



JUDAISM FOR LIVING SERIES

BLESSINGS A GATEWAY TO GOD SOURCE AND DISCUSSION SHEET



Blessings are a central part of our daily service of God. They are full of opportunity and meaning if we understand them properly and have proper intent while making them. Let's delve into the essence of brachos (blessings) to awaken ourselves to this awesome opportunity.

The Opportunity of a Blessing:

The Talmud asks on what basis (source) did the Rabbis originate the practice of saying blessings? Many answers are given, but the last and final answer is cited below:

SOURCE 1: *Brachos 35a – This world is given to us only after we recognize its Source*

Rav Yehuda said in the name of Shmuel: Everyone that **takes pleasure from this world without a blessing**, is as if he is (trespassing), **taking pleasure from things consecrated to Heaven**. Rebbe Levi raised a contradiction from verses: It's written in Psalms (24:1) **"To Hashem is the Earth** and all that fills it" and yet it states in Psalm (115:16), **"To Hashem is the Heavens, and the Earth He gives to man"**. This is not a contradiction, the first verse refers to before (making) a blessing, while the second verse refers to after the blessing..... Additionally, Rav Chanina Bar Papa said, all those who **take pleasure from this world** without a blessing is as if **he steals from God!...**

אמר רב יהודה אמר שמואל: כל
הנהנה מן העולם הזה בלא ברכה
כאילו נהנה מקדשי שמים, שנאמר:
"לה' הארץ ומלואה". רבי לוי רמי:
כתיב "לה' הארץ ומלואה", וכתיב
"השמים שמים לה' והארץ נתן לבני
אדם"! לא קשיא כאן קודם ברכה,
כאן לאחר ברכה

אמר רבי חנינא בר פפא כל הנהנה
מן העולם הזה בלא ברכה כאילו גוזל
להקב"ה

These two statements from the Talmud suggest that it is inappropriate to take pleasure from this world without acknowledging its source, even to go so far as to call it stealing!

Q: These statements surface a common misconception about the true scope of our ownership in this world, even regarding things that we may work for or create. What do you think that misconception is and how does this teaching clarify things for us?

Really, God is the source and owner of everything, even things we seem to create or build, and everything that He gives us (including the lives we take for granted) is a gift - unearned and sometimes undeserved! This is a powerful lesson and is the foundation of why we make blessings.

Q: How would being aware that everything is a gift change your life?

Q: The language of "improper trespass and even theft", regarding a person who enjoys God's world without a bracha seems to imply that blessings are a form of "payment" to God, without which we aren't entitled to benefit. It seems almost a little petty, and certainly not a motive we would typically ascribe to God. What do you think this description is trying to convey?

Consider this next source from a contemporary Rabbi which offers another perspective on this question:

SOURCE 2: *Rabbi Shimshon Pincus, Nefesh Shimshon (Tefilla) Morning Blessings.*

A simple analogy: If a man goes to the supermarket to buy bread and other foods, he must pay for them. But suppose the same man comes to the shopkeeper's home for a meal and eats exactly the same food, he doesn't pay a penny.

So it is with Brachos. God has His "business" – the universe. Anything one wants in life is [within the domain of] God's business and must be paid for. But if he develops a loving connection and relationship with God, he can eat from the Heavenly table. [This is accomplished by making a Bracha]. And when you eat by the shopkeeper you don't receive a bill!

משל פשוט לכך- אדם הולך למכולת וקונה לחם... הוא משלם עליהם. אך אם אותו אדם בא אל המוכר הביתה ומקבל בדיוק אותה ארוחה... הוא לא משלם כלום.

כך גם לעניינינו- להקב"ה יש עסק, העולם הוא העסק שלו. וא"כ כשאדם רוצה לחם או עינים בחנות של הקב"ה עליו לשלם על כך. אך אם האדם... מתקשר אליו בקשר של אהבה הוא אוכל משולחן גבוה, משולחנו של הקב"ה. וכשאוכלים משולחנו של החנוני לא מקבלים אה"כ חשבון.

Q: What is the key point that Rabbi Pincus is trying to convey?

Perhaps the true benefit that God intends is the **relationship that is created with Him**, when his children acknowledge and are grateful for His gifts.

This opportunity is **"set aside"** by God for those who will use it to come closer to Him, and the "currency", so to speak, is the blessing. **Someone that enjoys the world without a bracha, in a sense is trespassing and stealing this precious "opportunity"**.

The Code of the Opportunity: "Baruch Ata Hashem" – "Blessed are You Lord"...

All brachos begin with the familiar formula, "Baruch Ata Hashem" – bless you Lord. It seems like we are giving a blessing to God, however the Rabbis understand it a different way:

SOURCE 3A: *Yad Ketanah- When we say that God is "baruch," we mean that He is the Source of blessing.*

"Baruch Atah Hashem" – meaning, You are the Source of all blessing...and He creates them [i.e. blessings] and bestows from them an abundance of goodness on His creations, in accordance with His good will.

ברוך אתה ה'" כלומר אתה הוא מקור הברכה... והוא הממציא אותם ומשפיע מהן שפע רב לבריותיו כפי רצונו הטוב.

In other words, we aren't blessing God, but rather are acknowledging that He is the source of all blessings in general, and for the blessing in front of us now. The next source extends this concept:

SOURCE 3B: *Rashba, Responsa Vol. I, 423 – Bracha from breicha [source].*

Included in the concept of a Bracha is the admission that He is ruler over all, and everything is from Him...as it says [in the Talmud], "A person must bless [God] on the bad just as he must bless Him for the good," for the word "Bracha" comes from the word **"breicha" – reservoirs of water [i.e. the source of everything]**.

ומכלל הברכה ההודאה שהוא שליט
בכל והכל מאתו...כמו שאמרו חייב
אדם לברך על הרעה כדרך שמברכין
על הטובה, שהברכה מלשון בריכות
מים.

Q: What does the Rashba see in the word "bracha" which prompts him to widen the scope of its meaning?

The word **"breicha – reservoirs of water"**, connotes that God is the source for **everything in life**, way beyond the benefit in front of us at the moment, working to coordinate all aspects of our lives, at all times and for our ultimate benefit.

Now let's take a look at the continuation of the text of the bracha:

The Rabbis also point out that the textual formula of brachos shifts from addressing God directly in the second person, **"Blessed are You"**, to the third person, **"Who does such and such"**, at the end of the blessing.

Q: Why do you think the grammatical style of the bracha shifts from 2nd to 3rd person?

One explanation can be understood by looking at the Avinu Malkeinu prayer in which we refer to God as "Our Father, Our King". Father is familiar and close to us (2nd person) while our King is more awesome and powerful, yet a bit more distant (3rd person). Through a bracha, we connect to the **love of our Father who "desires" to give to us, with the absolute power of the King, who can turn his desires into reality, without any opposition.**

Take a look at the explanation of the Chassidic Master, the Noam Elimelech, who offers another perspective on this question:

SOURCE 4: *Noam Elimelech, Pashas Bechukosai – There are two stages of connection to God.*

We say "Blessed are You" in the second person, and "Who has sanctified us" in the third person, because at the outset of a person's service to God, it seems that he is already very close to Him indeed. But then, with continuous dedication to this service comes the realization of the great distance between him and the Almighty, and it is as if his service of God has not even begun.

הנה אנו אומרים "ברוך אתה" הוא נגלה,
"אשר קדשנו" הוא נסתר, שבהתחלת
האדם לעבוד הבורא נראה ונדמה לו
שהוא כבר קרוב לה' מאד. אבל בהתמדתו
בעבודתו יתברך בתמידות אז מבין ורואה
שהוא רחוק מאד מהבורא ב"ה ועדיין לא
התחיל בעבודה כלל.

Q: This comment of the Noam Elimelech seems to be somewhat sobering. Do you see a way it can be quite motivational?

It is easy for one to be taken by a false sense of his true spiritual standing. We relate to God as a loving God and naturally feel close to Him. Only when we attempt to draw closer to God do we begin to see where we really stand. **And that's ok, God personally placed all of us on this journey, and He is continuously guiding and supporting our climb up the ladder to grow closer to Him.**

Other Opportunities that Brachos Offer

We live in a world where it's really easy to forget God exists, because He is hidden behind the scenes and because he charged us with intervening in the world as if we were its sole masters. It's because of this tendency to forget which Maimonides offers as the very practical reason for brachos.

SOURCE 5A: *Rambam, Hilchos Brachos 1:4 – Brachos are a frequent reminder of God.*

5a. [The purpose of Brachos is] to constantly **remember the Creator**, and to be in awe of Him.

כדי לזכור את הבורא תמיד וליראה ממנו

We start brachos off in the second person to help fight off this forgetfulness.

Q: How does that help us remember?

Each blessing begins with a statement addressed directly to God ("Blessed are You"), a strikingly clear reminder that one is standing before God.

SOURCE 5B: *Midrash Shocher Tov, Chapter 16 – We address God directly in Brachos.*

Rav says the text of the Bracha must be "Blessed are You" [i.e., in second person], as it says, **"I feel the presence of God before me constantly."**

אמר רב בשעה שהוא מברך צריך לומר ברוך אתה
וגוי דכתיב שויתי ה' לנגדי תמיד

One of the reasons we forget God so easily is that He is hidden behind the scenes of life.

Q: How do we bring a Hidden God out of the shadows of life?

Consider the following source:

SOURCE 6: *Rabbi Reuven Leuchter – Brachos are the tool which enables us to perceive and internalize that God is present in the world.*

The world is full of many details, and in order for us to be able to recognize God in this world we need to learn to focus on those details. Our senses do not relate to "big things" such as the creation of the world, but rather to small details like the beauty of an apple, its smell, its texture. Small things can create awareness; generalizations cannot.

This is the purpose of Brachos – to develop a consciousness of God. Brachos are the tools to build our awareness of God. They are the tools to help us change our perspective of God from “out there,” to bring Him closer to our senses, to be able to perceive Him in our own lives.

One would think that the more inclusive a Bracha, the better. One would think that the shehakol blessing, “through Whose word everything came to be,” is more significant than boreh pri ha’etz, “Who created the fruit of the tree.” But the opposite is true. The more detailed a Bracha is, the better it is; and therefore, when it comes to the order of saying Brachos, boreh pri ha’etz comes before shehakol... We need to focus on a hundred different, (specific) facets of the goodness bestowed upon us by God (to develop a vivid awareness of Him.)

As Rabbi Leuchter is pointing out, brachos open our eyes to see more deeply into our world and into the little picture of our lives where we can reveal God and develop a relationship with Him. It’s like taking life from black and white to HD – “Hashem Definition”.

Brachos Magnify The Pleasure of Life

SOURCE 7: Kuzari, 3:13,17 – Gratitude doubles your pleasure

The constant practice of Brachos will add **sweetness to sweetness...Readiness for receiving pleasure, as well as imagining its absence, together result in doubled pleasure.** This is one of the benefits for those who are accustomed to saying Brachos with thought and mental preparation...

וממה שיוסיף לו עריבות על עריבות שיברך תמיד...
ההזדמנות להנאה והרגשתה ושיחשוב בהעדרה קודם
לכן כופל ההנאה. וזה מתועלת הברכה למי שהוא
רגיל בהם בכונה והכנה... כמו שאתה אומר “שהחיינו
וקיימנו” וכבר היית מזומן למות... ויקל בעיניך החולי
והמות כאשר יבא מפני שכבר חשבת עם נפשך
וראית... שאתה ראוי להעדר ממך כל טוב בטבעך...
ותהיה נהנה כל ימך

Brachos intensify our pleasures by forcing us to consider what life would be without them.

Q: In addition to this keen observation which we might not have considered, is there another more obvious way that brachos have the potential to double our pleasure in life?

Every bracha is an opportunity, not only to receive delicious physical pleasure but to feel God’s love for us, which enhances it tremendously!

SUMMARY

Brachos affirm and strengthen our belief in and relationship with God, they open up our eyes to the Godliness inherent in the world, enhance our pleasure in life, and help fill the world with spirituality. That’s quite an amazing opportunity that we have minute by minute, day by day to connect to our Creator and bring about Tikun Olam.

EXTRA CREDIT

The Mystery of "Amen"

An interesting part of every Bracha that we probably take for granted is the requirement to say "Amen" by those hearing it. Everyone says it, but many have little appreciation for what it means and how important it is.

SOURCE 8A-8B: *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 124:6/Talmud Bavli, Shabbos 119b – The Sages mandated that a person respond with "Amen" whenever he hears a Bracha.*

8a. They should answer "Amen" to every Bracha, whether they have already fulfilled their obligation of prayer or they have not fulfilled it yet. They should have the intent that "the Bracha that was recited is true, and I believe in it."

ויענו אמן אחר כל ברכה בין אותם שיצאו ידי תפלה
בין אותם שלא יצאו ובכוונה שיכין בלבו אמת היא
הברכה שבירך המברך ואני מאמין בזה

8b. What does Amen mean? Rabbi Chanina taught:
[It is an acronym for] "God is the trustworthy King."

מאי אמן א"ר חנינא אל מלך נאמן.

Every "Amen" is an affirmation that we believe that God is "trustworthy" to take care of us. There is even a way to look at "Amen", which makes it more powerful than the bracha itself!

SOURCE 9: *Rabbi Menachem Nissel, audio class "The Power of Amen" – A Bracha creates only one of two possible spiritual impacts, while the Amen response has the capacity to do both.*

Human beings were placed in this world to perform two very different, even opposite, types of spiritual service of God. One, which the Kabbalists call "from above to below" is to take all the spiritual energy from the upper worlds and bring it down to the physical world, imbuing this world with spirituality. (**Blessings over physical pleasures and mitzvos draw down spirituality from "above"**). The other, which is called "from below to above," is to take every part of the physical world and elevate it to the spiritual realms. (**Brachos of praise and thanks imbue our world from "below" with spirituality.**) Through these two activities, we sanctify the physical world....

Every Bracha accomplishes only one of these two things, but the word "Amen" encompasses both meanings. When a person says Amen, he aligns himself with the Bracha that has been said. He fortifies the Bracha with spiritual energy so that it can come down to this world. But "Amen" also represents a prayer that the Bracha be fulfilled. Thus, when a person says "Amen," he also spreads the spiritual energy of the Bracha throughout the physical world. That is how "Amen" can be greater than a Bracha itself, because "Amen" accomplishes both forms of sanctification, while a Bracha can only accomplish one.