

# Brachos – The Ultimate Way of Internalizing and Spreading Belief in God

## Avraham and Brachos

Midrash Rabbah 43:7- אָמַר רַבִּי יִצְחָק הָיָה מְקַבֵּל אֶת הָעוֹבְרִים וְאֶת הַשָּׂבִים, וּמְשַׁהֵיוּ אוֹכְלִים וְשׁוֹתִין הָיָה אוֹמֵר - לָהֶם בְּרַכּוּ, וְהֵן אוֹמְרִים לוֹ מַה נֹּאמַר, וְהוּא אוֹמֵר לָהֶם אָמְרוּ בְרוּךְ אֱ-ל עוֹלָם שֶׁאֲכַלְנוּ מִשְׁלוֹ, אָמַר לוֹ הַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא אֲנִי לֹא הָיָה שְׁמִי נִכְר לְבְרִיּוֹתַי וְהַפְרַת אוֹתִי בְבְרִיּוֹתַי, מַעֲלָה אֲנִי עֲלֶיךָ כְּאִלּוּ אַתָּה שִׁתַּף עִמִּי בְבְרִיּוֹתוֹ שֶׁל עוֹלָם, הִדָּא הוּא דְכָתִיב: קוֹנֵה שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ

Rabbi Yitzchak said: He (Avraham) would receive the passersby, and when they were eating and drinking, he would tell them **"Make a blessing (bracha)"**. They said, "What should we say?", and he told them, "Say 'Blessed are You, God of the Universe, from whom we ate'". God told him (Avraham), **"I consider it as if you are a partner of mine in the creation of the world"**. This is the meaning of the verse which says (about Avraham) "Creator of the heavens and earth".

**Why do you think that Avraham chose to teach his guests specifically about brachos (plural of bracha) as opposed to any other law in the Torah? What do you think that reflected about Avraham's personality, as well as the meaning of brachos?**

**[Advisors- Think about the words that we use in the bracha, the things that must be in every single bracha (Shem uMalchus), as well as the fact that we are able to address Him directly (blessed are "You"- although this part was not actually included in Avraham's bracha). This includes the basic emunah that Hashem exists, is King of the universe, and that we can talk to Him directly.]**

Devarim 8:10- וְאָכַלְתָּ וְשָׂבַעְתָּ וּבִרְכַתָּ אֶת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ עַל הָאָרֶץ הַטֹּבָה אֲשֶׁר נָתַן לָךְ - You should eat, be satisfied, and bless Hashem your God, upon the good land that He gives you.

Gemara Brachos 35a- ת"ר אסור לו לאדם שיהנה מן העוה"ז בלא ברכה וכל הנהנה מן העוה"ז בלא ברכה מעל מאי תקנתיה...אמר רבא ילך אצל חכם מעיקרא וילמדנו ברכות כדי שלא יבא לידי מעילה אמר רב יהודה אמר שמואל כל הנהנה מן העוה"ז בלא ברכה כאילו הנהנה מקדשי שמים שנא' {תהילים כד-א} לה' הארץ ומלואה ר' לוי רמי כתיב לה' הארץ ומלואה וכתוב {תהילים קטו-טז} השמים שמים לה' והארץ נתן לבני אדם לא קשיא **כאן קודם ברכה כאן לאחר ברכה**.

Our Rabbis have taught: A man is forbidden to enjoy anything of this world without a blessing, and whoever does so commits sacrilege (theft from God). What is the remedy...Said Rava: Let him from the beginning go to a Sage who will teach him the blessing, so that he should not

come to commit sacrilege. Rav Yehuda said in the name of Shmuel: Whoever enjoys anything of this world without a blessing is as though he had partaken of the holy things of Heaven; as it is said, "The earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof" (Psalms 24:1). Rav Levi asked: It is written, "**The earth is the Lord's** and the fulness thereof," and it is written, "The heavens are the heavens of the Lord, **but the earth hath He given to the children of men**" (Psalms 24:16)! There is no contradiction; **the former passage (24:1) is referring to before the blessing has been uttered, the latter passage (24:16) to after the blessing has been uttered.**

**What does this tell us about our natural right to enjoy anything from the world? How does a bracha have the ability to change something from belonging to God to instead belong to humankind?**

**[Advisors: Think about our relationship with our parents. As children, we don't truly own anything, but we get everything from our parents due to their love for us, and we don't do anything for it. However, when we become mature enough, and more is expected of us, things change. Now, we are expected to say please and thank you, to acknowledge that we aren't self-sufficient, to express appreciation for everything that we ever had, have, or will have. [Reason #1- see below.] In addition, there are times that we may be asked to chip in and help out around the house in whatever way we can. Our help may not be of crucial importance to the task actually getting done, but our parents want to involve us in the process, which helps us become more responsible people and see ourselves in a more dignified light. [Reason #2- see below.]]**

## Major Question about Brachos

Rabbeinu Bachya<sup>1</sup>, Devarim 8:10- כי וע"ד הפשט: אומר תחלה כי הברכות אינן צורך גבוה אלא צורך הדיוט, כי כיון שהוא יתברך מקור הברכה וכל הברכות הן משתלשלות ממנו כל הנמצאים המברכים אותו אין כל ברכותיהם כדאי לו, כי הוא הנמצא הקדמון שהמציא הנמצאים כלם ומציאותם אינה אלא מציאותו, ומציאותו תספיק בעצמו לא יצטרך לזולתו כלל, וא"כ אם יברכוהו כל היום וכל הלילה מה יתרבה בכך, או מה יתנו לו או מה מידם יקח. On the simple level, the purpose of brachos is not for God but for humankind; since Hashem is the source of all blessing and all blessings extend from Him, the entirety of blessings of everything in existence are beneath Him, for He is the original one who put everything else into existence, and their existence is in fact only because of His existence; His existence is self-sufficient and does not need anyone else. If so, **if they will bless Him all day and night, what will He gain from this?** What will they give Him and what can He take from their hands?

**[Advisors: This is an important question to ask about tefillah in general, and certainly something that most, if not all, teens have asked themselves by this stage in their lives.]**

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Bachya ben Asher, 1255-1340, lived in Spain and was a student of Rabbi Shlomo Ben Aderet (Rashba), and was very much influenced by Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban).

# First Purpose of Brachos – Gratitude and Humility

Rabbeinu Bachya, Devarim 8:10- אין התועלת והרבוי כי אם אלינו, כי כל המברך על מה שנהנה הוא מעיד...  
על ההשגחה שהוא יתעלה הממציא מזון לשפלים כדי שיחיו, ובזכותם התבואה והפירות מתברכין ומתרבין  
Rather, the benefit and gain (of saying brachos) is for us, for whomever makes a blessing over that which he benefited is testifying about divine providence, that God is the provider of food to the lower beings so that they may live, and it is in the merit (of these blessings) that the grain and fruits are blessed and become numerous.

Meshech Chochma<sup>2</sup> Devarim 8:10- ומסיק שם (ברכות מח:) דברכה שלפניה הוא מדרבנן...וטעמא נראה, דאם נעיין על התשלום על גמול הטוב שגמל לו הקב"ה אז הוא קו"ח מעליא...מה כשהוא שבע מברך, כשהוא רעב לא כל שכן?! שזה תודה וברכה עבור גמולו שגמל אליו השי"ת. אך באמת אין הברכה על זה בלבד, רק הוא ענין ומכוון אחר, שכשאוכל ושבע אז הוא עלול לבעט, וכמו שאמר הכתוב (פסוקים יב - יד) "פן תאכל ושבעת וכו' ושכחת את ה' אלקיך"...לכן צוה השי"ת שכשיאכל וישבע, יזכיר שם אלקים בתודה ויברכנה ויזכור כי "הוא הנתן לך כח לעשות חיל" (להלן פסוק יח) ומידו לוקח האוכל למלאות נפשו כי ירעב. וזה שאמר בסמוך (יב - יח) "השמר לך פן תשכח וכו' פן תאכל ושבעת וכו' ורם לבבך ושכחת וזכרת וכו' כי הוא הנתן לך כח לעשות חיל". הראה לנו טעם הברכה, שלא יקשיח לבבו מדרכי השי"ת ועדותיו. וזה יתכן דוקא כשהוא שבע, לא כשהוא רעב.

The Gemara Brachos 48b concludes that a blessing before eating is a rabbinic commandment (a lower level of obligation, as opposed to the Birkas Hamazon, the blessing made after eating, which is a Torah commandment, a greater level of obligation). [Why is the level of obligation for making a blessing after eating greater than that of the blessing before eating?] If it was just about gratitude, if a person has to make a blessing when he is full, all the more so that he should make it when he is hungry, as this is thanks for one's portion that he received from Hashem (i.e. since you feel more gratitude for food when you are hungry)! It must be that the purpose of blessings is not merely gratitude. Rather, when a person eats and is satisfied, he is likely to revolt, as the verse says "Lest you eat and be satisfied, and forget Hashem your God." Therefore, Hashem commanded that when a person eats and is satisfied, he should then mention thanks to God and bless Him and remember that "He is the one who gives you strength for all your accomplishments" (Devarim 8:18) and it is from His hand that humankind takes food to satisfy its soul when hungry. We have thus been shown that the reason of blessings are so that a person should not harden his heart from the ways of God and His commandments. This makes sense specifically when he is full and satisfied, not when he is hungry.

**[Advisors: For more advanced groups (only if you think that you have time, since this is less crucial than the following sections in the source sheet), you can ask the teens why it is that when it comes to making a bracha on learning Torah, the mitzvah m'deoraysa (the**

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<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk, 1843-1926. He wrote a celebrated commentary on Chumash, as well as on Maimonides' halachic magnum opus, the Mishna Torah.

greater obligation) is on making the bracha *before* learning, as opposed to afterwards. Why the difference from food, where the mitzvah m'deoraysa is for making a bracha *after* eating?

The answer that the Meshech Chochma, in his continuation of the above piece, gives is that before one begins learning, one is liable to desire to learn for the wrong reasons, whether it is for personal honor or glory or for some other ulterior motive. At that point, we are commanded to make a bracha, to remember that Hashem is the one who gave us the Torah; it is crucial that we focus on this before we start learning. This is not merely an intellectual exercise; there is tremendous religious meaning and significance in every word that we learn, as a means of connecting to Hashem. However, once we start learning with the right intentions, we are no longer in the same danger. The תורה is the antidote to the yetzer hara when learned properly and we no longer need a bracha to protect us once we have learned; the Torah will do that on its own.

This is obviously a springboard into a huge topic on its own right, but limit it to this, if you decide to discuss it.]

## Second Purpose of Brachos – Invited Partnership with God

Rabbeinu Bachya (Devarim 8:10)

ועל דרך הקבלה: וברכת את ה', אין הברכה צורך הדיוט בלבד וגם אינה הודאה בלבד אבל הוא לשון תוספת ורבויו... והנה כאשר אנו מברכים להקב"ה יש בזה תוספת רוח הקדש, וברכתנו היא סבה שיתברכו כל בריותיו ממנו, ואמרו עוד: (יבמות סד א) שהקב"ה מתאוה לתפלתן של צדיקים, ואילו לא היתה הברכה והתפלה כי אם "הודאה לבד למה יתאוה לתפלתן של צדיקים המועטין יותר משאר עמים רבים, והלא "ברב עם הדרת מלך". On a mystical level, (when the verse says) "And you shall bless God", the blessing is not merely for the purpose of humankind and is not merely an expression of gratitude; rather, it is a language of **adding on and multiplying...Behold, when we bless God, there is an addition of divine spirit, and our blessings are a cause for Hashem to bless all of His creations.** It is said (Talmud Yevamos 64a) that God desires the prayers of the righteous, and if blessings and prayer were merely prayer, why would He desire the prayers of the few righteous more than from great nations, for it is said "the splendor of the kind is with the multitude of nations" (aka strength in numbers)?

Rabbeinu Bachya (Kad Hakemach<sup>3</sup>, "Bracha")

ואע"פ שהוא יתברך מקור הברכה מצינו שהוא חפץ בברכות נבראיו למען הצדיקים להגדיל ולהאדיר שכרם ותגמולם לעולם הבא למען יהיה העולם הזה מתברך בשפע מזונות ורבויו הטובה ועל כן באה מצות עשה בתורה לברך על המזון כדי שיתברכו מזונות העולם כדכתיב (דברים ח:י) ואכלת ושבעת וברכת.

Even though God is the source of all blessing, we find that He nevertheless desires the blessings of His creations. (Why?) **This is the for sake of the righteous, in order to increase**

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<sup>3</sup> An encyclopedia which Rabbeinu Bachya wrote on prominent Jewish and Halachic topics.

**and glorify their reward and stake in the world to come, and so that this world will be blessed with the flow of food and great abundance.** Therefore, we have a positive commandment in the Torah to make a blessing over food, so that the food of this world will be blessed, as the verse says, “And you shall eat and be satisfied and make a blessing”.

**How does it make you feel knowing that your brachos can have this great of an impact on the world?**

**[Advisors: This section can potentially be misunderstood, so it is crucial to understand it in its proper context. Rabbeinu Bachya introduces his words by writing that this is “on a mystical level”. The world of Kabbalah discusses what goes on in the upper realm when a person does a mitzvah, learns Torah, makes a bracha, etc., and the impact that this has on the heavens and Hashem. However, this chas v’shalom does not mean that Hashem is dependent upon us in a natural way. It is best to understand this in light of the second piece in this section (Kad Hakemach), saying that Hashem wishes to involve us and give us greater merit, analogous to a parent who wants to involve his teenager in the house work, or someone who wants his or her spouse to help them in cooking dinner, even though they may not need the help. Hashem, like the parent or the spouse, wants to create a partnership, a relationship, with us, and the greatest way is by making us a partner in the creation of the world, which we saw in the first source with Avraham.]**

## **Amen – Affirming Belief when Hearing a Bracha**

רבי יוסי אומר: גדול העונה אמן יותר מן המברך - Gemara Brachos 53b  
Rabbi Yossi says: Greater is he who answers Amen than the one who makes the blessing.

ומפני שהאמונה יסוד כל התורה כולה תקנו לנו רז"ל בתפלה ובברכות - (Shemos 14:31) Rabbeinu Bachya לענות אמן, שהוא נגזר מלשון אמונה ומלשון הודאה שמקבל עליו דברי המברך ומודה בהם...ועל זה אמרו: (נזיר 10 ב) גדול העונה אמן יותר מן המברך. ובאור הענין: כי המברך מעיד בברכתו של הקב"ה שהוא מקור הברכה, והעונה אמן הוא מקיים השטר והוא העקר, שאין קיום העדות בעד ראשון אלא בעד שני, שהעדות נגמר על ידו והעונה אמן הוא העד השני וצריך הוא שיצטרף עם העד הראשון שהוא המברך כי עמו העדות קיים

Because belief (*emunah*) is the foundation of the entire Torah, our sages instituted that we should answer Amen in prayer and in blessings, for Amen is from the root of *emunah*, and it is a language of admission, that he is accepting the words of the one who made the blessing and agreeing to them...This is what is meant when it says “Greater is he who answers Amen than the one who makes the blessing”. The explanation of the matter is such: the one who makes the blessing testifies to the blessing of Hashem, saying that he is the source of all blessing. However, the one who answers Amen “ratifies the document”; he is the centerpiece. This is because testimony can only be upheld with two witnesses, not with one, so the one who answers Amen is completing the testimony. He is the second witness, and he must combine

with the first witness, the one who made the blessing, for it is with him (the one who answers Amen) that the testimony is upheld.

**Knowing now how great the impact of saying Amen is, do you think that it is better to say a bracha silently or out loud when there are others around?**