Talmud Brachot Top Ten Teachings, Daf 51:

1. **If you forgot to make a bracha *rishona* (before-blessing).** What do you do when you realize while you’re eating that you forgot to make a bracha *rishona* - the blessing before eating food? If the food is still in your mouth, and it would be disgusting to take it out, you should move it to the side of your mouth and make the bracha before continuing to chew and swallow. If it’s something that can be taken out of your mouth without being disgusting, like a lollipop, take it out and make the bracha. But what about something that can’t be moved to the side or taken out of your mouth? What if you took a sip of water and realized just before swallowing that you forgot the bracha? Can you swallow the water and then make a bracha *rishona*? Most authorities understand the gemara to be saying no, you cannot make a bracha *rishona* at that point. Someone asked Rav Chisda: if you ate and drank without a bracha, should you go back and make the bracha? He responded, if someone eats garlic and gets bad breath, he doesn’t eat more garlic to improve his breath. What does this mean? According to Rashi, the question is about making the bracha after finishing the food, and Rav Chisda’s answer is that just because you did one wrong thing by forgetting the bracha before eating, that doesn’t mean you should do another wrong thing by making a bracha at the wrong time. But the Vilna Gaon explains this differently: Rav Chisda was asked, what should you do if you’re in the middle of eating and you realize you forgot the bracha? Just because you made a mistake by not making the bracha before, that doesn’t mean you should continue to do the wrong thing by eating more without making a bracha. Ravina seems to indicate that you can make a bracha *rishona* even after finishing eating or drinking. He bases this opinion on a *beraisa* that says someone can make the bracha on going to the mikvah even after coming out of the mikvah. This teaches that a blessing that is usually made before can still be made after. But Ravina’s opinion is seemingly rejected, because his proof is very weak. The mikvah situation cannot be compared to eating, because the person discussed in the *beraisa* is not even eligible to make the bracha before going into the mikvah. The Rambam rules that if someone remembers while in the middle of drinking that he forgot to make a bracha, he can make the bracha after swallowing. But this is highly problematic, because the only support in the gemara for this ruling is Ravina, whose opinion was apparently rejected. Some commentaries explain that the Rambam is actually talking about the bracha *acharona* (the after-blessing). But a simple reading of the ruling indicates that the Rambam is saying one can actually make a bracha *rishona* after finishing a drink. How can he say that? Perhaps the answer is that what’s important when it comes to making a bracha is establishing a relationship of sorts with the food. In general, when you make a bracha on a particular food you’re supposed to hold that food in your hand, and that creates a connection between the bracha and the food. If you make a bracha while holding an apple, intending to eat that apple, but then you drop it and go to get a different apple, you need to make a new bracha on the new apple. A few pages earlier in the gemara, we had a question about when to make the bracha on *besamim*. The question didn’t seem to make sense, because the bracha almost always comes before the enjoyment. Why would we even think to make the bracha on *besamim* after smelling it? Because the point of the bracha is to establish a connection, and so the bracha on the *besamim* should be made when you touch the smell - but since scent is intangible, this can only happen when you smell it. Now perhaps we can understand the Rambam, and even Ravina. While the liquid was still in your mouth, you realized that you forgot to make a bracha and that you still need to make a bracha. This intention establishes the necessary connection. Once the connection exists, making the bracha becomes permissible, even though it can’t be done until the liquid is swallowed. However, today we do not follow the opinion of the Rambam, partly because it is a minority opinion and partly because we are not even completely sure of what he is saying.
2. **A convert at the mikvah.** Ravina references a *beraisa* that says someone can make the bracha on going to the mikvah after coming out of the mikvah. But the gemara says that this case is unique and cannot be compared to eating, because the person in the mikvah was not fit to make a bracha before going in, unlike someone eating food who was fit to make a bracha but simply forgot. Why would someone going to the mikvah not be fit to make a bracha beforehand? Rashi says this is talking about a *baal keri*, a man who had a seminal emission. There used to be a decree, put in place by Ezra, that a *baal keri* was impure for certain things, including saying certain words of Torah, and could only become pure by going to the mivkah. Therefore, before immersing in the mikvah the *baal keri* would be unable to make a bracha. Though we no longer follow the decree of Ezra, this ruling of making the bracha after immersing had become so embedded in halacha that it stuck. Tosfot disagrees with Rashi, arguing that the mikvah discussion is about a convert. Before immersing in the mikvah the convert is not Jewish, so of course the bracha needs to wait until after the immersion. And since this is how a convert makes the bracha on mikvah, it has become how everyone makes the bracha on mikvah, even a woman who is fit to make the bracha beforehand. The ruling has even been extended to the *al netilas yadayim* bracha, which we make after washing our hands. Though interestingly, the Rambam rules that *al netilas yadayim* should be said before washing the hands - after all, why should the ruling for a convert at the mikvah apply to hand washing?
3. ***Maaseh merkavah.*** Rabbi Yishmael ben Elisha said three things: If you’re getting dressed in the morning and you have a butler who could hand you your cloak and shirt, don’t let him; don’t have someone else wash your hands, do it yourself; and don’t hand *aspargus* to somebody who didn’t give it to you. These are mystical teachings. Letting a butler dress you would apparently interfere somehow with some mystical energy. *Aspargus* is a mystical drink that is supposed to have medicinal properties. How did Rabbi Yishmael ben Elisha know these mystical things? The angel Suriel, the interior ministry angel, told them to him. Rabbi Yishmael ben Elisha is said to have known some of the mysteries of existence, of angels and divinity. Rashi says that he went up to Heaven through the use of a Divine Name, and that this is in a *beraisa* about the *maaseh merkavah* (ascent of the chariot). According to Rashi, there was a body of teachings equivalent to what we call *mishnayos*, that were called *beraisos*. These *beraisos* were not written down and were transmitted only very selectively, much more than any other mishna, *beraisa*, or *tosefta*. Within them were instructions on how to make a Heavenly ascent using combinations and configurations of Divine Names. There are different ways of understanding what *maaseh merkavah* is, but this is Rashi’s understanding - esoteric teachings of Divine Names that gave practitioners the ability to access high levels.
4. **Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi and the Angel of Death**. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi says the Angel of Death told him three things: Don’t take your shirt from your butler, don’t let someone else wash your hands, and don’t stand before the women when you return from a funeral. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi was somehow able to access these hidden secrets because he had a relationship with the Angel of Death. The Angel was told to treat him with respect, and he was able to control how and when he died. He asked to be shown Gan Eden, so he was given a tour. It was supposed to be just a tour, but he grabbed the knife from the Angel of Death and jumped in, and they couldn’t get him out. The Angel grabbed him by the cloak to bring him out, but he said, “I swear I will not come out.” The Holy One Blessed Be He said, “if you’ve ever asked to annul an oath, then you have to come out. If not, you can stay.” Since he had never annulled an oath, he was allowed to stay, though he had to return the knife to the Angel of Death. They took Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi to see Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, who asked if he’d ever seen a rainbow. He said he had, although in truth he hadn’t and he was just being humble. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai told him if he’d had a rainbow in his time, he couldn’t be Yehoshua ben Levi. The Yismach Moshe offers an explanation of this story. It was because Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi had always kept his oaths and never tried to annul them that he was allowed to keep his oath to stay in Gan Eden. Why did it matter if he had ever seen a rainbow? G-d created the rainbow as a sign of His oath to Noah that He would never again destroy the world with a flood. Why was a sign needed at all? Generally, any oath can be annulled unless it was made with another party in mind who has done something beneficial to the one making the oath. After leaving the Ark, Noah brought various offerings and pleased G-d. Therefore, G-d’s oath to Noah was binding and could never be annulled. When a generation is unworthy, G-d becomes tempted to annul His oath, and the rainbow serves as a reminder that it cannot be annulled. The colors of the rainbow represent the different atonements achieved by the different animals Noah sacrificed. If Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, a leader in his generation, had truly never annulled an oath, then G-d would not have “needed” that reminder because He wouldn’t have even considered annulling His own oath.
5. **Ten things to do with the cup of blessing.** A *beraisa* tells us that there are ten things we should do with a cup of blessing. Most authorities understand this to be about a *zimun*. When the leader of the *zimun* holds the cup of wine to make the blessings, these ten rules should be followed: 1) It should be washed. 2) It should be rinsed. 3) It should be *chai* (alive). 4) It should be full. 5) It requires crowning. 6) A head covering should be worn. 7) It should be taken with both hands. 8) It should be held in the right hand. 9) It should be lifted up a *tefach* from the ground. 10) He should look at it and concentrate. Some add an 11th rule: it should be given as a gift to members of the household, most specifically the woman of the house.
6. **Rabbi Yochanan and Rambam.** Rabbi Yochanan says only four of the ten things are required: washing, rinsing, *chai*, and full. Washing refers to the inside of the cup and rinsing refers to the outside. There are different opinions regarding the meaning of *chai*, but it might mean that it is mixed right then and not earlier. In those days wine was always mixed with water, so the issue is at what point the water is mixed in. And whoever makes the bracha on a full cup gets an inheritance without any boundaries.
So far we’ve only been talking about the cup of wine used for *bircat hamazon*. Do the ten things also apply to kiddush and havdalah? The Rambam rules that for *bircat hamazon*, only Rabbi Yochanan’s four things are needed, but for kiddush and havdalah most of the ten apply. Why? Perhaps the Rambam sees Rabbi Yochanan as limiting the ten requirements down to four, but other rabbis disagreeing with that limitation. Since the Rambam holds that *bircat hamazon* technically does not require a cup of wine, he holds that the limited list of requirements is enough for when a cup is used. But since kiddush and havdalah do require a cup of wine, the bigger list of ten requirements, or at least most of them, should be followed.
7. **More about the ten requirements.** What exactly does *chai* mean? Rav Sheshet says that the water should be poured into the wine when the blessing over the land is made. Wine is used to sanctify objects, so the wine should be made perfect during the blessing on the land as a way of sanctifying the land. There is something about this blessing that is so fundamental to what *bircat hamazon* is all about. That is why there is a debate about whether or not women are Biblically required to say *bircat hamazon* - women don’t have a portion in the land, and the *bircat hamazon* is so bound up in the land and our gratitude for it and for what G-d provides for us through it that it makes sense for someone without a portion not to be obligated in the blessing. What does it mean that crowning is required? Perhaps that the leader should surround himself with students, or perhaps that the “head cup” should have little cups around it. This is not practiced today. The covering requirement is still practiced by some people today, who specifically put on a hat before beginning *bircat hamazon*.
8. **Don’t be too much of a tzaddik.** Ulla was a guest in Rav Nachman’s home, and Rav Nachman asked Ulla to lead the *zimun*. After the *zimun*, he asked Ulla to give wine from the cup of blessing to his wife, Yalta. This is the 11th requirement - giving the wine to the woman of the house. But Ulla refused. He quoted his own teacher, who said the woman is only blessed through the man, and gave the cup only to Rav Nachman. Yalta became very upset and broke 400 barrels of wine (probably not literally). At that point Ulla’s cup was empty, but he tried to appease Yalta by offering her another cup, because all the wine in the barrel is like the same cup. But she wasn’t impressed by his offer. She said, “From passing peddlers come meaningless words, and from old rags come lice.” Ulla thought he knew better than his host. He probably thought it would be immodest to give wine to Rav Nachman’s wife. But what he thought was a stringency was really just an insult to Yalta. It does not pay to be too much of a tzaddik, thinking that you know better than everything else.
9. **The order of the kiddush blessings.** Kiddush on Shabbos contains two blessings: the blessing on the wine and the blessing on the day. Which comes first? Beis Shammai says we should first make the blessing on the day and then make the blessing on the wine. This is because the day is the reason we’re making the kiddush in the first place. In addition, if the blessing on the wine came first then the blessing on the day would be an interruption between the blessing on the wine and the drinking of the wine. Beis Hillel says the blessing on the wine should come first, and then the blessing on the day. This is because you’ve already sanctified the day in your davening, and the reason you’re making the kiddush now is because you have a cup of wine in front of you. In addition, we have a principle that a bracha that is made more frequently takes precedence over a bracha that is made less frequently. The blessing on wine, which can be made as many times as one wishes during the week, is made more often than the blessing sanctifying the Shabbos day, so the blessing on the wine should be made first. The gemara rules like Beis Hillel.
10. **Support from a Heavenly voice.** The debate between Beis Shammai and Beis Hillel about the order of the kiddush blessings went on for many years. Finally, a Heavenly voice (a *bas kol*) announced that both opinions are the word of the Living G-d, but the halacha is like Beis Hillel. Generally in halachic debates we simply follow the majority, so why would a Heavenly voice be needed to settle this debate? Ruling according to the majority is not always so simple. If a smaller group is greater in wisdom than a larger group, the smaller group can technically be considered the majority. Beis Hillel had more people, but Shammai thought that his smaller group was greater than Beis Hillel’s larger group, and so Beis Shammai didn’t accept Beis Hillel’s ruling. The Heavenly voice came to announce that Shammai was wrong; his group was not greater than Beis Hillel. Therefore Beis Hillel really did have the majority, and we rule in their favor.