

## Blessed by a Rabbi

Ekev 5778

As I ascended the steps of leading to the sanctuary of Congregation Beth Hakneses Hachodosh in Rochester a few weeks ago, I was greeted by a sign. “Annual Brachos Bee, Sunday, July 15, 2018.” It had been a long time since I had seen a sign for such an event, let alone participated in one. Upon entry, children were provided a booklet with a list of the berachos on several hundred different food items, events and rituals; The amount of information required for study was commensurate with age and grade level, and there was some kind of a prize. In an article that appeared on the website The Lehrhaus in January<sup>1</sup>, Rabbi Dr. Zev Eleff, Chief Academic Officer the Hebrew Theological College in Chicago, wrote a detailed study of the history of Berachos Bees, which he described as a unique way of Judaizing the ubiquitous Spelling Bee. Berachos Bees date back to 1971; through the efforts of Rabbi Dovid Price and Rabbi Eliezer Wenger, they spread like wildfire through the Torah Umesorah network of schools. As the day school movement stretched beyond the of the New York area, regional competitions developed, leading up to national Berachos Bees. Brachos Bees were also reported in the broader media; The New York Times reported on the competition in the Junior Girls Division:

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.thelehrhaus.com/scholarship/the-brachos-bee-and-becoming-american-orthodox-jews/>

*Fast and curious the questions came: what is the blessing appropriate to almonds, American cheese, angel food cake, apples ... Down went contestants—on buckwheat, chives, éclair eggplant, grits, kasha, parsley. Finally, Reana Bookson, aged 6, stumbled on rhubarb, leaving Elaine Witty, 8, triumphant winner.*

There were certain schools known for producing Berachos Bee champions; In the 1980s, the undisputed king of the Berachos Bee was the Torah Academy of Greater Philadelphia. National Berachos Bees were disbanded in the 1990s, when Torah Umesorah realized that local or even schoolwide events were higher yield and less expensive, and indeed, in the more Yeshivish community, they are still popular. On Shabbos in Rochester, the day before the event, Dr. Baruch Eisenberg, a local pediatrician who organized the event, announced that **68 children were enrolled**- a staggering number for Rochester, New York. My brother and I began imagining what kinds of questions we might ask at such a contest: What are the blessings you recite if you are eating sushi while sitting overlooking the Mediterranean Sea, and suddenly a strange looking king walks by as it begins to thunder? But after our good natured jokes, I began to think about it some more. The competitive edge of the Modern Orthodox community has been channeled into basketball, academic competitions and occasionally into events like the International Bible Contest (aka the Chidon HaTanach) or the Moot Beit Din competition. We just don't see Berachos Bees anymore in our Modern Orthodox community. What does that say about

us? Is it that there's only so much interest our community can muster in the arcane details of the laws of berachos? Who wants to rattle off some perfunctory words every time they put food in their mouths?

In an indirect fashion our parsha feeds the perception that we in the religious world are obsessed with minutiae and obscure details, with rote performance over spiritual engagement.

#### **דברים פרק י פסוק יב**

וְעַתָּה יִשְׂרָאֵל מִה יִקְנֶה אֱלֹהֶיךָ שְׂאֵל מִעֲמֶךָ כִּי אִם-לִירְאָה אֶת-יְקֹנֶה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְלַכֵּת בְּכָל-דַּרְכָיו וְלֹא-הִבָּה אֹתוֹ וְלַעֲבֹד אֶת-יְקֹנֶה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל-לִבְבְּךָ וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁךָ:

What is it that God wants of us? The verse itself leads us to believe that God seeks our love, fear and devotion above all else. How are these lofty goals manifest? Listen to the puzzling words of the Talmud, in tractate Menachot:

#### **תלמוד בבלי מסכת מנחות דף מג עמוד ב**

תניא, היה רבי מאיר אומר: חייב אדם לברך מאה ברכות בכל יום, שנאמר: ועתה ישראל מה ה' אלקיך שואל מעמך.

#### **רש"י מסכת מנחות דף מג עמוד ב**

מה ה' אלהיך וגו' - קרי ביה מאה.

Believe it or not, the Talmud interprets this lofty verse, in which God outlines his requirements of his adherents, as referring to a requirement to recite 100 blessings a day. The Rabbis saw this as such a daunting challenge that they proceeded to assemble a list of daily brachos so that one can

achieve the aforementioned objective. In a regular Shacharit service, for example, there are nearly 50 blessings; Mincha takes care of another 19 with the Shemoneh Esrei, and another 24 at Maariv. Washing before a meal takes care of another six blessings- two before eating and four during *bentching*- leaving another four or so at your discretion, to be recited over food, special occasions, seeing certain extraordinary phenomenon and other such blessings. Shabbos requires some more discretionary blessings, as there are fewer blessings during prayer.

Perhaps the objective, in mandating so many daily blessings, was to keep us so busy that we have less time to rebel and act contrary to the the will of God - and so by default it becomes the most effective way to ensure a lifestyle filled with fear and love of God, אהבת ה' and יראת שמים. But if the primary objective is the promotion of fear, reverence and devotion, why would Chazal mandate an activity that practically begs for rote repetition?

Rav Avrohom Yehoshua Heschel, the Apter Rav (and namesake of the great philosopher) offers a remarkable explanation in the name of the Baal HaTurim.

**תורת אמת ויקרא פרשת ויקרא**

והנה תיקנו חכז"ל (מנחות מג ב) מאה ברכות בכל יום, מה שהכנסת ישראל צריך בכל יום מאה ברכות

**נגד מאה אדנים שהיה במקדש (בעל הטורים שמות לח, כז), דהוא היסוד של בית המקדש**

The reason our sages mandated 100 blessings a day is to evoke the memory of the 100 sockets that held together the boards of the *mishkan*. Reciting blessings, per the Apter Rav, is a way of rebuilding the Temple- certainly an appropriate goal as we are now in the period of consolation over the Temple after we have mourned for its destruction. But aside from the number 100, what is the connection between sockets and berachos?

I'd like to suggest that *berachos* are a perfect way to evoke these sockets, because both of them serve as a means of grounding and connection. Indeed, *berachos* connect us in three different ways:

First, *berachos* connect us to ourselves. They promote mindfulness, as saying a beracha does not just require *kavanah*, or intent and understanding, but requires knowledge to know what the food is made from and what the correct blessing is- and it requires us to pause for a moment rather than just shoveling food into our mouths. Berachos are also a source of connection in that they are the only ritual we have that encompasses all five senses; there are blessings on fragrances, on different natural phenomenon we see and hear, and of course on food we eat- and there are certain blessings that require touch as well, as we hold the item we are blessing- like when we pick up the esrog and lulav. Blessings connect us to ourselves because they encompass the Jewish calendar; there are blessings unique to virtually every

Jewish holiday, and every step of the life cycle is consecrated by *berachos* as well. There is a blessing pronounced over the birth of a baby girl- *hatov vehameitiv*, there are seven blessings pronounced under a chuppah, and at a funeral, there is another, final blessing- *dayan ha'emet*.

But *Berachos* don't just connect us to ourselves; they connect us to others as well. When you answer *amen* to the blessing of another person, you are their partner in the recitation of the blessing and affirm what they have just said. In Kabbalistic sources, answering *Amen* is viewed as a significant source of merit that can have far reaching and transformative ramifications. I think, though, that there is another facet of *berachos* that serves as a connection. Rabbi Avi Shafran, spokesperson for Agudath Israel of America, is a person I rarely agree with, but he was entirely correct in a piece he penned called "A Modest Jewish Proposal."<sup>2</sup>

*With all the contemporary Jewish world's disagreements and disagreeableness, all the polarized points of view and highly charged issues, might a small measure of pan-Jewish People unity be attainable by a collective embrace of brachos?*

As Rabbi Shafran put it, *brachos* are resistant to discussions of openness versus insularity; you recite a *beracha* on Cholent as you would on crepes Suzette. They are above discussions of women's roles in Judaism because

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.rabbiavishafran.com/a-modest-jewish-proposal/>

men and women are equally obligated in the recitation of *berachos*, certainly before partaking of food. And they have nothing to do with issues relating to Zionism and Israel (though the text of the blessing of *al hamichya* is one of the most religious Zionist texts there is); the blessing on a cherry is the same in Tel Aviv as it is, *lehavdil*, in Texas. The most doctrinaire vegan and the most committed carnivore are both obligated to make a beracha before partaking of a an extra firm piece of tofu or a juicy steak- and the beracha is the same. And the blessing on a glass of beer is the same regardless of whether you are the reddest conservative or the bluest liberal. And making blessings brings people together because it cultivates gratitude. If we thank God for the goodness He bestows upon us, we will grow accustomed to feeling thankful for His emissaries in bringing that goodness to our lives.

Finally, blessings connect us to Hashem. Indeed, the recitation of a blessing renders us partners in building the world. There is a verse we say every month in Hallel (115:16)

הַשָּׁמַיִם שְׁמַיִם לַיהוָה, וְהָאָרֶץ נָתַן לְבְנֵי אָדָם

The heavens belong to God, and the Earth belongs to mankind.” The Talmud explains that so long as we make a blessing before partaking of the good of this world, it belongs to us. Reciting a blessing before partaking of food affords an opportunity to engage in a profound theological experience. Just think about what you are saying:

ברוך אתה ה' אלוהינו מלך העולם שהכל נהיה בדברו

ה' - ברוך אתה ה' - Blessed are you, God. What does it mean that God is blessed?

ה' - אלוהינו מלך העולם - Our master, sovereign of the Universe, time and space - here, you are declaring that God is in control

ה' - שכל נהיה בדברו - by whose word everything comes into being. This is a transcendent declaration of God's dominion, and you get to do it every time you have an ice cold glass on water on a blazing Dallas day!

Just a few minutes ago, we *bentched* the month of Elul, heralding the arrival of the month of introspection and repentance that is the prelude to the High Holiday season. During this month, we will take stock of the ways we need to improve spiritually, and the beneficial behaviors we should take on so as to merit success in the new year of 5779. Making *berachos* is an easy yet profound way to engage in this kind of transformative behavior. It can start in just a short while, at kiddush. Pause for a few moments before partaking of food and make a blessing over it; if you don't know the proper blessing, don't hesitate to ask. Virtually none of my colleagues ever receive *berachos* related questions, and we all love them. And after partaking of food, spend another few moments on the *beracha acharona*, the concluding blessing. If we want to merit a *חיים של ברכה*, a life of blessing, let us, in this month, live a *חיים של ברכות* - a life of blessings.



