



B'NAI DAVID-JUDEA

Shabbat Shorts

Ummm ummm UMM. Umm?? Umm!

It's a familiar part of the Shabbat meal ritual, between the time that the assembled have washed and the time that HaMotzi is recited (and the challah is eaten). Suddenly words fail us and we revert to urgent grunting - or so it surely sounds to the not-yet-initiated. What's the Halachic backstory here?

To address this question, as well as several others pertaining to the ritual of blessing over and eating the Shabbat loaves, we'll repair to the Shulchan Aruch's *general* discussion of how we approach the eating of bread. Let's begin with "*Umm umm*".

The Shulchan Aruch opens the chapter titled "The law concerning interrupting between washing and breaking bread", by citing two opinions: *Some say* that there is no need to avoid an interruption between washing and eating. And *others say* that we are required to consciously avoid such an interruption. "And", the Shulchan Aruch concludes, "it is good to avoid an interruption". Three questions we need to tackle then:

- What is the source of the disagreement between the two opinions?
- What exactly do we mean here by the term "interruption"?
- And, what does "good" mean?

Mishnah Brurah sets out to clarify the Shulchan Aruch's intentions. He first lays down that both opinions acknowledge and accept the

Talmud's exhortation to "immediately" follow washing with eating. And both opinions agree that the Talmud's underlying concern is the possibility that the longer the delay between washing and eating, the greater the possibility that our hands will again become ritually dirty (which is roughly the same here as literally dirty), thus completely undoing what we had accomplished through washing.

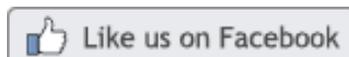
The difference in opinion is over the lengths to which we are required to go in order to avoid a distraction that might lead us into an activity that would undo the effects of our washing. For the first opinion, a mere "interruption", by which the Shulchan Aruch means the passage of a minute or two, or even some small talk around the table while we are waiting for everyone to get reseated, is of no concern, as it is insufficiently likely that these will prompt anyone to get up and engage in some activity entirely unrelated to the meal. The second opinion reads the Talmud as urging us to maintain an above-and-beyond type of vigilance. Even "interruptions" of the sort we are discussing here, which are unlikely to send us off into an entirely extraneous activity, must be avoided. **Important note: Verbal communication that is directly related to the "needs of the meal" falls beneath the threshold of "interruption" and is permissible according to both opinions.** Something worthwhile to keep in mind! (*Umm umm!*)

Bottom line: What is the Shulchan Aruch advising in concluding that "it is good to avoid interruption?" What does "good" mean? He means that we should strive as best we can to avoid small talk, and even to avoid silent temporal delay (anything longer than a minute or so). But in the final analysis, if such an interruption just couldn't be avoided, there is no need to repeat the ritual washing, just as long as we did not actually engage in an extraneous activity that soiled our hands in any way.

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