

WOMEN AND ZIMMUN

by Jennifer Breger

This article draws heavily on Ari Z. Zivotofsky and Naomi T.S. Zivotofsky, “What’s Right With Women and Zimmun,” *Judaism* (1993) and Ari Z. Zivotofsky, “What’s the Truth about Women’s Zimmun,” *Jewish Action* (Fall 1999).

In our busy lives and rushed schedules, it is often only on Shabbat and holidays that we get an opportunity to sit down together to eat with friends and family. For many of us it is therefore only then when *zimmin* for women really becomes an issue. Although at the very least women are *halachically* allowed to form a *zimmin*, it is still not a common practice among Orthodox women and girls.

Because there are seeming conflicts between the Talmudic sources, authorities differ in their views about women and *zimmin*. Whereas the Talmud in *Arachin* 3a states that “all are obligated in *zimmin*,” in *Berachot* 45b it says that “women form a *zimmin* for themselves,” but also that “women may not have a *zimmin* said over them” (45a). *Halachists* throughout the ages have argued as to how to reconcile the different statements. The *Rosh*, the *Rokeach* and the *Gra* all obligate women to join an existing *zimmin* of men, and also obligate three women who eat together to form an independent *zimmin*. Rabbi Yosef Caro in the *Beit Yosef*, and the *Shulchan Aruch Harav* both rule that women must respond to a men’s *zimmin* if there is one, but that there is no obligation to form their own. The *Tosafot*, giving weight to the custom that women do not form a *zimmin*, say that women’s participation in any *zimmin* is optional.

Practical situations vary. If there are three or more women eating together without men, they can form a *zimmin* and many would say they must. Women and men cannot form a *zimmin* of three together—i.e. two men and one woman or one man and two women. There are actually some early sources that say that men and women can form a *zimmin* together, but these are rejected by most authorities and by all the *Acharonim*. This is probably because there is a view that women’s and men’s obligation for *Birchat Hamazon* is different.

If there is a *zimmin* of men, most authorities would say that one or two women must join and respond, and may not say *Birchat Hamazon* individually. If there are three or more women and between three and nine men, then the women may either join in the men’s *zimmin* or form

their own *zimmun*. If there are ten or more men, women have to join the men in their *zimmun*, because this *zimmun* adds the word *elokeinu* and becomes a *davar shebekedusha* (holy statement). Maimonides and all the *Acharonim* rule that women cannot say *zimmun* themselves with God's name because they do not constitute a *minyan*.

What if there is a *zimmun* of women at the table and one or two men? There is an unfortunately prevalent view that men must leave the table during the women's *zimmun*. This is not the case. Numerous authorities including Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach say that they should remain and answer. For girls from Sefardi families, who count a boy over six as a third or tenth person in a *zimmun*, it would seem logical that a girl before *Bat Mitzvah* could complete a female *zimmun*.

What should the introduction to women's *zimmun* be? Although many use the term *chaverotai* (friends), others consider that *givirotai* (colleagues) is more appropriate. Thus the leader could start *Birshut imi morati* or *ba'alat habayit, givirotai nevarech*. There is no *halachik* need for a leader of a men's *zimmun* to ask permission of the hostess present to start the *zimmun*, or for a leader of a women's *zimmun* to ask permission of the host or her father, etc. On the other hand, many now consider it simple courtesy that a male leader of a *zimmun* should say, when appropriate, *birshut ba'al habayit u ba'alat habayit* or *birshut ba'alat habayit* even though most *bentshers* do not contain this formula. The same logic of courtesy applies to a female leader including the *ba'al habayit* when appropriate.

Printed *bentshers* also usually do not include a *harachamon* for a wife to say for her husband, while there is one for the husband to say for his wife. There is great flexibility with what may be recited as a *harachamon*, and no *halachik* limitations to adding a *harachamon* for a woman to say for her husband. There is indeed a famous manuscript *hagaddah* written for Sarah, wife of the *Chatam Sofer* and the daughter of Akiva Eiger the Younger, where the *Birchat Hamazon* reads only, "*harachamon hu yevarech et ba'ali*." Now many women prefer the word *ishi* because of the connotation of *ba'al* as master.

What is most important today is for girls and women to practice leading *zimmun* and to learn to feel comfortable in the role. The *Mishnah Berurah* actually explained the Rabbis' exemption of women from *zimmun* if there were less than three men, by saying that women weren't educated enough to recite it. But this is clearly not the case today. As women are becoming increasingly more educated Jewishly, women's *zimmun* should be more commonly practiced.