



TOWARDS MEANINGFUL TEFILLA

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Birchot HaShachar: Part II

In the last article, we explored the first four brachot of Birchot HaShachar, which focus on thanking Hashem for the particular position He has given us in life: being Jewish, having freedom, and our identity as men or women. We now turn to the brachot that thank Hashem for the basic needs and abilities that allow us to function each day.

ברוך אתה ה' מלך העולם פוקח עורים

In this bracha, we thank Hashem for the gift of sight. **Rabbi Shimon Schwab** suggests closing our eyes while reciting this bracha and trying to imagine what life would be like without the ability to see. This simple exercise can help us appreciate just how precious the gift of vision really is.

Here is a short story that illustrates this point. A 25-year-old man was riding on a train with his father when he suddenly exclaimed, "Dad, look! There are trees and flowers!" His father smiled. A couple sitting nearby watched the young man's childlike excitement with pity. A few moments later, the young man called out again, "Dad, look! The clouds are moving with us!" The couple turned to the older man and asked, "Why don't you take your son to a doctor?" The father smiled and replied, "We just came from the hospital. My son was blind from birth, and today he got his sight back."

How often do we take our ability to see for granted? This bracha gives us an

opportunity to pause and appreciate a gift that we may barely notice in our everyday lives. The **Olat Tamid** adds another dimension to this bracha. In addition to thanking Hashem for the gift of sight itself, someone who wears glasses should also appreciate the human ingenuity that has made glasses possible. This idea is especially meaningful to me because I have extremely poor eyesight and am legally blind without glasses. I often think about how different my life would be if glasses and contact lenses had never been invented. Something that I use every single day, and rarely stop to think about, is itself an incredible gift!

ברוך אתה ה' מלך העולם מלביש ערומים

In the next bracha, we thank Hashem for providing us with clothing to protect us from the elements. The **Olat Tamid** suggests that as we recite this bracha, we should think about the different types of clothing we have: warm clothes for the winter, Shabbos clothes that help us honor Shabbos, and so much more. Taking a moment to consider all that we have can help us recognize just how fortunate we are to live in a world where clothing is so readily available, compared to the days in which each person had only one outfit and would wash it once a week.

But there is a deeper dimension to this bracha as well. I recently came across a website devoted entirely to clothing for dogs, featuring hundreds of outfits, from

dresses and suits to pajamas, pants, and skirts. Looking at this website made me laugh out loud. Because there is just something so absurd about an animal dressing in clothes!

Why is this? **Rabbi Shimon Schwab** explains that clothing has a deeper significance for human beings. After Adam and Chava sinned by eating from the Etz HaDaat, Hashem clothed them. Unlike animals, human beings were given free choice and the ability to rise above their natural instincts. Our clothing can serve as a reminder that we are not meant to live simply by following our animalistic urges. We have the ability and responsibility to make thoughtful choices and to strive for something higher. Seen in this light, מלביש ערומים is about much more than the clothing itself. As we thank Hashem for providing us with clothes, we can also reflect on the unique gift of free choice and our responsibility to use it well.

ברוך אתה ה' מלך העולם מתיר אסורים

In this bracha, we thank Hashem for releasing those who are imprisoned or bound. Even if we have never been imprisoned ourselves, we can use this bracha to appreciate the freedom of movement that we enjoy each day. The **Olat Tamid** explains that there is also a deeper way to understand the idea of being bound. Each of us has certain assumptions about ourselves and the world around us. We may believe that we are only capable of accomplishing a certain amount, or that certain opportunities are simply beyond our reach. Sometimes, these beliefs become like invisible chains, preventing us from recognizing our

potential.

With Hashem's help, we can break through these limitations, discover our abilities, and accomplish what we are meant to accomplish in this world. Similarly, someone who has struggled with an addiction and managed to break free can use this bracha to express gratitude for that freedom. What a powerful reminder that Hashem can help us break free not only from physical chains, but also from the things that hold us back internally.

ברוך אתה ה' מלך העולם זוקף כפופים

In this bracha, we thank Hashem for enabling us to rise from our beds and stand upright. The simple act of getting out of bed each morning is not something to take for

Birchot HaShachar Part II

Some points to focus on as we make
the Brachot:

פוקח עיוורים – For giving us the gift of sight.
Imagine the joy and wonder of a blind person
seeing for the first time – the colors, the faces,
the beauty of the world.

מלביש ערומים – For clothing us with what we need.
We have an abundance and ease in obtaining clothing,
and we were made on a higher level than the animals,
with the gift of free choice.

מתיר אסורים – For giving us the ability to move.
We can move freely, overcome addictions,
and break self-imposed barriers.

זוקף כפופים – For giving us the ability to stand tall.
We can stand up straight, without physical ailments,
without stress, and without guilt.

✂ Cut and paste into your siddur

granted. Neither is our ability to stand up straight and move about freely. But just as we saw with the previous bracha, there is more to this idea than its physical meaning.

Sometimes, a person can feel as though they are bent over beneath the weight of life's burdens. The pressures of earning a living, raising children, and maintaining shalom bayis can feel overwhelming. At other times, a person may be weighed down by shame, guilt, or regret over something that has happened. When Hashem gives us the strength to lift our heads, regain our confidence, and move forward, He is helping us stand upright in a much deeper sense. As we recite כפופים זוקק, we can thank Hashem for the physical strength that allows us to stand, while also asking Him to help us rise above the emotional and spiritual burdens that weigh us

down. What a gift it is to be able to stand tall, both physically and emotionally!

FROM GRATITUDE TO TEFILLA

It is interesting to note that these four brachot are written in the plural: עורים, כפופים, ערומים, and אסורים. We are thanking Hashem not only for what He has granted us personally, but also for the gifts He has given mankind as a whole. This is why even someone who personally lacks one of these abilities or blessings still recites these brachot.

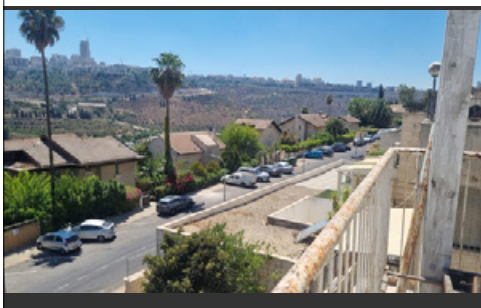
Before concluding our discussion, I would like to suggest one additional way to approach these brachot. Although they are formally brachot of שבח (praise) and הודאה (gratitude), I believe they can also serve as a springboard for בקשה (personal requests). As we thank Hashem for our sight, we can ask Him to help us see more clearly, both physically and in the way we understand the world. As we thank Him for our clothing, we can ask for help in making the right choices and living up to our potential. As we thank Him for freeing those who are bound, we can ask Him to help us break through the limitations that hold us back. And as we thank Him for enabling us to stand upright, we can ask Him for the strength to face life's challenges with confidence.

These brachot remind us that Hashem is the Source of the very abilities we rely on every day. When we truly internalize that recognition, we can begin to understand that we have Someone to turn to for all our needs. And that is one of the most powerful lessons of Tefilla - the more we recognize Hashem's role in our lives, the more naturally we can turn to Him, not only to thank Him for what we have, but also to ask for what we need. ■

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