



**RABBI AARON**

Editor, Torah Tidbits

**GOLDSCHIEDER**

# Rabbi Soloveitchik: Making Meaningful Berachot

Not a day passes in the life of an observant Jew without reciting *berachot*. Beginning our day with prayer, when we eat, when performing certain mitzvot - *berachot* are rendered.

We generally understand the idea of making a *Beracha* as a formula by which we ‘thank’ God or ‘offer praise’ to Him. The formula *Baruch Ata Hashem*, is often translated, “Praised be God’s name.” Yet, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik suggested that this explanation does not capture the true meaning of making a *beracha*.

The Rav cited such giants as the Ari Hakadosh, the Vilna Gaon, and the author of the Tanya, who all reject the standard explanation stated above. Rather, they offer a kabbalistic view, which the Rav claimed,

should be accepted as a *beracha*’s true connotation.

Even before elucidating this idea, we first need to take a close look at the way the Torah uses the expression *baruch*. This will clarify its accurate meaning. The following verse is a key: “God created man in His image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. God blessed them and God said to them: ‘Be fertile and increase; fill the earth and master it’ (Gen. 1:27-28). This verse does not mean that the Almighty was praising or giving them acclaim. Rather, the verse asserts that the Creator imbued human nature with the desire to procreate and produce more offspring. The notion of *beracha* relates to expanding, procreating, or multiplying. (*Blessings and Thanksgiving* p.116)

Consider the meaning of the following verse: “And God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it” (*Beresheet* 2:3). R. Avraham ibn Ezra (*ad loc.*) explains: “The meaning of *beracha* is an increase of goodness. On this day, the body’s reproductive strength is renewed, as is the soul’s power to discern.” Nachmanides agrees with this interpretation, calling it true and accurate. (*Ibid.*, p.120)<sup>1</sup>

1 The Maharal of Prague comments that the word for blessing, which consists of letters *bet*, *resh*, *chaf* - all hint to the notion of doubling. The letter *bet* is double

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Thus, when we begin our blessings to the Holy One with the traditional word “*baruch*,” we mean the same thing that God meant in his *beracha* to Adam and Chava and what he meant when he endowed the Shabbat with *beracha*. When the Torah commands us to bless God - “You shall eat and be satisfied, and you shall bless the Lord your God for the good Land that He has given you” (Devarim 8:10) - it means that we, as it were, bless God in the same vein; increase, expand, enlarge. But what does this actually mean?

In answering this question, the Rav simplified certain kabbalistic idioms, explaining that although the Creator is the Holy King, the all-powerful maker of all, the foundation and purpose of all creation, there is the reality that God needs man, as it were. Just as the people of Israel were a necessary component in the giving/receiving of the Torah and the revelation at Sinai, God needs man in order to be manifest and known to the world. God is concealed and hidden until he is revealed. “The Shechina, as it were, cannot reveal Herself...the “King is held captive

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*the previous letter (alef), resh is double the prior letter (kuf), and Chaf is double the previous letter (yud). Also, Shabbat is noteworthy for its many examples of “doubling”:* *Lechem Mishne (two challot based on the double portion of manna, Musaf (additional prayer) which consists of shnei temidim, and the neshama yetera (the double soul).*

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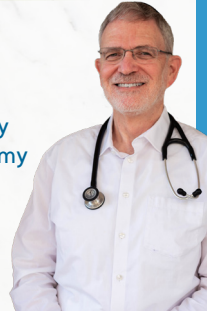
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in His Tresses” (Song 7:6). Man must free the *Malka Kadisha* from His chains, bring Him out of hiding, scatter the dense cloud, so that He may illuminate the world with His radiance. The master of the world is all-powerful, except when it comes to His own revelation.” (Blessings and Thanksgiving, pp. 123-124).

In this context The Rav elucidated the following Talmudic teaching. “All is in Heaven, except for reverence of Heaven” (Berachot 33b). Reverence of Heaven, *yirat Shamayim*, is none other than the perception of Heaven, *re’iyat Shamayim* - “seeing” (“*re’iyah*”) and revering (*yir’ah*) share the same Hebrew word. The manifestation of the presence of God (the *Shechina*) depends on man himself. (Ibid., p.124)

It is interesting to note that words we include in a beracha: *melech haolam*, king of the world, has another connotation. The Rav quotes the talmud (Kiddushin 71a) which states: The Torah says, “This is my name forever” (Shemot 3:15), but “*le’olam*,” forever, is spelled “*le’alem*”, to be obscured. Although the Almighty fills the world, nevertheless, He conceals Himself and remains hidden. Man can reveal more of God if he chooses. (Ibid., p.140)

The following chassidic story is illustrative of the above notion:

“The first Karliner *Rebbe*, who was referred to as R’ Aharon *Hagadol* (the great; 1736-1772), was a man of great piety and depth. In his eloquent liturgical songs, he often expressed his longing and love for Hashem, and his soul’s constant quest to be close to Him.

One *motz’ei Shabbos* (Saturday night) R. Yaakov, one of R. Aharon’s chassidim came

to visit. During the conversation, the *gab-bai* brought him a plate of fruit. The *Rebbe* picked up an apple, fervently recited the appropriate blessing, thanking God for the fruits of the trees and cut off a slice. He then proceeded to eat the apple.

The chassid sat across from his *Rebbe* and watched his every move, He had always considered his *Rebbe* somewhat akin to an angel, and yet here was his *rebbe* eating a mundane apple just like anyone else. For a fleeting moment a thought flashed through R’ Yaakov’s mind, “we both eat apples, we both recite blessings. Sure the *Rebbe* recites the blessings with more fervor than I, but essentially we are both pretty much the same.”

The *Rebbe*, quick to note the subtle change of demeanor from reverence to careful appraisal, said to his student, “Tell me, R’ Yaakov, what indeed is the difference between you and me? I eat apples, and you eat apples. I recite blessings and you recite blessings. So how are we different?”

“I was just wondering the same thing,” replied R’ Yaakov, somewhat startled and embarrassed.

“I’ll tell you the difference,” said R’ Aharon thoughtfully, “When I get up in the morning, I look around and see the beautiful trees in the garden, the miracles of creation, and the wonders of the world. I become so enthralled that I want to recite a blessing to express awe. However, I know that it is forbidden to recite God’s name in vain, so I must take an apple over which I can recite a blessing.

“But, when you arise in the morning, your first thought is, ‘I’m hungry. All night I haven’t eaten.’ You would like to eat an apple, but of course you know that you cannot eat

an apple without reciting the appropriate blessing. So you take the apple, recite the blessing, and eat it. Here is where we differ. You make a *beracha* so that you can eat an apple, while I eat an apple so that I can make a *beracha*.” (“*The Maggid Speaks*,” Krohn. 163-164)

The Rav asserted that the meaning of the formula “*Baruch Ata*” - Blessed are You - that a Jew recites before eating is similar to that of Moshe’s petition, “May the power of the Lord be increased (*Bamidbar* 14:17). In other words, Lord of all worlds, please reveal the glory of Your dominion to the eyes of all.” By the virtue of my discovery of You, my God, in this apple that I am eating, in this cup from which I sip wine, You and I merge with one another. The Master of the world is present when the *beracha* is recited, because its meaning is the disclosure of the Shechina.” (Blessings and Thanksgiving, p.124)

The Rav powerfully summed up this important teaching: “If you ask me what Judaism is, I will respond: Judaism is contained in the words “*Baruch Ata*.” The recognition that the Almighty, as it were, needs our *berachot*, means that He, as it were, needs to be discovered by us and needs our constant aspiration to seek and find Him.” (Ibid., 125) ■

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