



TOWARDS MEANINGFUL TEFILLA

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OU ISRAEL

Women's Division

Birchot HaShachar: A Daily Reminder of Hashem's Gifts

After beginning our davening by thanking Hashem for our neshamot (*Modeh Ani* and *Elokai Neshama*), and for our bodies (*Asher Yatzar*), and then preparing ourselves properly for the day ahead through *Birchot HaTorah*, we now begin *Birchot HaShachar*.

Birchot HaShachar is a series of 16 brachot in which we praise and thank Hashem for many of the basic blessings and functions of our daily lives - for giving us clothing, sight, strength, freedom, and more. The **Mishna Berura** explains that the reason we recite these brachot is based on the famous statement in **Gemara Brachot 35a** that one is not permitted to benefit from this world without first making a bracha. Just as this is true for every food we eat, it is also true for the many pleasures and benefits we experience throughout our lives. We need to stop and appreciate what Hashem has given us each and every day.

The Gemara in Brachot describes how, as a person prepares for the day, he should make a bracha at each step along the way. For example, when he opens his eyes, he says *Poke'ach Ivrim*—"Who opens the eyes of the blind." When he gets dressed, he says *Malbish Arumim*—"Who clothes the

naked." This process helps us visualize all of the blessings Hashem has placed in our lives and develop a greater appreciation for them. Nowadays, we recite the entire list together as part of our set tefillah, but the underlying idea remains the same - to pause and recognize just how much Hashem gives us every single day.

In this article, we will focus on the first three brachot.

ברוך אתה ה' אלקינו מלך העולם, אשר נתן לִשְׂכֹנֵי
בֵּיתָנוּ לְהַבְחִין בֵּין יוֹם וּבֵין לַיְלָה:

We praise and thank Hashem for giving the "שכני" the ability to distinguish between day and night. שְׂכָנִי can refer both to a rooster and to the heart.

As we hear the rooster's "cock-a-doodle-doo," announcing the arrival of a new day, we are reminded that we, too, (like the rooster) have been granted a special ability to distinguish. From a young age, we learn to differentiate between good and evil, safe and dangerous, hot and cold, and right and wrong.

This innate ability is something we often take for granted, but it is essential to our daily functioning. More specifically, our ability to distinguish between day and night and to recognize the passage of time gives our lives structure and meaning.

When the days begin to blur together and time loses its significance, life can begin to feel less meaningful and consequential. We thank Hashem for giving us the gift of time - the opportunity to wake up each morning with new goals and ambitions, and to recognize the uniqueness and potential of each new day.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, שְׁלֹא עֲשִׂנִי גוֹי

We thank Hashem for having created us as Jews. The Midrash relates that Moshe Rabbeinu was so overcome with emotion at Matan Torah, as he received the Torah and mitzvot, that he cried out with this bracha (**Midrash Abachir**). When we recite this bracha, we should take a moment to focus on the incredible gift we have been given - the privilege of belonging to Klal Yisrael, of recognizing and serving HaKadosh Baruch Hu, and of having the opportunity to learn His Torah and fulfill His mitzvot.

Try picturing for a moment what our lives would be like without the Torah to guide us. When we truly stop to think about this, we can be overcome with gratitude and happiness that our hearts are, as the **Yesod V'Shoresh HaAvodah** describes it, “on fire” with appreciation.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, שְׁלֹא עֲשִׂנִי עֶבֶד

We thank Hashem for having created us as free people. Rabbi Ephraim Oshry, who

recorded and answered halachic *she'eilot* during the Holocaust in his sefer **ממעמקים**, was asked a powerful question: How could Jews continue to recite the bracha שלא עשני עבד when they were literally being enslaved in the most brutal circumstances?

Based on the **Avudraham**, he explains that the bracha must be recited even by someone who is, in fact, a slave. The bracha is not referring only to physical freedom, but also to spiritual freedom. A person may be physically enslaved, but he can still retain the ability to serve Hashem. And even when that ability is taken away by oppressors, we know that such a situation is only temporary. We are still given bechirah chofshit (free choice), the ability to choose how we respond, how we behave, and how we conduct ourselves.

We saw a powerful expression of this in



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Cut and paste into your siddur



recent years, when some of the hostages, despite being physically imprisoned and enduring unimaginable circumstances, chose to begin keeping Shabbat and other religious practices. Even when their physical freedom was taken from them, they found ways to exercise their spiritual freedom and strengthen their connection to Hashem.

This is an important reminder for all of us. No matter what difficult circumstances we may face, there is always an inner freedom that cannot be taken away: the freedom to choose our response and the person we want to be.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, שְׁלֵא עָשִׂי אֲשֶׁה

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, שְׁעָשִׂי כְּרִצּוֹנִי

Men thank Hashem for having given them the ability to focus on their Avodat

Hashem, to be able to spend hours studying Torah and to be devoted to all of the Mitzvot, without some of the additional responsibilities that were granted to women, and to therefore be fully obligated in all of the Mitzvot. This bracha should be a reminder every day to commit oneself to this special responsibility and privilege.

Women here acknowledge that they were created as Hashem willed. Hashem created man and woman together as one being and then separated them into two distinct beings, with separate roles and identities (**Bnei Yissaschar**). This was Hashem's will, and we thank Him for giving us our unique role and responsibilities, including the privilege of balancing building a family with our own Avodat Hashem.

Next week, iyH, we will continue our exploration of Birchot HaShachar. ■

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