

The Special Relationship of Sephardic Jews to the Bracha of HaNoten La'Yaef Koach

By Rabbi Haim Jachter

An Ashkenazic rabbinic colleague of mine told his students that Sephardic Jews¹ do not recite the Bracha of Hanoten La'Yaef Koach (blessing Hashem for giving strength to the weak). His assumption was based on the fact that Maran (Rav Yosef Karo, the preeminent Sephardic Halachic authority) in the Shulhan Aruch (Orah Haim 46:6) states that this Beracha should not be recited since it does not appear in the Gemara. The rabbi then consulted me to make sure he was correct. The colleague was shocked to learn that Sephardic Jews (with the exception of Yemenite and Italian Jews²) do recite this Beracha, against the ruling of Rav Yosef Karo!

This Beracha is mentioned by the Tur (Orah Haim 46) as well as a number of other Rishonim including the Semag and Mahzor Vitry. Maran Rav Yosef Karo, in his Bet Yosef (Orah Haim 46 s.v. Od Bracha Ahat), disagrees with the Tur and wonders how one can use Hashem's name in a Beracha, which was not recorded in the Talmud³. Therefore, Maran rules in the Shulhan Aruch that one should not recite it. Based on this, the Vilna Gaon and the Peri Hadash (Rav Hizkiya Da Silva, 1656-1695, a major Sephardic Halachic authority) also did not recite the Beracha.

On the other hand, Maran HaHida (Tuv HaAyin number seven) cites a tradition from the Ari Hakadosh⁴ that this Beracha should be recited including the

¹ The Rama (Orah Haim 46:6) records that the widespread custom among Ashkenazim is to recite this Bracha. The Mishnah Brurah (46:21) records that the consensus opinion among (Ashkenazic) is to recite this Bracha including Hashem's name.

² Although Rav Shalom Messas (Teshuvot Shemesh UMagein 1:25) records that the custom in Morocco is to recite this Bracha without mentioning Hashem's name, Rav Lebhav (Orah Haim 46:6) notes that this was the custom only in the Moroccan city of Meknes. In the rest of Morocco, writes Rav Lebhav, the custom was to recite this Bracha including the name of Hashem.

³ The Beit Yosef also notes that the Rambam does not mention this Bracha. However, the Avudraham (in his commentary on the weekday Shaharit) mentions that there are a number of communities which recite this Bracha including the mentioning of Hashem's name. The Bi'ur HaGra cites the Rosh (Kiddushin 1:41) as the source for the assertion that we may not recite a Bracha that does not appear in the Gemara. It is interesting, however, that the Rosh elsewhere (Ketubot 1:15) rules that it is acceptable to recite a Bracha that was instituted in the Geonic era. Rav Ovadia (Teshuvot Yehave Da'at 4:4) explains the reason why the consensus view among Sephardic Posekim, such as the Hida (Keshet Gudal 5:23) and the Ben Ish Hai (year one Vayeishev paragraph 10), is for women to recite She'Asani Kirtzono without mentioning Hashem's name is that this Bracha is not only not mentioned in the Talmud it is not even mentioned in the Geonic literature.

⁴ The Magen Avraham (46:12) and Ba'eir Heitev (Orah Haim 46:10) also cite the Ari z"l to this effect.

mentioning of Hashem's name. He and the Ben Ish Hai (year one Vayeishev paragraph 9), therefore, ruled to say the Beracha with Hashem's name. He argued that had Maran Rav Yosef Karo known that the Ari HaKadosh ruled to say the Beracha, he too would have retracted his view. Even if Maran would disagree, and thereby create an uncertainty with regard to the Halacha, the Hida and the Ben Ish Hai hold that the general principle of "Safek Berachot L'Hakel" (when in doubt, be lenient and do not recite the Beracha) does not apply to instances which the Ari HaKadosh would say the Beracha⁵.

Surprisingly, Hacham Ovadia Yosef (Teshuvot Yabia Omer 2 Orah Haim 25:12-13) also rules to say the Beracha. However, he takes issue with the Hida's assumption that Maran would have agreed with the Ari HaKadosh had he would have seen his opinion. Rav Yosef usually prefers to follow the pure Halachic approach of Maran over the Kabbalistic bent of the Ari, Hida and Ben Ish Hai. Therefore, Hacham Ovadia bases his ruling on the fact that the accepted Sephardic Minhag (custom) is to recite the Beracha. This is indicated by the fact that almost all Sephardic Siddurim include this Beracha. Hacham Ovadia says that the principle of "Safek Berachot L'Hakel" does not apply when the common custom is to recite the Beracha.

Hacham Ovadia explains that the widespread custom and the fact that this Beracha is presented by a variety of Rishonim indicates its ancient origin. He even writes that perhaps the Rishonim that cite this Beracha had an alternative text of the Gemara which included this Beracha.

A Concluding Thought

An underlying motivation to include this Beracha in the daily liturgy might include⁶ powerful spiritual message inherent in this beautiful Beracha. Many of us who work exceedingly hard to support our families and community occasionally step back and wonder from where we draw the strength to

⁵ This assertion is stunning in light of the Ben Ish Hai's assertion (year one Nitzavim, paragraph 19) to omit a Bracha in case of doubt even in a situation where Maran Rav Yosef Karo rules that one recites the Bracha. This reflects the incredible esteem in which the Ben Ish Hai held the Ari z"l!

⁶ The Tur notes the primary intention of this Bracha is restore a tired body after a night's rest. Our added explanation fits well with the origin of the phrase HaNotein LaYa'eif Ko'ah, Yishayahu 40:27-31.

accomplish that which have successfully completed. We wonder how were we able to accomplish that which is clearly beyond our physical ability and stamina.

At the end of many weeks of difficult work we wonder how we were able to make it through. It is only with the help of Hashem, the Notein LaYa'eif Koah, that we are able to do so. We recognize that without Hashem's help it would be impossible to accomplish all we have done. Perhaps this explains the special connection we feel towards this special Beracha and endeavor to include it in our daily Tefillah as a means to express our deepest gratitude to Hashem for enabling us to accomplish far more than we are innately capable.