil backward, out of the way (מ"ב סק"ב). If there is no water at all, one should clean his hands with anything that can clean them (כף החיים סק"ז), e.g., a towel, napkin, or tissue.
7. **Gets water mid-Birkas HaMazon.** If one gets water later, in the middle of Birkas HaMazon, he should pause and wash his hands. This is not an interruption in Birkas HaMazon since it is for the mitzva and it is a small action (מור"ר בשו"ת שבט הקהתי ח"א סי' צ"ד). Also, it is better to wait before bentsching to be able to wash mayim acharonim than to start bentsching with the mezamen and the tzibbur or the Rebbe (שו"ת שבט הקהתי ח"ג סי' פ"א). Even if one bentsched without washing mayim acharonim and afterward he got water, he should still wash for the reason of Sedom salt (3).

Ruach Ra'ah on Mayim Acharonim

On the Ground Where People Walk

8. Ruach ra'ah comes onto water used for mayim acharonim, and there is a concern one might be harmed if he walks over it. Thus, mayim acharonim is done into a dish, not over the ground (שו"ע קפ"א ס"ב). It seems ruach ra'ah does not come onto water in a dish.

9. **Under the table.** However, one may wash onto the ground where people do not walk. Thus, one may wash under the table. Even though a table is sometimes moved, usually the water is already evaporated by then (מ"ב סק"ד). That notwithstanding, there are those who are careful to wash mayim acharonim specifically into a dish (ליקוטי מהרי"ח, קב הישר פ"ג בשם השל"ה, הגר"א במעשה רב אות פ"ד).
10. **Flooring.** Some poskim say it is only a problem to wash onto the actual ground, i.e., the earth, but if something is over the ground, e.g., one is in a house with flooring, there is no problem, as ruach ra'ah does not come (מג"א סק"ב, פמ"ג שם).
11. However, others say one may not even wash over flooring (לבוש). Thus, l'chatchila one should be careful to refrain from this if possible (ע"פ מש"כ בשער הציון סק"ז).

Removing the Mayim Acharonim Dish from the Table

12. It is proper to remove the dish with the used mayim acharonim water from the table before Birkas HaMazon, as one should l'chatchila avoid saying words of kedusha in front of water with ruach ra'ah (כף שו"ת) (החיים סק"ה), as we find regarding netilas yodayim in the morning (החיים סק"ה). Some people just cover the dish that has the water in it with a cloth or the like (הסתייפול, ארחות רבינו ח"א עמ"ב פ"ג).
13. However, if it is hard to do it, there is no need to remove it from the table, as strictly speaking, it is not a problem to make a bracha in front of water with ruach ra'ah (שו"ת שיה יצחק או"ח סי' ב' בשם החת"ס) (לגבי נטי"י שחרית, פסק"ת סי' ב' בשם בעל דברי חיים, שו"ת באר משה ח"ה סי' ל"ט).

Wiping Mouth and Mustache

14. Some hold one should not wipe his mouth or mustache with hands moist with mayim acharonim water to wash off the grime from the food, as there is ruach ra'ah on them (כף החיים סוף סק"א).
15. However, many people do clean residual grime from food around their mouths with the mayim acharonim on their hands (רש"י יומא) (דף פ"ג ע"ב ד"ה מים אחרונים הרגו). This is based on the concept that ruach ra'ah only comes onto the water that dripped off the hands. That water is given to the היצוניים based on *sod* (5), not the water that remains on the fingers. This is certainly true according to the assumption of many poskim that ruach ra'ah is only on water spilled onto the ground, not water in a dish (8). Many gedolim did this (שו"ת התעוררות תשובה ח"א סי' פ"ג).

Halachos Based On the Different Reasons

Nowadays

16. Some of the above reasons obligating mayim acharonim do not apply today. Accordingly, the poskim discuss whether there is a chiyuv to wash mayim acharonim in various situations.
17. **Sedom salt.** We do not have Sedom salt among us today. Thus, some do not wash mayim acharonim (מג"א סק"ב). However, the Gra's view is that Sedom salt is still relevant today. Thus, mayim acharonim is a chiyuv even today (הובא במ"ב שם).
18. **Cleanliness.** People today are not usually careful to wash the grime from the food off their hands at the end of a meal. This is likely because people today eat with a knife, spoon, and fork, so their hands do not get as dirty from eating (מור וקציעה להיעב"ץ). Hence, their hands are not considered filthy to the extent that they would not be able to say Birkas HaMazon in a state of cleanliness. For this reason too some people do not wash mayim acharonim.

