Talmud Brachot Top Ten Teachings, Daf 52:

1. **We don’t listen to Heavenly voices.** A *beraisa* claims that the law follows Beis Hillel. But we just heard that a Heavenly voice announced that Beis Hillel was correct, so why do we need this *beraisa*? It could be that the *beraisa* is from before the Heavenly voice was heard. Or it could be that the voice had already been heard, but that was not the final say in the debate because, as Rabbi Yehoshua says, we don’t decide halacha based on Heavenly voices. There is a well-known story in Bava Metzia about a debate between Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua regarding the ritual purity of an oven. Rabbi Eliezer held one opinion, and Rabbi Yehoshua and the rest of the sages held a differing opinion. To prove that he was right, Rabbi Eliezer asked for miracles, and each miracle that he requested happened. For example, he said, “If I am correct, the wall of the house of study should cave in,” and the wall indeed began to lean. But Rabbi Yehoshua countered, commanding the wall to stand. Out of respect for both sages, the wall stayed at an incline. Finally Rabbi Eliezer asked G-d Himself to settle the debate, and a Heavenly voice – what we call a *bas kol*, a revelation likened to an echo and a step down from full prophecy – announced that the law is like Rabbi Eliezer. But Rabbi Yehoshua said that didn’t matter, because we don’t listen to Heavenly voices. *Hashamayim shamayim laHashem veha’aretz nasan livnei adam* - Heaven is G-d’s, while Earth was given to people. We say that Torah is *lo bashamayim hi* - it is not in Heaven, that we should say, “who would go up to Heaven to get it for us?” It is meant to be close to us and meant for us to figure out for ourselves. We are not supposed to rely on Heaven to answer our halachic questions, and therefore we cannot base our halachic decisions on voices coming down from Heaven. In fact, the Torah teaches us that sometimes we are supposed to ignore miracles. If a “prophet” tells us not to follow the Torah, even if he performs miracles to prove that he is right, the Torah says we should not listen to him. As one extreme example, Christians believe that Jesus was a prophet who received a new Scripture that’s supposed to replace the old one, but that is exactly the kind of thing the Torah warns us to ignore. A prophet cannot use miracles to convince us not to follow the Torah, and a rabbi cannot use miracles or Heavenly voices to convince us not to follow the halacha that was decided by the rabbis following the proper halachic process. Generally, halacha follows the majority opinion of the sages, and once a majority is decided that becomes the established halacha that must be followed.
2. **The point of the Heavenly voice.** Most people say that this debate between Hillel and Shammai over the order of the kiddush blessings, and in fact the majority of debates between Beis Hillel and Beis Shammai, actually was settled by the Heavenly voice. How can that be, when Rabbi Eliezer was excommunicated until his death for listening to the Heavenly voice and refusing to yield to the majority? Tosfot explains that the two cases are different, because here the Heavenly voice was supporting the majority while in the case of Rabbi Eliezer the Heavenly voice was supporting the minority. We know that we are supposed to follow the majority, so we can ignore a Heavenly voice that tells us not to, but when the voice supports the side we should be following anyway it’s not a problem. But then what was the point of the Heavenly voice at all? Beis Hillel had the majority, so we follow Beis Hillel - why do we need a Heavenly voice telling us to follow Beis Hillel? One answer is that it may have been unclear who actually had the majority. Beis Hillel had more people but it is possible that Beis Shammai’s people were greater and thought their opinion should carry more weight due to their greater intelligence. When one great *posek* rules differently from a number of minor *poskim*, we do sometimes follow the lone *posek* due to his greatness. But that’s not a great answer, because we are still supposed to follow specific rules in deciding halacha rather than basing our decisions on Heavenly voices. Maybe the voice was just meant to make sure that everyone knew the halacha was like Beis Hillel, so that Beis Shammai would finally stop arguing about it and realize that they were not truly greater than Beis Hillel. Why do we ultimately consider Beis Hillel the majority? Beis Hillel had an advantage in that they would listen to Beis Shammai’s opinions and respond to them, while Beis Shammai tended not to engage. Beis Shammai perhaps did have more raw intellectual ability, but Beis Hillel came to outweigh them in analytical ability. Like in the famous fable, Beis Shammai was a hare but Beis Hillel was a tortoise, persisting and going the distance and overtaking Beis Shammai in greatness, not just in numbers but also in understanding.
3. **Changing the order for havdalah.** Beis Shammai says that for kiddush, the blessing on the day should come before the blessing on the wine. But at the end of Shabbos, the havdalah blessing should come after the blessing on the wine. This seems like a contradiction, but it isn’t really. When Shabbos starts, it’s kiddush that brings it in. So it makes sense for the blessing on the day to be the first thing we say. When Shabbos ends, havdalah is what ends it. The idea is that we want to bring in Shabbos as early as possible and then hold onto it for as long as we can, even if the difference is only a few seconds. Hillel agrees that in havdalah the blessing on the wine should come before the havdalah blessing, and that is how we do it today. This is an expansion of the concept of Kabbalas Shabbos, greeting the Shabbos like a bride whom the groom can’t wait to see and can’t bear to see leave. What’s interesting is that Beis Shammai is the one usually more concerned with legal principles, yet here his ruling is influenced by the rather sentimental idea of holding on to Shabbos for a few extra seconds.
4. **Is wine needed for *bircat hamazon*?** The gemara discusses Beis Shammai’s opinion on whether or not a cup of wine is required for *bircat hamazon*. In a *beraisa*, Beis Shammai says that if wine is served after the main meal but before *bircat hamazon*, you should drink the wine first and then benstch. This sounds like he is saying the wine does not need to be used for *bircat hamazon*. But perhaps what he means is that you should make the bracha on the wine but not actually drink it before bentsching. Of course, that doesn’t make sense because you would need to taste the wine when you make the bracha, and once you do that you can’t use it again for bentsching. So maybe you need to pour some of the wine into your hand or a separate cup, though this only works if you have enough wine that your second cup meets the minimum requirement for bentsching, meaning that you would need a *revi’is* for the bracha and a second *revi’is* for the bentsching. According to Rav Chiya, Beis Shammai means that you should drink the whole cup before bentsching, and you do not need a cup for *bircat hamazon* itself. Interestingly, we have two opposing opinions that are both claiming to be the opinion of Beis Shammai. It doesn’t necessarily matter which is right, because we don’t follow Beis Shammai anyway, but the discussion is halachically relevant in figuring out whether or not we need a cup for bentsching. This question also comes up elsewhere. For example, Psachim says that at the Seder we drink the third cup with bentsching. Should we learn from this that benstching always requires a cup? Not necessarily. *Bircat hamazon* is a mitzvah, and this is an opportunity to connect the third cup to a mitzvah. That doesn’t necessarily apply when we don’t otherwise have a reason to drink a cup of wine. It may be a good thing to have wine with bentsching, but that doesn’t mean it is always required. The Rif and the Rambam rule that a cup is not required for *bircat hamazon*. The Ran clarifies that bentsching with a cup of wine is good but not required. Ashkenazic *poskim* like the Rosh say that a cup is required, even during the week and even when there is no *zimun*. The Arizal says that our minhag is not to use a cup for only one person. If one person wants to do it, maybe he should leave the cup on the table rather than holding it, to show that this bentsching is different from a *zimun*. The Mechaber of the Shulchan Aruch brings down the opinions of these *poskim* but does not really make a ruling. The Mishnah Brurah suggests that one should endeavor to use wine for bentsching with a *zimun*, but if there is no wine in the house we are *meikil*. Today many people are more careful to use wine for a *zimun* on Shabbos or Yom Tov, but not as much on other days.
5. **Fixing “blemished” wine.** By tasting the wine, you affect it. You cannot make kiddush on wine that you’ve already had a taste of. It’s as if tasting the wine creates a blemish in it. But this can be undone. By pouring in more wine or water, you can make the wine like it hasn’t been used, and then you can pour it back into the bottle.
6. **When to wash the hands.** Beis Shammai says you should wash your hands before mixing the wine with water. This is referring to the wine before the meal. Beis Hillel says you should first drink the wine, then wash your hands. The gemara and the commentaries explain the background for this debate. Beis Shammai is concerned about liquid that may spill onto the outside of the cup. Although generally one’s hands cannot cause a vessel to become *tamei* (ritually impure), the rabbis decreed that when liquid is touched by someone whose hands are *shnios letum’ah*, it becomes a *rishon letum’ah* and can make a vessel *tamei*. So if you don’t wash your hands and you touch liquid that spills onto the outside of the cup, the liquid takes on the *tum’ah* and can in turn make the cup *tamei*. To avoid this, Beis Shammai says we should wash before the wine. Beis Hillel, on the other hand, considers it unlikely for liquid inside the cup to spill onto the outside. But Beis Hillel is concerned that the cup may already be *tamei* (which Beis Shammai does not allow), and therefore if you wash your hands and don’t completely dry them, the *tum’ah* will flow in the other direction – water from your hands will touch the *tamei* cup and thus become a *rishon letum’ah*, and that in turn will make your hand *tamei*. Therefore it is best not to wash until after drinking the wine. Beis Hillel also holds that one should wash right before the meal.
7. **Some people wash before kiddush today.** Beis Hillel clearly says that the hands should be washed after the wine. In addition to the worry over a possible transfer of *tum’ah*, the gemara adds another reason for this: washing should be done immediately before the meal. The Rama, however, says that the hands should be washed before kiddush. Why would the Rama rule according to Beis Shammai? According to one opinion, Rav also washed before kiddush. There is actually a *machlokes* about whether or not people were careful to only wash before bread, based on what Rav did. From Psachim 106b, it seems that he would wash his hands first, and then if he felt like making kiddush over wine he would do that, and if he felt like making kiddush over bread he would do that. This means that sometimes he would wash his hands before making kiddush over wine. The Rama is actually following Rav, rather than Beis Shammai. But why did Rav do it this way? Rabbeinu Tam explains that on Shabbos specifically, it’s not a problem to wash before kiddush because you’ll be making *hamotzi* immediately after kiddush. During the week that wouldn’t work, because the meal usually isn’t completely ready before the wine is served. The table might need to be set; the wine might need to be mixed. It could be that they used to mix hot water into the wine during the week, but not on Shabbos. If there is going to be an interruption between kiddush and *hamotzi*, you can’t wash before kiddush. Rav Bruna in the name of Rav cites the opposite opinion: we wash only after kiddush. Today most people wash after kiddush, but *Yekkes* follow the opinion of the Rama and wash before kiddush. *Yekkes* are very particular in their minhagim. Though the Rama disagrees with the Shulchan Aruch on this point, there is a legitimate source for the opinion, and so *Yekkes* follow the Rama. Historically Ashkenazim have tended to follow the Rama, and it’s likely that up until recently more Ashkenazim would have followed this practice, but today only the *Yekkes* do it this way.
8. **The order of havdalah.** Rav Huna once visited Rava, and he saw that when Rava made havdalah he made the bracha on the *besamim* before the bracha on the fire. Rav Huna said to Rava that both Beis Hillel and Beis Shammai say that the fire should come before the *besamim*. But Rava explained that there is a *machlokes* about the opinions of Hillel and Shammai on this subject. Rabbi Meir says that they agree. Rabbi Yehuda, in a *beraisa*, says that Beis Hillel and Beis Shammai agree on the case of someone who has only one cup of wine to use for both havdalah and *bircas hamazon* - both say bentsching should come first - but they disagree on the order of the *besamim* and the fire. Beis Shammai says we make the bracha on the fire first, and Beis Hillel says we make the bracha on the *besamim* first. According to this understanding, we follow Beis Hillel.
9. ***Borei me’orei ha’aish.*** What exactly is the blessing that we make over the fire? Beis Shammai says we should be using the word *bara*, which means created. Beis Hillel says it should be *borei* - creates. According to Rava, everyone agrees that *bara* is past tense, but *borei* is less clear. Beis Shammai says *borei* actually implies future creation, and that’s not right because G-d has already created fire. But Beis Hillel says that *borei* can also be past tense. According to Rav Yosef, everyone actually agrees that *borei* can be past tense, and the real *machlokes* is about the next word: should it be *me’or* (singular) or *me’orei* (plural)? Beis Shammai says *me’or*, because there is really only one light. The Vilna Gaon explains that this is referring to Divine fire, which is undifferentiated. Fire made by humans has distinctions, but its source in the Divine realm does not. Beis Hillel, on the other hand, says we should be using the plural. Of course, today we follow Beis Hillel and make the bracha “*borei me’orei ha’aish*.”
10. **Should non-Jews be keeping Shabbos?** If you have a fire that was used by a non-Jew on Shabbos, you cannot use that fire for havdalah. Rashi says this is because a fire that was used for forbidden labor on Shabbos did not rest, and you cannot make a *borei me’orei ha’aish* on fire that didn’t rest because a sin was done. But non-Jews are not supposed to keep Shabbos, so what sin was done? Perhaps we can say that the fire itself was somehow affected by being used for labor on Shabbos. But there’s a simpler explanation. In Yevamos 48b, Rashi talks about a Noachite who accepts on himself not to worship idols but continues to eat non-kosher food, saying that the Torah warns this person regarding Shabbos. This Noachite is not a convert, but rather a non-Jew who takes on the seven Noachide laws, one of which is the prohibition of idol worship. Rashi says this person must keep Shabbos, because one who violates Shabbos is like an idol worshiper. How? Because Shabbos is testimony that G-d created the world, and therefore anybody who believes that G-d created the world must keep Shabbos. For a Noachite to use fire to do forbidden labor on Shabbos would thus be tantamount to denouncing G-d and worshiping idols, and that certainly is a sin. Of course, this opinion is very controversial. Rishonim other than Rashi say that non-Jews, even those who take on the seven Noachide laws, are not required to keep Shabbos.