Talmud Brachot Top Ten Teachings, Daf 46:

1. **The short one with the singed thigh.** Rabbi Zeira was ill, and Rabbi Avahu said, “when the short one with the singed thigh recovers, I will make a festive meal for the rabbis.” This is possibly the only reference in the Talmud to the idea of making a *seudat hoda’ah*, a festival of gratitude, which people still do today. Why did Rabbi Avahu refer to Rabbi Zeira with this nickname? Rabbi Zeira is one of the most interesting characters in the Talmud. He delved into some very deep mysteries. Rava once made a *golem* (android) and sent it to him as a kind of prank, and when he realized what it was he said something that caused it to stop working. There is a fascinating story in Tractate Megillah: Rabba invited Rabbi Zeira to a festive Purim meal. At the meal, Rabba got drunk and slaughtered Rabbi Zeira. When he realized what he’d done, he prayed for Rabbi Zeira to come back to life, and it worked. The next year Rabba again invited Rabbi Zeira to join him for Purim, and Rabbi Zeira declined because “a miracle doesn’t happen every time.” Why would Rabba even try to invite Rabbi Zeira back after literally killing him the previous year? Some explain that the story is metaphorical. Rabba didn’t kill Rabbi Zeira, but drew his soul so high that it couldn’t return to his body. Others do understand the story literally, suggesting that the two rabbis were experimenting with dying and coming back to life, just like they had experimented with building a golem. Every thirty days Rabbi Zeira would go into an oven just to see if the fire would hurt him, presumably as a test to see if he was worthy of being spared the fires of Gehinnom. What all of these strange stories have in common is mysticism. Rabbi Zeira was like one of those people who walk on fire to reach a meditative state in which fear doesn’t affect them. It could be that one time an experiment didn’t work perfectly, and that is how his thigh got singed. Maybe some other rabbis gave him an *ayin hara* because they were jealous of his piety. This could explain the singed thigh, but it doesn’t explain Rabbi Zeira calling him “the short man with the singed thigh” when he was ill. Perhaps it is like the story of the Kotzker Rebbe: one of his young relatives was ill, and everyone was asking how such a great Torah scholar could have fallen ill. The Rebbe said, “he’s not so great.” And then the young man recovered. What was going on? In Heaven they were hearing how great this young man was, and they were saying it was time to take him. So the Kotzker Rebbe said, “he’s not so great,” as if to say that he still had a lot of work to do and Heaven didn’t really want him yet. Similarly, Rabbi Avahu was bringing up Rabbi Zeira’s singed thigh to show Heaven his vulnerability and awaken G-d’s compassion.
2. **Who makes the *hamotzi*?** Rabbi Zeira recovered from his illness, and Rabbi Avahu hosted a festive meal to celebrate, as he’d promised. When the meal began, Rabbi Avahu asked Rabbi Zeira to make the *hamotzi* for everyone gathered. But Rabbi Zeira said, “Don’t you hold like Rabbi Yochanan, that the head of the household makes the bracha?” So Rabbi Avahu made the bracha and started the meal. Typically the host should be the one to make the *hamotzi* and distribute the bread, because if a guest distributes the bread he might not give enough to everyone. If the host does it, he can be sure to give out large enough portions - at least a *kezayit* of bread for everyone. If there is a kohen or a big talmid chacham at the meal, should he be given the honor of making the *hamotzi*? No, it should be the head of the household. This isn’t an honor that needs to be given out, because it’s more important to make sure all the guests get enough bread. What if there is a roll set aside for everyone so there is no worry that people won’t have enough bread? In that case, the head of the household can decide if he wants to make the bracha himself or honor someone else with it. At Rabbi Avahu’s festive meal, Rabbi Zeira could have been considered the host because the party was in his honor. But he was so humble that even though he was the center of attention, he cared more about giving honor to the friend who had prayed for him and made this party for him. He therefore insisted that Rabbi Avahu, as the host, be the one to make the *hamotzi*.
3. **Who leads the *zimun*?** At the end of the meal, Rabbi Avahu asked Rabbi Zeira to lead the *zimun*, and again Rabbi Zeira declined. He said, “Don’t you hold like Rav Huna, that whoever made the first blessing (the *hamotzi*) should also lead the bentsching?” Rabbi Avahu acquiesced but didn’t actually agree, and in fact this is not the halacha. When it comes to the *zimun* it is better for a guest to lead, so that he can make a blessing for the host. But if the host doesn’t feel a need to be blessed and would prefer to lead the *zimun* himself, he can. Which guest should be given the honor of leading the *zimun*? If there is a talmid chacham at the table, he should be given the honor, even if there is also a kohen at the table. If the kohen is also a great scholar then the honor can be given to him, but it doesn’t have to be. Some have the custom that when a non-kohen is leading a *zimun* with kohanim present, he accords respect to the kohanim by saying, “with the permission of the kohanim,” though strictly speaking this is not required.
4. **The blessing for the host.** The bentschers we use today include a short blessing that guests make for their hosts. The gemara has a longer version of this blessing: *Yehi ratzon shelo yevosh ba’al habayit be’olam hazeh velo yichalem be’olam haba* - May it be G-d’s will that this host not be embarrassed in this world or humiliated in the next world. What does this mean? Embarrassment can come in this world when we do the wrong thing. But sometimes people act badly and don’t feel embarrassed, because they are powerful and no one would dare say a word against them. These people may be free of embarrassment in this world, but they will be humiliated in the next because the power they held in this world will not save them from G-d’s judgment. Rebbe would add: *Veyitzlach me’od bechol nechasav, veyihyu nechasav v’nichsaynu mutzlachim ukrovim la’ir, ve’al yishlot satan lo bema’asei yadav velo bema’asei yadeinu, ve’al yizdaker lo lefanav velo lefaneinu shum davar hirhur chet ve’aveirah ve’avon me’atah ve’ad olam* -  And may he be very successful in all his possessions, and his property should be successful and close to home, and may the evil Opposer not have any rule in the work of his hands or the work of our hands, and may there not be appearing before him or us the thought of sin or *aveirah* from now until forever. Why do we bless the host that his possessions should all be close to home? According to Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, it’s not good to have to travel all over the world to make a living. It’s better to have everything you need close to home and easy to access. Our siddurim have altered the wording of the blessing of the host but have retained the concept. It has become less common in modern times for the leader of the bentsching to recite the blessings aloud, because nowadays every individual is able to read the *bircat hamazon*, but he really should.
5. **Rabbi Nachman vs. Rav Sheshet.** There is a debate between Rabbi Nachman and Rav Sheshet regarding the *zimun*. Rashi explains the debate in this way: Until where is the bracha for the *zimun*? Rabbi Nachman says until *nevarech*; Rav Sheshet says until *hazan*. In other words, Rabbi Nachman says the *zimun* bracha ends at the end of the *zimun*, while Rav Sheshet says the first blessing of the bentsching itself is still part of the *zimun*. This means that according to Rav Sheshet, someone who is bentsching without a *zimun* should skip the first blessing and begin with *nodeh lecha*. There is a *beraita* that can support each opinion. One *beraita* says bentsching is either two or three blessings. We can understand this to mean that without a *zimun* it is only two blessings, and with a *zimun* it is three (the fourth blessing, *hatov vehametiv*, is not included because it was a later addition). Another *beraita* says that bentsching is either three or four blessings. We can understand this to mean that without a *zimun* it is three blessings, and with a *zimun* it is four - the *zimun* itself counts as a separate blessing.
6. **Tosfot: a different understanding of the debate.** Tosfot has several complaints about Rashi’s interpretation of the debate between Rabbi Nachman and Rav Sheshet. First, the first blessing of bentsching is Biblical, so how could it be that we skip it unless we have a *zimun*? Second, we have a rule that in a debate between Rabbi Nachman and Rav Sheshet regarding things that are prohibited the law follows Rav Sheshet. But that would mean it’s the halacha that we skip the first blessing unless we have a *zimun*, and we know that’s not the case -- both because it’s not common practice and because the gemara continues to refer to bentsching as three blessings. Third, we learn from a verse that the *zimun* and the first blessing are two separate things. Therefore, Tosfot reads the debate differently. He sees it as a continuation of the discussion on the previous page about what to do when one of the three people isn’t finished with his meal. We learned that if three people are eating together and only two of them are ready to bentsch, the third must pause his meal and join the *zimun*, and after the *zimun* he can continue eating. The question is, how far into the bentsching does he need to wait before resuming his meal? Rabbi Nachman says only until the end of the *zimun* itself. Rav Sheshet says until the end of the first blessing - not because the blessing is part of the *zimun*, but because the *zimun* itself isn’t technically a blessing and it doesn’t really count as participating in the *zimun* unless he’s heard one blessing.
7. **Back-to-back blessings.** The fourth blessing of *bircat hamazon*, *hatov vehametiv*, is not Biblical. How do we know? Because it starts with “*baruch atah Hashem”* and doesn’t end with it. We learn in a *beraita* that all blessings begin with *“baruch atah Hashem”* and end with *“baruch,”* with the exception of *birchot hanehenin* - blessings on things that we enjoy - and blessings on mitzvot. The other exception to the rule is a blessing that follows another blessing, which typically ends with “*baruch”* but doesn’t start with “*baruch*.” That is why in Shemonah Esrei, only the first blessing starts with *“baruch atah Hashem.”* The *hatov vehametiv* blessing starts with *“baruch”* but doesn’t end with it, which suggests that it is not connected to the previous blessing but is actually its own separate entity. What does it mean for a blessing to “follow” another? Is it just about when we say them, or must there be an intrinsic connection between the blessings? *Hatov vehametiv* comes right after the third blessing of bentsching, but are they really connected? Tosfot says that even though we say the *al netilat yadayim* and *asher yatzar* blessings back-to-back every morning, they are not considered connected because each can be, and often is, said on its own. Rabbi Soloveitchik clarifies that while the 18 blessings of the Shemonah Esrei are always said together, *al netilat yadayim* and *asher yatzar* are two distinct blessings that do not always go together. Sometimes even if two blessings have no intrinsic connection, if they are consistently said together they may still be considered connected. What about *birchot hashachar*, the group of blessings we say in shacharit? The Rambam says that they are all distinct blessings and not a connected group, but they do not need to start and end with *“baruch”* because they fall into the category of *birchot hanehenin*. In fact, these blessings don’t need to be said together; you could say them one at a time as you complete each step of getting ready in the morning. According to Rabbi Soloveitchik, Tosfot learns like the Rambam that these are all individual blessings. The Ran and the Rosh say that these are not *birchot hanehenin* but *birchot hashevach* - blessings of praise. Even if you don’t personally benefit from the subject of one of these blessings, you can still say it. There is another Tosfot that might agree with this opinion, suggesting that the only reason these blessings don’t follow the standard formula is that they are so short.
8. **Separate but connected.** Tosfot says that *yishtabach* doesn’t begin with “*baruch”* because it is connected to *baruch she’amar.* That means that blessings can be connected to each other even if they are not quite said back-to-back. *Baruch she’amar* is the beginning of *psukei d’zimrah* and *yishtabach* is the end; there are more than 12 paragraphs between them. But they are thematically connected, and that is why we are supposed to be careful not to speak between the two blessings. The same is true for *ahava rabbah*, the blessing before the Shema, and *emes veyatziv*, the blessing after the Shema. Even though the Shema comes in the middle, the two blessings are still considered connected because the Shema and its blessings are all one unit. However, this does not apply in every case. There are blessings that we say before reading from the Torah or a Megillah and blessings that we say after, but those blessings are not considered connected to each other. Perhaps this is because originally only the last person would make the bracha after the reading, which means it was a very big interruption, or it might be that those blessings are more distinct from the mitzvah that they are said on, and so the whole section is not considered one unit the way the Shema and its blessings are. Therefore the blessings after reading from the Torah or a Megillah start and end with *“baruch.”*
9. ***Hatov vehametiv*: Biblical or rabbinic?** Most opinions say that the fourth blessing of bentsching, *hatov vehametiv*, is rabbinic, but there is an opinion that it is Biblical. Rav Yosef brings three proofs that the blessing is rabbinic: the workers don’t say it; it starts with *“baruch,”* and generally a blessing that comes after a blessing does not, which suggests that it is a separate and somewhat unconnected blessing; and it isn’t said in the house of a mourner. The gemara says later that this blessing was instituted in Yavneh after the *harugei beitar* incident. This was a situation in which many people died tragically and the bodies couldn’t be buried until years later. When the burials were finally done, this new blessing was instituted in gratitude. But if that’s true, how could there be an opinion that the blessing is Biblical? Rabbi Soloveitchik explains that there is no dispute regarding when the blessing was instituted - everyone agrees that it happened in Yavneh. But was the new blessing added onto bentsching simply because there was nowhere else to put it, or was it specifically instituted as an extension of the Biblical requirement of *bircat hamazon*? If it was meant as an extension of the Biblical requirement, perhaps it could be considered Biblical. Rabbi Soloveitchik then points out eight distinctions between this blessing and the rest of *bircat hamazon*. One distinction is that you’re supposed to say *bircat hamazon* in the same spot where you ate, but that might not be necessary for *hatov vehametiv*. Another is that according to the Rambam, if you forgot to say a part of *bircat hamazon* and you’re already in the middle of *hatov vehametiv*, it’s too late to say the thing you missed because you have already finished the actual *bircat hamazon*.
10. **Who washes first?** The Persian custom was to have the greatest person wash first. Rav Sheshet challenges this custom, because it means the greatest person at the meal is waiting the longest for his food. Theoretically he’d be allowed to eat before everyone else, but the general practice is for everyone to wait for the host to make *hamotzi*. For *mayim acharonim*, the Reish Galusa says to start with the least prominent person. Rav Sheshet challenges this too, saying that it is disgusting to make the most prominent person wait the longest with dirty hands. Though it does mean he’d be allowed to keep eating the longest. What is Rav Sheshet’s suggestion? Based on a *beraita*, he says that at the beginning of the meal the most prominent person should wash first and be served first, so he doesn’t have to wait. For *mayim acharonim*, if there are five people then the most prominent should go first, and if there are 100 people then the least prominent should go first until there are only five left, at which point the most honorable should go first, and this person should lead the *zimun*. Rav also says that this most honorable person should be the one to lead the *zimun*.