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Is it Preferable to Start a Meal with Bread?

Question: It seems wrong that some people decide not to do netilat yadayim¹ and eat bread at the beginning of a meal, and thus do not bentch (recite Birkat HaMazon). One who has a meal should bentch, and if it takes eating a little bread, so be it. However, someone told me that if you eat only a little piece of bread, you have to recite individual berachot throughout the meal. Is that so?

Answer: One is not required to eat bread if he does not want to, even if it means that he will not bentch (except on Shabbat and Yom Tov, when eating a meal including bread is required²). That being said, regularly avoiding eating bread because one

does not want to be bothered with bentching is a regrettable phenomenon.

A person who has the philosophy that you espouse and makes the effort to wash and bentch at every meal should be careful not to cause more halachic problems than it is worth. The first possible issue involves netilat yadayim. Although it is proper to be stringent and wash before eating any amount of bread,³ the obligation likely begins only when eating a k'zayit,⁴ and possibly even a k'beitza.^{5 6} Therefore, one should not make a b'racha on netilat yadayim before eating less than a k'beitza.⁷ (The question of how to calculate these sizes is hotly contested and beyond our present scope).

Eating a small amount of bread with the intention that everything else that one eats will be “covered” by the meal’s b'rachot (HaMotzi and Birkat HaMazon) raises another problem. While the gemara⁸ says that bread exempts from a b'racha other foods that are eaten subsequently during the meal, this is true only under circumstances in which the foods are subsumed in the meal.⁹ Based on this,

¹ A special manner of washing one’s hands, in this case, before eating bread.

² *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim* 274:4; *ibid.* 529:1.

³ See *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim* 158:3, and *Mishna Berura* ad loc. 10.

⁴ The size of an olive.

⁵ The size of an egg.

⁶ *Shulchan Aruch* op. cit. 2.

⁷ *Mishna Berura* ad loc. 9.

⁸ *Berachot* 41b.

⁹ See some applications, ad loc.

the Magen Avraham¹⁰ suggests that if one eats a tiny piece of bread, or even a larger amount but for the sole purpose of exempting other foods, the other foods do not revolve around the bread and the HaMotzi may not exempt them from their b'rachot. He counters that it is possible that since bread is usually the anchor of the meal, the principle that the b'racha on it exempts other foods applies across the board.

According to the more accepted understanding of the Magen Avraham's opinion,¹¹ one should not set up a situation in which he is eating bread just to exempt other b'rachot, due to the doubt regarding whether this works. The same logic applies, despite one's good intentions, when one eats bread just so that he will be obligated to bentch. Admittedly, some prominent authorities say that other foods are exempted even in that case.¹² However, this is hardly an optimal situation that we would suggest for one who would prefer not to eat bread at all. If one likes to eat bread for its own sake but abstains in order not to "be bothered" with washing and bentching,¹³ it would be

fine to convince him to regularly include bread in his meal, and the Magen Avraham's issue would not apply.¹⁴

If one eats less than a k'zayit of bread, then although he still recites HaMotzi, even more poskim agree that he must make all the individual b'rachot during the meal.¹⁵ Furthermore, he will not be able to bentch in any case and will have to make the appropriate b'rachot after eating. If he does have a k'zayit, he must eat it within the timeframe of k'dei achilat pras.^{16 17}

We have not weighed all the pros and cons (including the issue of eating bread-like foods during a full meal without bread¹⁸), and we have not arrived at a recommended course of action for every permutation. However, we can fairly say that if a person is not interested in eating approximately a slice of bread, he should feel free to pass it up together with washing and bentching. Which-ever approach one takes, he should become familiar with the several halachic questions that arise in "bread meals" and "non-bread meals."

¹⁰ 177:1.

¹¹ See *Machatzit HaShekel* ad loc.; *Mishna Berura* 177:3.

¹² *Even HaOzer* 174:12; *Aruch HaShulchan* 177:2; *Igrot Moshe, Orach Chayim* IV, 41.

¹³ The same is likely true of one who enjoys bread but would prefer to avoid it due to dietary concerns.

¹⁴ See *V'Zot HaBeracha*, p. 71.

¹⁵ *Igrot Moshe* op. cit. In this case, regarding several *halachot*, it is not even considered eating, and there is also no obligation of *Birkat HaMazon* to unite the food into the framework of a meal. See also *Chelkat Ya'akov, Orach Chayim* 49.

¹⁶ The duration of this timeframe is also contested, but is roughly in the range of 4-9 minutes.

¹⁷ *Mishna Berura* 210:1.

¹⁸ See *Igrot Moshe* op. cit.