What's Right With Women and Zimmun

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Introduction

In recent years, there has arisen considerable halakhically based controversy over women's participation in certain areas of Jewish life. These include women's prayer groups, women's advanced Torah study, and women's reading of the Torah. One area which involves little actual halakhic controversy in terms of permission to participate is women's zimmun (the introductory invitation preceding Grace after Meals). Nevertheless, it is not widely practiced by women. This summary article will attempt to elucidate some of the issues of zimmun and women. It will include an elaboration on those areas in which there is no controversy, such as the permissibility of women forming their own zimmun, as well as some discussion of the debated issues, such as women and men forming a joint zimmun. Some laws and concepts of zimmun as they relate to women, will be discussed, then the relevant Talmudic sources will be cited. This will lead to a discussion of the medieval commentators' understanding of these sources, followed by the contemporary discussions and, finally, the contemporary halakhic view.

Zimmun

The first mishnah in the seventh chapter of Brakhot states: "Three who ate as one [together] are obligated" in zimmun. The definition of what this zimmun entails is presented in the third mishnah:

What is the formula for zimmun? If there are three, he [the leader] says: "Let us bless [for the food which we have eaten]." If there are three besides himself, he says: "Bless." If there are ten, he says: "Let us bless our God...." If there are a hundred, he says: "Let us bless the Lord our God:...." If there are a thousand he says: "Let us bless the Lord our God, the God of Israel:...." If there are ten thousand:....

These introductory blessings said before the Grace are clearly an old formulation, for they do not contain the standard formula for a blessing, which developed in the middle of the Talmudic period. In addition, it is unusual for the text of a blessing to depend on the size of the crowd. Normative halakhah is not quite like this section of the mishnah. Rather, we only have two texts, one for three to nine people and the other for ten or more. The one for ten or more includes a mention of God's name.

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while the other does not. Despite these oddities of the *zimmun* formula, it is nonetheless treated as comprising real, legitimate blessings.\(^5\)

In explaining these *mishnayot*, the Talmud brings numerous textual sources for the obligation of *zimmun*.\(^1\) Nonetheless, there is a debate among the commentators whether *zimmun* is of Biblical\(^6\) or rabbinic origin.\(^6\) There is even an opinion which suggests that a *zimmun* of three people is rabbinic, while a *zimmun* of ten is Biblical.\(^7\)

The preferred format for *zimmun*, as stated by the *rishonim* (rabbinic scholars of the 11th-13th century), is that one person, the leader, invites everyone to participate in the Grace, and then he/she recites the entire Grace out loud. The others remain quiet and fulfill their obligation by listening to the leader and responding “*amen*.” Because it is difficult to concentrate on the entire Grace while someone else says it, the custom has arisen for everyone to say the full Grace quietly by himself, while attempting to hear at least the first blessing recited aloud by the leader.\(^8\) The current practice, however, does not negate the essence of the *zimmun*, that one person fulfills the obligation of Grace for all the rest. Thus, in most situations where one cannot legally accomplish this objective for others in the group, that group may not form a *zimmun* together.\(^9\) At the very least, the one who cannot fulfill the obligation of the others cannot be the leader. This may have important ramifications for women participating in or leading *zimmun*, as men and women may have different levels of obligation in saying the Grace (although women certainly have an obligation to say Grace, as stated explicitly in mishnah *Berakhot* 3:3\(^1\)).

If *zimmun* is such a nice idea, a communal invitation to say Grace and praise God, then why should there ever be any hesitation? Let a group of any size or gender say *zimmun*! This question is even more pronounced when it is realized that, originally, the *zimmun* invitation was a single statement and response which, for fewer than ten people, did not contain any reference to God’s name.\(^12\) This issue is discussed by the commentators in the context of the Talmud’s discussion (*Berakhot* 4a) of whether two women can say *zimmun*.\(^11\) Two possible reasons are suggested by the commentators why a *zimmun* of two might be problematic. First, although the *zimmun* formula for fewer than ten people is not a *davar she-bi-kedusha* (a liturgy or “matter” of holiness), it may be considered *kri'a davar she-bi-kedusha*—like such a ritual, which has certain minimal requirements,\(^11\) such as at least three individuals. Second, it may simply be a problem of appearance; it looks like one is adding to the prescribed blessing—two are obligated to start the Grace from the blessing after the *zimmun* invitation.\(^11\) In either case, *zimmun* is treated as a real blessing.\(^10\)

**Talmudic Sources**

There are two significant Babylonian Talmudic sources that address women’s participation in *zimmun*—the seventh chapter of *Berakhot*, ex-
panding on the mishnayot quoted above, and the very beginning of Arukh.

The seventh chapter of Brakhot is devoted principally to a discussion of the laws of zimmun and Grace. The first mishnah, which defines who may and may not participate in a zimmun, states:

Three who eat as one [together] are obligated in zimmun ... women, [non-Jewish] slaves, and minors "may not have zimmun said over them" (ayn metzannin alehem).

This ambiguously formulated mishnah does not give us much detail about a woman's status within the framework of zimmun, but it does indicate that women, slaves and minors are in a different category than are free adult males, a category characterized as ayn metzannin alehem.

The ensuing discussion in the Talmud forces one to reconsider use of this mishnah in actually determining halakhah. With respect to a minor, the Talmud is explicit. On Ber. 47b and 48a, the Talmud, using our mishnah as a springboard, discusses the participation of a minor in zimmun and concludes: "... and the law is not like any of these sayings [including the mishnah]." Rather, as Rav Nahman says, a minor who knows to Whom we say Grace, may participate in a zimmun.18

In light of this explicit rejection of the mishnah with respect to a minor, it is important to carefully analyze what the Talmud has to say with regard to a woman. On Ber. 45b, the Talmud records another tannaitic source, a braita, which states:

Women form a zimmun amongst themselves, slaves form a zimmun amongst themselves, but women, slaves and minors, even if they want to form a zimmun, may not.

In discussing this braita, the Talmud indicates that it seems odd that women or slaves should be able to make their own zimmun. After all, for many other "countings," women and slaves do not count even amongst themselves. Furthermore, the mishnah explicitly placed them in a separate category from free adult males with respect to zimmun. In response to this, the Talmud tells us that what is important here is that there should be at least three independent, intelligent beings capable of praising God, in which case three women certainly qualify (tza'ot). If so, continues the Talmud, what about the end of the braita where it states that women and slaves may not join together? The response is that such a union may lead to immorality and is therefore outlawed.20

The second significant Talmudic source is a short piece on the top of 9a in Arukh. The Talmud is discussing a series of laws found in a braita, all of which begin with the phrase: "All are obligated in ...." In each case the Talmud is trying to understand what additional class is included due to the word "all." In this list is included: "All are obligated in zimmun" and "All can be included in zimmun." The Talmud discusses these two statements in the following way:
“All are obligated in zimmun.” [All] comes to include what? To include women and slaves, as we learned [in the same braita quoted in Brakhot]: women form a zimmun amongst themselves, and slaves form a zimmun amongst themselves. “All can be included in zimmun.” [All] comes to include what?
To include a minor who knows to Whom we bless.

This discussion supports a woman's obligation in zimmun, possibly on the same level as men.

It seems clear that minors are not obligated in zimmun (just as they are not yet obligated in other mitzvot). It is equally clear that even though they have no obligation, they may be included in the quorum (ninyan) needed for zimmun. Needless to say, this has obvious implications with respect to the issue of joint quorums where all members may not be obligated at the same level, e.g., a joint zimmun of men and women.

Due to the ambiguity of the Talmudic sources and to the discussion of the sources that has ensued since them, it is imperative to next analyze the writings of the rishonim (scholars from the 11th to the 15th century) and achronim (scholars since that time) to arrive at any conclusions. The issues will be broadly divided into the topics of joint zimmun and separate women's zimmun, and will be addressed in that order.

**Joint Zimmun**

The source in Arukh in Anin seems to most authorities clearly to reject free men and women joining to form a zimmun, i.e., two women and one man. Since the Talmud quotes two separate statements, “All are obligated in zimmun” and “All are included in zimmun,” it is evident that the two issues are not synonymous, which is to say, one needn't be obligated to be included, and one might be obligated, yet not included. Thus, being included in one category might not guarantee inclusion in the other category. The assumption is then made that, as opposed to a “minor who knows to Whom we bless,” women and slaves are not included in the second category, that of inclusion in a zimmun, and, as such, two women and a man may not form a zimmun.

Even if this approach, of prohibiting joint zimmun, is followed, as it is by the vast majority of authorities, it still leaves the problem that there is no Talmudic reason given for the ban on such a zimmun. Rashi\(^1\) posits that it is based on their different status in the Grace, but not in the zimmun per se. In the Grace, circumcision is mentioned, in which women do not personally participate, and inheritance of the land is mentioned, in which slaves do not participate. Thus, since the men have an aspect in the Grace that is not applicable to women or slaves, men cannot join with them in the zimmun. The Shulchan Arukh, O.H. 199:6 states as halakhah that a mixed zimmun is prohibited, but provides no reason. The Mishnah Brurah, rather than quoting Rashi's reason, provides two new rationales. First, he states that women are not obligated in zimmun as men\(^2\) are, and, additionally, a unit which owes its halakhic status to a union of men and women
is not proper (*eyn ba'avuran na'eh*), even if it consists of a husband, wife and children. The *Raisad* gives yet another possible reason, that women are not *bnei k'vitet* — possibly meaning that, together with men, women cannot establish a permanence. An opposite, equally logical, approach to the passage in *Arakhin* could be taken, in which the reasoning of the second statement of the *Gemara* would be: "All can be included in zimmun;" Whom does this "All" come to include? Certainly not women and slaves, because that is obvious; women and slaves are mentioned above as obligated, so they are surely included. Rather, you might have thought that since minors have no obligation they cannot count towards the three or ten, therefore the "All" comes to include a minor as being eligible to be included. And since we have a *bratta* that explicitly includes minors, who are not obligated, certainly women, who are obligated, may be included in the zimmun.

There is a minority dissenting opinion in this issue, which, while not presenting this exact logic, reaches similar conclusions. The *Tur* (O.H. 199) quotes Rav Yehudah Hacohen as stating that a zimmun of women and men is permitted. The *Sha'ar ha'Zywn* (199:3) quotes an anonymous scholar who used to form a zimmun together with his daughter and son-in-law; and the *Mordekbhai* states that R. Simhah of Speyer (13th century) used to include women in the zimmun of three and ten. This opinion, however, is rejected by the vast majority of authorities, including all later codifiers (*ahronim*), i.e., scholars since the 16th century.

This discussion has focused primarily on a joint zimmun of three. The issue of forming a joint zimmun of ten (which may have different halakhic parameters than other groups of ten, i.e., *minyan*) is also discussed in the sources. In the general case of counting men and women together for a zimmun of ten, as well as in the specific case of nine men and at least one woman, there is a minority opinion that would permit a zimmun with God’s name. The vast majority of authorities (primarily *ahronim*), however, do not agree.

**Women's Zimmun of Three**

Up to this point the contested issue of whether women may join with men to form a zimmun has been discussed. In the next topic, that of a separate women's zimmun, the question is not whether women may form a zimmun, but rather, whether they must. That is, is the separate women's zimmun an obligation or an opportunity? In addition, this will lead to the question of whether women acquire an obligation when in the presence of a men's zimmun.

In formulating an opinion on a separate women's zimmun, the commentators were faced with three apparently divergent sources. The *bratta* in *Brakhot* seems to indicate a permission: If women choose to, they may form their own zimmun. The Talmud in *Arakhin* appears to indicate an
obligation: women, like men, are obligated in forming a zimmun when presented with the opportunity. And last, the prevailing custom contemporary with each of the commentators, which is sometimes viewed as a "source," was that women did not generally form a zimmun.

Three basic approaches were taken in order to harmonize the sources. Tosafot puts greater emphasis on the prevalent custom than on the Talmudic sources. Based on that, Tosafot easily interprets the Talmud in Brakhot to be saying that zimmun for women is only optional, and our women have opted not to do it. With a little effort, Tosafot then interprets the Talmud in Arukh to also be speaking of an optional obligation rather than a true obligation.

A second approach, adopted by the Beit Yosef in the name of the Smag, tries to give equal weight to the two Talmudic sources. They interpret the reference to an obligation in Arukh to be referring to an occasion when an obligation exists within the group. That is, if women are eating with three or more men, then the women acquire the same obligation in zimmun. Thus, a woman would not be permitted to break off and say Grace on her own, independent of the zimmun. If, however, three or more women are eating with fewer than three men, then we turn to the braita in Brakhot which tells us, according to this interpretation, that they are permitted, but not obligated, to form a zimmun.

The third approach puts the greatest weight on the Arukh source. The Rosh (R. Asher ben Yehiel, circa 1250-1327), after noting the other options and expressing surprise at the custom that women do not usually form a zimmun, says that he sees no way to interpret the sources except to say that women do have an actual obligation to form a zimmun when three eat together. After all, he says, why should they not be on equal footing with men in this obligation, as there is no reason to exclude them? The Rokeah (R. Eleazar ben Judah of Worms, circa 1165-1235), one of the earliest codifiers, also states that women are obligated in zimmun. This is the approach accepted by the Vilna Gaon, who says that there is an absolute obligation for women to form a zimmun when three or more eat together.

In the first two approaches, three women eating together not in the presence of three men are not under an obligation to form a zimmun, as men would be. The obvious question is the one which the Rosh raised, and that is: Why not? Why should they not be under the same obligation?

A variety of possible answers have been offered, each with its own ramifications. The Baal postulates that it relates back to the essence of zimmun, of the leader's recitation of Grace fulfilling the obligation for others. Since, he states, from the time of the Talmud through contemporary codifiers, there has been a doubt about whether women have the same level of obligation as men in Grace, it would not be plausible to count them in the same zimmun as men, and this was extended to not obligate them in zimmun at all.
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The Hafetz Hayyim postulates two other reasons. In the Mishnah Brurah, he says that the rabbis did not wish to impose on women the obligation of zimmun when they are by themselves, because women were usually not experts in zimmun. The rabbis were trying to be lenient and not impose an obligation that women would have trouble fulfilling due to their lack of knowledge. In the Shut ha-Zizyun, he suggests that the exemption is tied in with an ancillary requirement of zimmun. It is preferable that all zimmun be said over a glass of wine, and for women to use wine in a ritual is not proper. The rabbis therefore did not impose the zimmun obligation on women when they are by themselves, and would a priori be the ones leading and using the wine.

Women's Zimmun of Ten

The discussion until this point has focused on the formation of a quorum of three men to say the basic zimmun formula. There is an additional level of zimmun which adds God's name to the basic formula. When the Talmud discusses zimmun, it seems that it is always referring back to Berakhot 7:5, which contains the entire zimmun “package,” for three, ten, etc., individuals. This includes the rule that when ten or more men form a zimmun they add God’s name to the zimmun formula. It might seem that whenever women’s zimmun is discussed, the entire zimmun “package” is also included, and that a woman’s zimmun should follow all the same laws as the men’s: if ten women form a zimmun, God’s name should be added. Indeed, among the early authorities (rishonim, from the 11th to the 15th century), there is an opinion which permits women to include God’s name in a zimmun of ten. Such an opinion is cited by the Meiri, Sifer Me’orot and Shiltot ha-Gibbonim, and is held by Rabbenu Tam.

All of the later codifiers (ahronim) reject this opinion and rule that a woman’s zimmun, no matter the size, says zimmun without God’s name. Maimonides seems to be the first to have raised this issue, and it is his opinion, which is given without any source or reason, that is accepted by the later codifiers. Various reasons are advanced for this ruling, including the possibility that, with ten people, Grace with zimmun becomes a davar shehakdehade (acts or declarations of sanctification of the Holy One); women cannot form a “congregation” or, women are not obligated (but only have the option) in zimmun and therefore cannot extend it to include God’s name.

Practical Situations

Below will be presented various combinations of men and women (slaves will be left out of the picture) that can exist, and the halakhah as determined by the later codifiers (ahronim) in each scenario. For the most part it will be seen that it is the second approach discussed above, that zimmun is optional for women alone and mandatory if with a zimmun of men,
that has been accepted. A minority of codifiers accept the third approach, obligating women in zimmun in both cases, while the opinion of Tesafoṭ is almost never accepted, although it is sometimes taken into consideration.

A) Ten or more men with any number of women — The existence of a zimmun of men obligates all eating there, men and women, in zimmun. Thus, the women also have an obligation to participate in zimmun. Since the halakhah is that the women cannot form their own zimmun of ten to include God’s name, the present zimmun (with the men) is on a higher level of requirement than any zimmun the women could form independently. The women would therefore be required to participate in the zimmun of the ten men.

B) Between three and ten men and any number of women — As in the above case, the women have an obligation to participate in zimmun. However, unlike the previous case, in this instance, if there are three or more women, their zimmun is on par with the men’s, who also will not include God’s name. Hence, the women can break off and form their own zimmun. The requirement is simply that all present at that meal participate in a zimmun.

C) Three or more women and fewer than three men — This is the essence of the debate regarding the interpretation of the primary sources. There is NO opinion that says that women cannot form their own zimmun. Rather, the Shulḥan Aruḵh is of the opinion that three women may optionally form a zimmun, but are not required to, and hence no mandatory zimmun exists in this situation. The Vilna Gaon, and a number of other significant authorities, rule that in this case the women have an obligation to form a zimmun. If these women do say Grace with zimmun, it is proper and appropriate for the men present to answer, even though they do not have an obligation in zimmun in this instance.

D) Fewer than three men and fewer than three women — No zimmun may be formed, even optionally. This is true even if they are all members of the same family, such as father, mother and their children.

Two interesting cases which we have not found discussed, and which would both apply only to Sephardim because of their custom of including a minor in zimmun:

E) Two women, fewer than three men and a girl between the ages of six and twelve — Would the halakhah be the same as two men and a minor, in that an optional zimmun exists? It would seem to us that there is no reason why not.

F) Two men, three or more women and a boy between six and thirteen — There are two optional zimmuns here for Sephardim (Ashkenazim have only the women’s, and this is case D). Do they have equal weight, since both may be defined as “optional”? Is one preferable to the other? Could or should they split?
Conclusion

Women have been included in the framework of zimmun from the Talmudic period. There are areas of dispute, but there are certain essentials which are universally agreed upon by the codifiers. Amongst those points are that: (1) If women participate in a meal where there is an obligation in zimmun for the men, the women fall under the same obligation to participate in a zimmun. (2) Women are permitted to form a zimmun on their own (at least when eating alone). Many authorities encourage that, while some think there is an obligation on women for zimmun.67 These points are critical in women fulfilling certain obligations that they have, and in widening avenues of communal Jewish self-expression that are openly endorsed by the halakhic authorities. We know of educational institutions and homes in the United States and Israel which encourage these practices. It is a goal of this paper to further knowledge of this topic, thus furthering the goal of Jewish education and practice. It is worth concluding with the words of the Ben Ish Hai.68 "It is proper for all people to instruct the women in the household to form a zimmun amongst themselves when they eat in a group of three."

NOTES


2. When the term "obligated in zimmun" is used in this paper it implies that the individuals who have that obligation may no longer say Grace on their own and must participate in the communal zimmun (mishna, Brakhot 7:4, O.H. 193:1).


4. E.g., Deut. 8:10, Deut. 32:3; Psalms 54:4; See Brakhot 48b.

5. Rainin on the Me'ir at the end of Brakhot, Tosef. 199; Pirke Yehoshua, chap. 7.

6. Rav Natruni Geon (Siddur Rav Amram Geon 141a); Mekor Vitro (p. 21); Meiri (Brakhot 45a); Rif (Brakhot 5:10); Shulchan Arukh HaRav (199:9); Shulchan Arukh (199:19).

7. Kingat Sefer, Brakhot 5. See also Maharsha on Agudot, Brakhot 19b.

8. B'li'ar HaHa'ora 195:5; Bah 193 based on Brakhot 45b; Maimonides, Brakhot 5:3; Rosh 7:27.

9. Tosef 183:6; Mishnah Brakhot 183:28; Shulchan Arukh HaRav 193.

10. Mogen Avraham 193:8; Mishnah Brakhot 193:24; Sha'ar ha-Tinyan 193:22.
11. See however note 42 for sources that discuss the level of women's obligation.


13. Based on a braza cited on Brahat 45b, the normative halakhah is decided (Maimonides, Brahat 5:15; Shulhan Arukh, O.H. 152:1) that two may not form a simum. There are some who say that they may (e.g., the Rosh, simum 329 — p. 228 in the Otsar He张家口 edition).


15. Purim Yehudah, Brahat 45a.

16. See source in note 3.

17. See, however, Teshuvah Umikra of R. Abraham ben David (Ravad) (Kaphah ed.), number 12, who accepts the mishnah at face value and interprets the gemara to mean that a minor may be counted in the two, while for a simum of three a minor is explicitly excluded by the mishnah. R. Yoma (Brahat 43b) also does not see the mishnah as being rejected. Rather, he says that the mishnah is referring to minors without knowledge and the gemara to minors with knowledge.

18. This is codified in the halakhah (The Shulhan Arukh, O.H. 199:19; Remaz O.H. 199:10 and Hayei Adam 48:20, while not disputing the actual halakhah, say that our custom is not to include a minor. Meiri, Brahat ch. 7 and Pirkha O.H. 199 quote an opinion that minors may even form a simum entirely on their own. The Kef ha-Yeim (592:18) rejects this opinion. See R. Ovadia Yosef, Yeshu'ot De'or 413.

19. Because of this reason, even more than three women may not join with more than three slaves to form a simum, although each group independently could form a simum. Mihaneh Benayahu 199:14.

20. It seems to these authors that the reason of immorality stated here applies only to women and slaves, but from this source no proof can be brought to prohibit women and free men joining together. This seems to be the understanding of the Shulhan Arukh, O.H. 199:6, Mihaneh Benayahu s.n. 12 and 14; Drasha O.H. 199; Meiri, Brahat ch. 7. "Some say", others do not reach such a conclusion; for example, see Maharam of Rottenburg quoted in Beh O.H. 199, Sita Meshubet, Arukh 3a; Arukh ha-Shulhan 199:2; third opinion in Meiri, Arukh 3a; Rav on Megillah 19a.


22. See note 23.

23. See also Hazon Ish O.H. 50:8. We see the reason of "not proper" to be different from that of immorality (pargant) of note 19. Some may interpret them as one and the same. Shita Meshubet Uzziel (Hiden Meshubet 6) brings a proof from here that the rabbit did not object to a mixed meal per se, but only to a legal union formed for the sake of a mixed. Frimer, Op. cit., p. 65, cites authorities who say that such a union could lead to "immorality."

24. Raavad, see n. 17.

25. Beh. O.H. 195 quotes an opinion that R. Yehuda HaNevi'im would only count women towards the two and not the three. Others might view this as an even greater novelty. See note 17 where a similar ruling is brought in the name of the Raavad with regard to a minor. As the Raavad proposes this based on the mishnah in Brahat, which discusses women and minors, it would seem that the Raavad would not count women in the simum of three, although he might count them towards ten.

26. Mostokhi to Brahat 45b.

27. See Pirkha (592) in the name of the Agur, Toqot, 599:2; Arukh ha-Shulhan, O.H. 199:2; Shulhan Arukh, O.H. 199:6. See also Joel B. Wolowelsky, "The Eating Fellowship," Op. cit., for a discussion of the reasons why a woman may or may not be included within a simum with men, and his suggestion that perhaps this should be more flexible nowadays.

28. See, for example, the Bial O.H. 199, who explains that R. Simhah permitted women in a joint simum of ten because it is not a dever she-Nefesh, from which, according to the Bial, women are normally excluded. We see that the simum of ten may be different than
the usual quorum of ten (minyan). That it may not be different is suggested by its inclusion with nine other minyan rituals in Meg. 4:3.

29. R. Simhah, quoted in the Mordekhai to Brakhot 158 and 178; one opinion in the Meiri, Brakhot 14a; Bakh to O.H. 199 explaining the opinion of R. Yehudah Hacheben in the Tur, 685 to Tur O.H. 689; Rabbi Aaron Halevi to Brakhot 45b; Ken to Megilloth, Ch. 2: R. Rosh and Rabbenu Tam as cited by Shulhan Arukh ha-Gibborim to Alfasi at beginning of Brakhot, ch. 7.

30. Meiri, see n. 99; Shulhan Arukh Harav 199:7.

31. See note 34.

32. Brakhot 3b. This also seems to be Rashi’s and Tur’s (O.H. 199) opinion. Tosafot admits that women forming a zimmun was not actually unheard of. He cites the daughters of Rabbenu Avraham (a student of Rabbenu Tam) who, on their father’s advice, used to form a zimmun.

33. The idea of an optional zimmun is not unique to women forming a zimmun, and occurs in other zimmun situations. For example, if people did not technically eat “together,” such as at separate tables or separate rooms, they are not required to form a zimmun but may do so (Shulhan Arukh to Mordekhai, Brakhot 7:5; Dukha 193:2; Bitur Ha-Talmod, 193:2, s.v. adif (for)). Additionally, some rishonim say that two men may form an optional zimmun (the Rokeah, see note 18).

34. O.H. 199.

35. Midrash Targ. 27. See also Hayyim Adam 48:20.

36. Brakhot 7:4. This is also the opinion of the Talmud in Rabban Yehuda.

37. The real problem as we see it, with the first two approaches, is that they separate the two sources. The problem with that, is that the Talmud in Arukh quotes Shukhan Ha-Rama in support of its position that all, including women, are obligated in zimmun. It thus seems clear that, at least in the eyes of the Talmud, the two sources are saying the same thing and are both supporting the notion that women are obligated in zimmun. That is essentially what the Rosh and the Gra (Vilna Gaon) say.


40. Ohn Semeiti (Brakhot 3:3); see generally, Primer, supra, p. 65.

41. Bah, Tur O.H. 199.

42. Brakhot 33b; Shulhan Arukh O.H. 186:1; Encyclopedia Talmudica 2:248:1.

43. This is the very argument that Rashi explicitly rejected. The Vilna Gaon (Brakhot 33b) uses similar reasoning and explains that women were not given the same obligation in zimmun to avoid the possibility that women would come to fulfill the obligation on behalf of the man, which would be problematic.

44. O.H. 199:10.


46. Ramah, 188:1.

47. This seems a little difficult in light of the halakha that when the host leads the zimmun he is supposed to give his wife to drink from the cup of wine (Shulhan Arukh O.H. 188:4; Mishnah Berurah 188:10). However, the Kaf ha-Min (199:19) quotes an opinion that women would actually use a glass of wine when they form a zimmun.

48. Either of the HaRosh’s explanations is consistent with women being obligated in zimmun in the presence of three men. It is assumed that men would be expert in leading the Grace, and that the men would use the glass of wine. Hence, there is no longer a reason to exempt the women from the existing zimmun, and they too become obligated.

49. Meiri, Brakhot 47a; Me’orot, Brakhot 45b; Shulhan Arukh ha-Gibborim, Brakhot 7:2. This debate does not necessarily fall along the same lines as that over whether women have an obligation. For example, the Rosh and the Gra both hold that women have an obligation in zimmun. Yet the Rosh, as quoted by the Shulhan Arukh ha-Gibborim, says women can use God’s name, while the Gra (O.H. 199:6) says that they cannot.


See Frimer for details.

33. Shulhan Arukh, O.H. 199:7. This is according to the second approach, that of the Brit Yosef (author of the Shulhan Arukh), to the sources, that women are obligated when eating with a zimmun of men.


35. R. Yaakov Emden in his Sidrei (p. 115) agrees with the Brit Yosef that women eating alone have an option to form a zimmun, but are obligated to join a zimmun if they eat with a zimmun of men. He then advises that one should make women aware of this obligation so that they will know to participate in the zimmun.

36. Shulhan Arukh, O.H. 199:6; Mishnah Brurah 100:18; Kaf ha'Hayyim 199:23. There is a dissenting opinion that says they should not break off, but the She'ar ha-Yeshen 199:9 says that the first opinion is the logical one.

In any example of case A, and of case B when there are fewer than three women, when the women participate in the men's zimmun, they are required to listen to the men's zimmun and may not be leaders, according to Bitur Halakhah 199, s.v. V'noch, and Kaf ha'Hayyim 199:24. The latter gives as the reason that it is unclear whether women are obligated in Grace Biblically or rabbincally (see note 42). Meiri, Brakhot ch. 7 cites an authority who says that the women may even lead.

37. The Arukh ha'Shulhan 199:2 agrees that there is an optional zimmun (and uses this to explain why women can never use God's name in a women's zimmun), but says that the custom is not to make one, and “we have never heard of women who form a zimmun on their own.” Clearly there are other codifiers who do not find the implemention of this option as surprising.

38. Aurbach, Op. cit., p. 94, in the name of his uncle, R. Shlomo Zalman Aurbach, one of the leading contemporary authorities in halakhah.


41. The primary exceptions that we found are Tosafot (Brakhot 42b), Arukh ha'Shulhan (199) and Bitur Halakhah (199), who all state that it was not current practice for women to form their own zimmun. But none of them dispute the essential halakhah and none discourage women’s zimmun.

42. Shneur Rishonim, Korah, 13.