

Talmud Brachot Top Ten Teachings, Daf 37:

1. ***Ikar and tafel vs. Rav and Shmuel.*** On daf 36 we learned the principle of *ikar* and *tafel*: when two foods are eaten together, a bracha is required only on the food that is *ikar*, primary. When bread is part of a meal it is considered the *ikar*, and therefore the *hamotzi* will cover most other foods at the meal. A possible exception is when little pieces of bread are eaten with salty, spicy fish just because otherwise the fish would be too salty. In that situation, the bread may actually be *tafel*. But in general, bread is king of the meal. The gemara now teaches us another principle: according to Rav and Shmuel, anything made from one of the five grains that is not bread in many instances gets a *mezonos*. But what if the food made from grains is only one part of the dish? Rav and Shmuel do not say the grain needs to be the majority in order for this principle to apply. If it's really just a tiny bit, or just there as a binding agent, then a *mezonos* would not be necessary, but if the grain is a significant minority of the dish then the bracha is *mezonos*. But now we have two contradictory principles: *ikar* and *tafel* vs. the significance of even a small amount of grain. The rabbis work hard to maintain and reconcile both principles. For example, what is the bracha on breaded schnitzel? We might think it should be *mezonos* based on Rav and Shmuel, because the breading is made from grain and grain gets a *mezonos*. But the rabbis consider the main purpose of the breading to be making the chicken better. Since the chicken is most certainly the *ikar*, the bracha should be *shehakol*. Some point out that in theory if the breading is very heavy then a *shehakol* is not enough, but the majority of rabbis rule that breaded schnitzel is *shehakol*. What about mushroom barley soup? Some say it is not *mezonos* unless the majority of the soup is barley. But if we apply Rav and Shmuel's statement about grain, then even a significant minority of barley – perhaps 25% - is enough for a *mezonos*, and that bracha would cover the other ingredients as well.
2. ***Borei nefashos.*** For all liquids except wine (and maybe olive oil), and for food that isn't made from grain and doesn't grow from trees or from the ground, the bracha is *shehakol*. After eating these foods, we say a bracha that is like a miniature *bircat hamazon*, known as *borei nefashos*. "*Baruch atah Hashem Elokeinu melech haolam, borei nefashos rabos v'chesronan, al kol ma shebarata l'hachayot behm nefesh kol chai, baruch chei ha'olamim* - Blessed are You, G-d, King of the world, Who creates numerous living things and their deficiencies, for all that You have created with which to maintain the life of all living beings, blessed are You, the life of the world." Tosfot explains that in this bracha, we thank G-d for creating the things that we can't live without and for creating the things that we do not need for survival. Bread and water are necessities. We cannot live without them. G-d sustains us with bread and water, and we thank Him. But we recognize that G-d has also put other things in this world for our pleasure. Strictly speaking, we don't need apples to survive. But G-d created apples and oranges anyway, so that we can enjoy them. We thank G-d for these extra enjoyable things as well. Today, our supermarkets contain more delicacies than the Baalei Hatosfot would have seen in their lifetimes. The idea of the *borei nefashos* is for us to be grateful for all of these extras that are available to us and to find healthy ways to enjoy them that lead us to appreciate G-d's gifts. What is the importance of the soul's "deficiencies"? As Ishbitz teaches, if you want to know who you are, look at your lack. Who is wealthy? He who is deficient in money in his own mind. The person who has a million dollars will want two million, and that hunger will drive him to go out and get more. Weakness can motivate you to achieve greatness. So if you want to know your strength, you must find your weakness and turn it into a strength. In most cases this process starts with a psychological deficiency, which motivates an impulse to remove the deficiency. But the true path goes even beyond our deficiencies, asking what we can do that transcends our physical nature to some degree and searching for true closeness to the Holy One Blessed Be He.

3. **Rice on Pesach.** Rabbi Yochanan ben Nuri says rice is a type of grain. Just like the other grains, it can be used to make leavened dough, and that dough would be chametz that cannot be eaten on Pesach. It can also be used to make matzah, and that matzah would be acceptable to use on Pesach just like matzah made from one of the other grains. The other rabbis disagree with Rabbi Yochanan ben Nuri. How did the rabbis actually decide whether or not rice is a grain that should be considered chametz? According to Rabbi Hershel Schachter's understanding of the Yerushalmi, it was not just based on a tradition that had been passed down to them. They actually experimented for themselves. They would take various types of flour, bake bread, and decide if the bread that resulted met the criteria for chametz. So Rabbi Yochanan ben Nuri baked bread using rice and decided that what came out of the oven was bread, but other rabbis looked at it and said it was not truly leavened.
4. **Verifying halacha with outside sources.** The gemara details a debate over the correct bracha for *orez* and *dochan*. Most translate *orez* as rice and *dochan* as millet, but Rashi flips the definitions. In other languages, *orez* means rice. Can we use that as proof that *orez* in the gemara means rice? According to some rabbis, we cannot. Rabbi Hershel Schachter notes that Rabbi Chaim of Brisk had a tradition that we cannot learn halacha from other disciplines. We are not scientists or historians. If we don't have a tradition for something, it often doesn't matter what science or history has to say about it. There is a debate elsewhere in the gemara about how the words were written on the *tzitz*, one of the garments of the kohen gadol. A rabbi once went to Rome and claimed that he saw the actual *tzitz* and thus could definitively put that debate to rest, but the other rabbis didn't accept his testimony. They didn't care that he'd seen it with his own eyes. Verification from outside sources does not necessarily matter when it comes to halacha. So we cannot use the fact that *orez* in other languages means rice as a proof that *orez* in this gemara means rice. Perhaps Rashi is right and *orez* is actually millet. However, the majority of poskim do say that *orez* is rice, so in this instance the question of outside sources is mostly theoretical.
5. **The bracha on rice.** Rav and Shmuel say the bracha for *orez*, which we will assume does mean rice, is *shehakol*, and a *borei nefashos* should be said afterwards. Does rice not warrant a *mezonos*? There is in fact a *beraita* that says rice is *mezonos*. At first the gemara says that *beraita* does not reflect a general consensus; it is only citing one opinion, that of Rabbi Yochanan ben Nuri, who considers rice a type of grain that can create leavened bread. However, we have another *beraita* that says that rice is *ha'adama*, and if it's ground and baked then it becomes *mezonos*. That cannot be the opinion of Rabbi Yochanan ben Nuri, because he considers bread baked from rice to be *hamotzi*. The gemara ultimately seems to rule that rice is *mezonos*, but much confusion remains. Especially since *orez* may not even mean rice (see #4). Even today the debate is not resolved, and there are differing opinions regarding the correct bracha for rice. The majority rule that it's *mezonos*, but some rule that it's *shehakol* or *ha'adama* if it's not very well cooked. Because of this confusion, some people only eat rice as part of a meal with bread, so that it's covered by a *hamotzi* and does not need its own bracha. Another option is to eat the rice as a side dish with a *shehakol* main dish, and to have in mind when making the *shehakol* that it will also cover the rice. Although rice isn't always seen as a condiment, if you make an effort to mix it in with your main dish this could work.
6. **When to consider a debate resolved.** Rabban Gamliel, who was the Nasi, the head of the Court and as close as we had to a king at the time, was entertaining a group of rabbis including Rabbi Akiva. They ate dates, and then it came time to make the blessing after the meal. We know that after eating one of the fruits that the land of Israel is praised for, a special bracha should be said. But that rule can be interpreted in multiple ways. According to Rabban Gamliel's interpretation, the full *bircat hamazon* is required, but according to his rabbinic contemporaries, a shorter

version should be recited. So after serving dates to his guests, Rabban Gamliel asked Rabbi Akiva to lead them in the after-blessing, expecting the full *bircat hamazon*, and Rabbi Akiva instead recited the shorter version. Rabban Gamliel became upset. They were in his home, and surely Rabbi Akiva knew that he believed the full *bircat hamazon* was required. But Rabbi Akiva said to him, "Didn't you teach me that in a dispute, we rule according to the majority?" Rabban Gamliel was alone in his interpretation of the halacha. All the other rabbis at the table followed the other ruling, that the shorter version is said after eating the fruits that the land of Israel is praised for. The question is, when is it acceptable to hold differing opinions and when does one have to concede to another's ruling? In a sense, that's what Rabban Gamliel and Rabbi Akiva were arguing about. Rabban Gamliel figured that different authorities held different opinions, but his own was perfectly valid and he had a right to expect it to be followed in his own home. Rabbi Akiva believed it did not make sense to continue to entertain this minority opinion, because they all knew that if it came to a vote Rabban Gamliel would lose. Before Rav Moshe Feinstein, the posek in America was Rabbi Henkin. Rabbi Henkin ruled that someone who gets married civilly is considered to be halachically married and requires a *get* before remarrying. Rav Moshe disagreed, saying that a civil marriage is not a halachic marriage. For a while, though he disagreed with Rabbi Henkin, Rav Moshe tried to be respectful to him, suggesting that whenever possible people who had been civilly married should have a *get* before remarrying. But over time, Rav Moshe's ruling became law. Today the overwhelming halachic view does not consider civil marriage to have the status of chuppah and *kiddushin*. And that shift was incredibly important, because without it the *baal teshuva* movement could never have happened. Rav Moshe's ruling saved many thousands of people from being considered *mamzerim*. (Based on a shiur by Rabbi Mordechai Tendler.) There was a time that two major poskim held differing opinions on this crucial question, but now the debate has been resolved and it's as if we have an official ruling. While we don't have a Sanhedrin today, we still have some forms of halachic consensus. But because this is a serious issue, a halachic authority should be consulted when it comes to questions of this nature.

7. **An amusing potential conundrum.** Grapes are one of the fruits special to Israel. This means that if we followed Rabban Gamliel, we would be required to say *bircat hamazon* after drinking a cup of wine. But *bircat hamazon* is often - and in those days it may have been always - said over a cup of wine. If you say *bircat hamazon* over a cup of wine, and the cup of wine requires *bircat hamazon*, you just have to keep drinking another glass and saying another *bircat hamazon*. It would never end! Tosfot says we can solve this problem by using less than a *revi'is* of wine for the *bircat hamazon*. An amount of wine less than a *revi'is* is enough to use for *bircat hamazon* but is not enough to require its own *bircat hamazon*. So it would be easy enough to break the cycle, and in fact the whole thing is moot because we don't follow Rabban Gamliel anyway. But it's an amusing potential problem.
8. **Matza ball soup.** According to Rav and Shmuel, a matza ball is *mezonos*. When you're having matza ball soup, is the matza ball a significant enough part of the soup that the soup itself is considered *tafel*? We call it matza ball soup, but is that really what it is, or is it more like chicken (or vegetable) soup that just happens to have matza balls in it? Following Rav and Shmuel, a *mezonos* on the matza ball will cover the whole dish and no other bracha is required. But the OU website says that you should actually make two brachot: a *mezonos* for the matza ball, which is a separate entity, and a *shehakol* or *ha'adama* for the soup. If you are going to make only a *mezonos* on the whole thing, you should make sure to have soup with the matza ball and not to just eat the matza ball by itself. What if you don't really enjoy matza balls, and you're eating it because it's there but you don't consider it the important part of the soup? In that case, the matza ball is *tafel* and you don't need a *mezonos* at all.

9. **Mushroom barley soup.** Mushrooms are *shehakol*, barley is *mezonos*, and vegetables are *ha'adama*. What do you do when you have all of these things together in one soup? Do you need to make three separate brachot? Some people do, but it's not necessary. Odds are that the barley is mostly what gives the soup its texture and substance while the other things add flavor and nutrients. Since *mezonos* is considered important, the barley doesn't need to be the majority of the soup in order for the bracha to be *mezonos*. As long as it is a sizable minority, a *mezonos* will suffice for the whole soup.
10. **Cereal and yogurt.** If you pour yogurt over your cereal, what bracha do you make? (It's hard to say which is the *ikar* and which is the *tafel*.) In a situation like this the halacha seems to follow Rav and Shmuel, so the correct bracha is *mezonos*. If the cereal is at least 50%, it's clearly *mezonos*. Even if the cereal is only 25%, it's still *mezonos* according to Rav and Shmuel, who we follow in this case. But if it's 90% yogurt and only 10% bran on top, the bracha is *shehakol*.