



RABBI SHALOM

ROSNER

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Birchat HaTorah

As Shavuot approaches and we celebrate Matan Torah, let's explore the nature of the *brachot* that we recite prior to learning Torah.

Birchat HaTorah: Before or After Learning?

The *Gemara* (Berakhot 48b) inquires as to whether the blessing that we recite prior to learning Torah – *Birchat HaTorah* is a Biblical or Rabbinic obligation? There is a disagreement in the *Gemara*, and the outcome is that *Birchat HaTorah* is indeed a Torah obligation, like *Birchat HaMazon*. All other *brachot* are only Rabbinic obligations.

The *Meshech Hochma* asks: Why is it that the Biblical obligation is to recite a *bracha* **before** we learn Torah and **after** we eat? Wouldn't it be more appropriate to be required to thank Hashem at the very first moment, prior to partaking in the delicacy before us?

If the only purpose of a *bracha* is to offer gratitude to Hashem for providing us with food, perhaps it would be more appropriate to recite a blessing before partaking of the food. However, the *Meshech Hochma* perceives the purpose of *Birchat HaMazon* differently. When one is satiated, he is

more likely to rebel (Berakhot 32a; Rashi, *Devarim* 11:16). When one lacks something, he is more likely to turn to Hashem to request it. However, once one feels satisfied and is not in need of anything, he is less likely to recognize that the food came from Hashem. Therefore, the Biblical obligation is to recite a blessing after we eat in order to remind us to express our appreciation for the food that Hashem has provided to us.

With respect to Torah, however, the opposite is true. After engaging in Torah study, one feels inspired and enlightened. We do not need a reminder to offer gratitude to Hashem for having granted us the Torah. However, prior to learning, we must make a *bracha* to ensure that we place our learning in the proper context. We are not just seeking intellectual stimulation or recognition. Rather, we are studying the Torah because it is a mitzvah to do so.

The *Gemara* in Nedarim offers a rather strange explanation for the *Hurban: Shelo birchu baTorah techila* – “They didn't recite the blessings over the Torah prior to studying Torah.” Many commentators are puzzled by the *Gemara's* statement and ask (a) Why didn't they recite the blessings over the Torah? and (b) Even if they didn't recite the blessings over the Torah, is that so terrible? They still learned! They just didn't articulate the blessings over the


Torah.

Rabbi Asher Weiss, in *Minchat Asher: Sichot al HaMo'adim*, vol. 2, ch. 44, provides a fascinating explanation of what was so terrible about not making a blessing prior to learning Torah. Rabbi Weiss asserts that the fault was - that they did not recite a blessing on the Torah **prior** to learning; however, they may have made a blessing **after** having learnt Torah. If they were satisfied with what they had learnt, they made a sort of *birchat ha'nehenin*, as one would recite a blessing after a meal. This was their grave error. We need to make a blessing **prior** to learning, similar to the blessing we recite prior to eating. By reciting a blessing prior to learning, we express our appreciation and understanding that we are about to study something holy, whether or not it is enjoyable. We study for the purpose of studying itself.¹

Why Two Brachot?

Rav Mordechai Yaffe, in his *Sefer Levush*, asks why we recite two different *brachot* each morning in connection with *Birchat HaTorah*? One concludes “*la’asok bedivrei Torah*” – “to engage in words of Torah,” and the other *bracha* is “*Noten haTorah*” – “Giver of the Torah.” Typically, we recite one *bracha* per mitzva. Why does Torah study have two? Rav Yaffe answers that


1 The Kehillat Yaakov actually categorizes the *bracha* of “*asher bachar banu*” as a *birchat ha'nehenin*, by focusing on the object (*heftza*) of the Torah, rather than on the act of the performance of the mitzva (like is typically done – lulav, shofar, succah etc), notwithstanding that it is recited prior to engaging in the study of Torah.



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one of these *brachot* is actually recited at the **conclusion** of learning. How so?

Consider when the obligation to study Torah ends. After the *shiu*? After Maariv? The obligation is constant – all day and all night: “You shall meditate upon it day and night.” והגית בו יומם ולילה. The obligation continues until one falls asleep, at which point he cannot recite a *bracha*. Thus, the *bracha* at the conclusion of learning can only be recited the next morning. Thus, each morning, we recite one *bracha* – *Noten haTorah* – to conclude yesterday’s learning, and another *bracha* – *la’asok bedivrei Torah* – on the learning of the new day.

Constant Awareness of Torah

Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik asks why once one recites the *birchat HaTotah* in the morning, even if one’s learning is interrupted one is not obligated to recite an additional *bracha* prior to re-engaging in the study of Torah? If one eats bread at breakfast, he has to recite a new blessing at dinner. If one sits in a succah for lunch, he has to recite a new *bracha* when he returns to the succah for dinner. Any interruption requires a new blessing. Why is the same principle not applicable to the study of Torah?

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The Rav explains (based on a tosafot in brachot 11b) that in other instances, it is one's discontinuity (*hesech ha'daat*) that requires a new blessing. However, when it comes to Talmud Torah, one is always conscious of the Mitzvah. There is acute awareness and latent awareness. For example, when a mother plays with a child there is an **acute** awareness of the child. When the mother is at work and the child in kindergarten there is a natural **latent** awareness of her child's existence. It is expressed in the form of a commitment, devotion, identification – a feeling that cannot be extinguished.

Similarly, with regard to Torah. One may not have an acute awareness of Torah 24/7, but the latent awareness never ceases. Since there is no discontinuity – no new blessing is required when one returns to engage in learning Torah (moving from latent to acute awareness).

As we celebrate Matan Torah, may we appreciate each moment in which we can engage in Torah, and constantly be reminded of our latent connection to Torah throughout the day, even when not studying Torah, as a result of our constant commitment and devotion to Torah and mitzvot! ■



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Professor Menachem Ben-Sasson
 "מסורות על דרכי העברת התורה ושימורה"

23:30
פרופסור דוד גרינברג
Professor David Greenberg
 "Let's study Midrash"

00:15
הרב חנוך ירש
Rabbi Chanoch Yeres
 "The Mother's Role in Educating Children"





2 Pele Yoetz - Yemin Moshe
 Refreshments will be served