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# THE CONCEPT AND PRACTICE OF BRACHOT

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One of the most powerful means of connecting to God is prayer, and perhaps the most prevalent form of prayer is the Bracha (blessing). Brachot are recited numerous times each day, in many different situations, to remind us Who is ultimately the Source of all blessing. Moreover, Brachot articulate our ability to build a relationship with God through performing mitzvot. In a deeper sense, Brachot cause heavenly benevolence to descend upon the universe, thereby sustaining all of creation. This shiur will explore the nature and purpose of Brachot, the Amen response, and how Brachot can help revolutionize our spiritual growth.

The core issues that will be addressed in this class are:

- ✧ What is the philosophy and reasoning behind the institution of Brachot?
- ✧ God knows my thoughts and feelings, so why must I articulate them explicitly?
- ✧ What is the meaning of the word Bracha?
- ✧ How important is *kavana* (mindfulness) in Brachot?
- ✧ In what way does a Bracha affect the one who recites it, the Jewish nation, and the world at large?

## Class Outline

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## INTRODUCTION. WHAT DO 1,300 JOURNALISTS REPORT FROM A GOLD MINE?

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### **August 23, 2010, NYTimes.com, Trapped Chilean Miners' Send Message**

SANTIAGO, Chile — Thirty-three miners trapped underground for 17 days in a collapsed gold and copper mine in northern Chile sent up a message tied to a drill on Sunday, telling rescuers they were all alive.

President Sebastián Piñera said the paper message was tied to a drill that rescuers used to bore through to the area near an underground shelter where the miners are located. But he said it will take months to get the trapped men out. It will take time, the beaming president said at the mine head, "but it doesn't matter how long it takes to have a happy ending."

The miners message, written with red paint, read "The 33 of us in the shelter are well". Mr. Piñera held up the piece of paper on television, as drivers honked horns here in the capital and diners applauded in restaurants.

The miners are four and a half miles inside the winding mine and about 2,300 feet vertically underground. They are inside a mine shaft shelter the size of a small apartment. The authorities said they had limited amounts of food. Rescuers plan to send narrow plastic tubes called doves down the narrow borehole with food, hydration gels and communications equipment. Relatives hugged one another and thanked God as news of the message reverberated outside the entrance to the mine, where they had been camped out since the mine caved in on Aug. 5.

### **August 27, 2010, NYTimes.com, Video Messages from Trapped Chilean Miners**

Relatives of 33 miners trapped in a collapsed mine shaft far below in Chile's Atacama Desert have been shown a video of the men. "We have organized everything very well down here," says the miner recording the video, whose face appears only in glancing shots. "Here is where we meet every day, here is where we plan, where we pray," he says.

### **October 12, 2010, NYTimes.com, aol.com, The Day of the Rescue**

President Obama said earlier, "While the rescue is far from over and difficult work remains, we pray that by God's grace, after 68 days underground, all of the miners will be able to emerge safely and return to their families soon." ...

Edison Peña Villarroel, 34, the fitness buff who ran several miles a day in the mine, has emerged. "Thank God we're alive," he said. Mario Sepúlveda, the second miner to be rescued and the narrator of the much-watched video that took viewers on a tour of the underground quarters, told Chilean journalists, he never lost faith in God. ...

Darwin Cortez, brother of miner Pedro Cortez, the 31st miner up, sprayed champagne across the crowd. He said: "Thank God, thank God. They are all safe. It's a miracle!" One by one throughout the day, the miners had emerged to the cheers of exuberant Chileans and before the eyes of a transfixed globe.

Sometimes, we gain life-altering insights through the experiences of others. As one miner after another surfaced expressing thanks to God for their survival, this gratitude was echoed by their family and friends and relayed to the world at large by over 1,300 journalists. This message of appreciation to a Greater Force for a new lease on life was contagious.

Fortunately, it is not necessary to endure a near-death experience to appreciate the awesome opportunity of each day. Judaism teaches that each Jew, even on routine days, must articulate appreciation to God, to cultivate the understanding that life itself is a huge gift. It is through the means of Brachot that we come to acknowledge and appreciate the overwhelming goodness with which we are truly blessed. And yet, as political science Professor Stephen Baron at SUNY-Oswego writes (aish.com), even 100 daily Brachot may only express a *fraction* of the appreciation we should really feel.

It is in this context that we launch our quest to understand the role of Brachot in Judaism.

## SECTION I. BRACHA BASICS – THE MAKINGS OF A BRACHA

Brachot are much more than ritual incantations to be mumbled under our breath before eating an apple. Reciting Brachot represents one of the greatest acts of relating to God and contains vastly deep meaning. Brachot are a powerful vessel helping us develop an awareness of God in all aspects of life.

### PART A. WHAT IS A BRACHA?

A *Bracha* is a text that follows a format specified by halacha. It can be long or short, but it invariably contains the name of God and a phrase beginning with the words “*Baruch Atah*” (“Blessed are You”). Most *Brachot* also mention God’s Kingship. *Brachot* play many roles in Jewish observance. They are the building blocks of most parts of our *tefillot*, prayers. In fact, the Shemoneh Esrei, the centerpiece of each of the daily prayers, consists of a sequence of Brachot. There are also numerous occasions throughout the day which call for the recitation of Brachot. The following are the three main categories of Brachot.

#### 1. Rambam Brachot 1:4 – Categorizations.

Every Bracha can be categorized into one of three types:

1. Brachot upon receiving physical benefit [food, drink, or pleasant fragrances].
2. Brachot upon the performance of mitzvot.
3. Brachot of thanksgiving, which are a way of expressing praise, gratitude, and request.

נמצאו כל הברכות כולן שלשה מינים:

1. ברכות ההננייה
2. ברכות המצוות
3. וברכות ההודאה שהן דרך שבח והודייה ובקשה.

Every Bracha is a statement of praise of God that is fitting for the particular situation. The following examples illustrate how each of these three categories of Brachot is formulated.

#### 2. Examples of the text of Brachot.

Type 1: Brachot for physical benefit (e.g., before eating fruit): “Blessed are You Lord our God, King of the universe, Who creates the fruit of the tree.”

Type 2: Mitzvah Brachot (e.g., when washing hands): “Blessed are You Lord our God, King of the universe, Who has sanctified us through His commandments, and instructed us regarding washing hands.”

Type 3: Blessings of praise (e.g., upon hearing thunder): “Blessed are You Lord our God, King of the universe, Whose might and power fill the universe.”

סוג א'- ברכת הנהנין: (כגון על פירות האילן)  
ברוך אתה ה' אלוקינו מלך העולם בורא פרי העץ.

סוג ב'- ברכת המצוות: (כגון על נטילת ידים)  
ברוך אתה ה' אלוקינו מלך העולם אשר קדשנו  
במצוותיו וצונו על נטילת ידים.

סוג ג'- ברכת ההודאה: (כגון על שמיעת רעמים)  
ברוך אתה ה' אלוקינו מלך העולם שכחו וגבורתו מלא  
עולם.

By definition, every Bracha is characterized by the phrase “*Baruch Atah Hashem*,” which can be loosely translated as “Blessed are You God,” followed by the pertinent praise. In order to understand what a Bracha is, we must develop a more sophisticated understanding of the word “baruch.” Many Biblical commentators question this terminology, for how is it possible for a person to bless God, Who lacks nothing? What are we saying when we declare that God is “baruch”? There are two basic approaches:

### 3. Chizkuni, Bereishit 24:27 – Baruch means praise.

The word “baruch,” when used in relation to God... is an expression of greeting... or of praise.

כל לשון ברוך דגבי הקב"ה... לשון נתינת שלום... או לשון שבח.

The second approach is that the word “baruch” implies that God is the Source of all blessing:

### 4. Yad Ketanah- When we say that God is “baruch,” we mean that he is the Source of blessing.

“*Baruch Atah Hashem*” – meaning, You are the Source of all blessing... and He creates them [i.e. blessings] and bestows from them an abundance of goodness on His creations, in accordance with His good will.

“ברוך אתה ה'” כלומר אתה הוא מקור הברכה... והוא הממציא אותם ומשפיע מהן שפע רב לבריותיו כפי רצונו הטוב.

### 5. Rashba, Responsa Vol. I, 423 – Bracha from breicha [source].

Included in the concept of a Bracha is the admission that He is ruler over all, and everything is from Him... as it says [in the Talmud], “A person must bless [God] on the bad just as he must bless Him for the good,” for the word “Bracha” comes from the word “breicha” – reservoirs of water [i.e. the source of everything].

ומכלל הברכה ההודאה שהוא שליט בכל והכל מאתו... כמו שאמרו חייב אדם לברך על הרעה כדרך שמברכין על הטובה, שהברכה מלשון בריכות מים.

### 6. Rabbi Chaim Volozhin, Nefesh HaChaim, 2<sup>nd</sup> Gate Ch. 2 – Baruch means abundance.

The expression “baruch”... means multiplicity and abundance.

מילת ברוך... לשון תוספת וריבוי.

(Rabbi Chaim Volozhin goes on to explain that a Bracha is the medium chosen by God through which human beings draw an abundance of His spiritual energy into the world.)

## PART B. THE SOURCE OF BRACHOT

While there are many different Brachot that we are required to recite on a daily basis, and many more that are obligatory on various occasions, only two of the Brachot have a Biblical origin: the blessing after meals and the blessing before studying Torah. All other Brachot were instituted by the Sages.

### 1. Sefer HaChinuch 430 – Only two blessing carry Biblical weight; the rest were instituted by the Sages.

The Torah only obligates one to say a Bracha after a meal [with bread], not before [the meal]...

שחייב מצות התורה אינו רק לברך אחר המזון, לא לפניו... וכל שאר הברכות כולן הן מדרבנן, חוץ מאחת

All the other Brachot were instituted by the Sages, except for one...the Bracha recited before learning Torah.

שהיא מן התורה... והיא ברכת התורה לפנייה.

The source for saying a blessing after food comes from the following verse.

## 2. Devarim 8:10 – The Torah tells us to make a blessing after eating food.

When you eat and are satisfied, you must therefore bless God your Lord for the good land that He has given you.

ואכלת ושבעת וברכת את יקוק אלקיך על הארץ הטובה אשר נתן לך:

## 3. Talmud Bavli, Brachot 48b – The Talmud sees all four blessings of Birkat HaMazon hinted at in the verse.

Our Rabbis taught: Where is the saying of Grace intimated in the Torah? In the verse, [Devarim (Deuteronomy) 8] “And you shall eat and be satisfied and bless” signifies the benediction of “Who feeds.” “The Lord Thy God” signifies the benediction of *zimmun* (invitation). “For the land” signifies the blessing for the land. “The good” signifies “Who builds Jerusalem.”

תנו רבנן: מניין לברכת המזון מן התורה? שנאמר: [דברים ח'] ואכלת ושבעת וברכת - זו ברכת הזן, את ה' אלהיך - זו ברכת הזמון, על הארץ - זו ברכת הארץ, הטובה - זו בונה ירושלים.

While there is no verse stating it explicitly, the Talmud derives the obligation to make a blessing upon learning Torah as well.

## 4. Talmud Bavli, Brachot 48b – Based on Biblical exegesis, there are two possible sources for the blessing upon learning Torah.

We have concluded the necessity for reciting a blessing after a meal [with bread]; from where do we derive saying a blessing over the Torah? Rabbi Ishmael says: It is learned *a fortiori*: If a blessing is said for temporal life, how much more should it be said for eternal life!

Rabbi Chiya bar Nachmani, the disciple of Rabbi Ishmael, said in the name of Rabbi Ishmael: This is not necessary. For see, it says, [Devarim 8] “For the good land which He has **given** you,” and in another place it says, [Shemot (Exodus) 24] “And I will **give** you the tables of stone and a law and commandments, etc.” (According to Rabbi Chiya, the blessing on the Torah is derived from the common usage of the Hebrew expression for giving (נתן) in the verses relating to Birkat HaMazon and giving the Torah).

ואין לי אלא ברכת המזון, ברכת התורה מניין? אמר רבי ישמעאל: קל וחומר, על חיי שעה מברך - על חיי עולם הבא לא כל שכן?

רבי חייא בר נחמני תלמידו של רבי ישמעאל אומר משום רבי ישמעאל: אינו צריך, הרי הוא אומר: [דברים ח'] על הארץ הטובה אשר נתן לך, ולהלן הוא אומר: [שמות כ"ד] ואתנה לך את לוחת האבן והתורה והמצוה וגו'.

The text of all other Brachot was established by Ezra and his court, who imbued the Brachot with tremendous depth and spiritual significance. These texts are considered utterly authoritative, and it is forbidden to deviate from them.

#### 5. **Rambam Brachot 1:5 – The source of the text of the blessings.**

The wording of all the Brachot was instituted by Ezra and his court [circa 350 B.C.E.], and it is not appropriate to alter them or to add or subtract from any of them. Anyone who deviates from the text that the Sages instituted for Brachot is mistaken.

ונוסח כל הברכות עזרא ובית דינו תקנום ואין ראוי לשנותם ולא להוסיף על אחת מהם ולא לגרוע ממנה וכל המושנה ממתבע שטבעו חכמים בברכות אינו אלא טועה.

### **PART C. THE GENERAL PURPOSE OF BRACHOT – CONSTANT COGNIZANCE OF GOD'S PRESENCE.**

As we have already mentioned, Brachot are an intrinsic part of Jewish daily life, as well as one of the fundamental building blocks of prayer. Why were Brachot instituted and what purpose do they serve?

Brachot are the tools which enable us to recognize God in all aspects of our lives. By prefacing so many significant activities (eating, drinking and performing mitzvot) with a praise addressed to God, and reacting to various events with such praise, we are certain to be constantly reminding ourselves of God's Presence.

#### 1. **Rambam, Hilchot Brachot 1:4 – Brachot are a frequent reminder of God.**

[The purpose of Brachot is] to constantly remember the Creator, and to be in awe of Him.

כדי לזכור את הבורא תמיד וליראה ממנו.

The awareness of God's Presence which a Bracha is meant to engender is indicated quite clearly by the standard text of a Bracha. Each blessing begins with a statement addressed directly to God ("Blessed are **You**"), a strikingly clear reminder that one is standing before God.

#### 2. **Midrash Shocher Tov, Chapter 16 – We address God directly in Brachot.**

Rav says the text of the Bracha must be "Blessed are You" [i.e., in second person], as it says, "I feel the presence of God before me constantly."

אמר רב בשעה שהוא מברך צריך לומר ברוך אתה וגו' דכתיב שוייתי ה' לנגדי תמיד.

While Brachot are a fundamental component of our daily prayers, there are also numerous occasions throughout the day that require the recitation of a Bracha. These Brachot, isolated from any religious service and attached to one's daily mundane activities, serve to continue connecting us to God throughout the day.

#### 3. **Rabbi B. Forst, Pitchei Halacha, Kitzur Hilchot Brachot (Introduction) – Reciting Brachot brings God into our daily routine.**

Sometimes it is easy to feel close to God at times of prayer, but it is very difficult to think about Him throughout the daily routine... Therefore, the sages instituted the practice of Brachot...

לפעמים קל לו לאדם להתרגש ולהדבק בה' בעת תפילתו... אבל קשה לו מאוד להכיר את הבורא כאשר הוא עסוק בחיי יום יום... לפיכך תיקנו חז"ל לברך...

Due to this particular import of Brachot, the halacha in fact requires us to recite no fewer than 100 Brachot every day! (On an average weekday, enough Brachot are contained in the daily prayers that it is almost inevitable for a person to recite 100 Brachot over the course of the day. On Shabbat, when the prayers are shorter, one is advised to have snacks in order to recite more Brachot; see Mishnah Berurah 290:2.)

#### 4. **Menachot 43b – The Torah hints that we should recite one hundred Brachot every day.**

It was taught [that] Rabbi Meir was accustomed to teach that a person must recite one hundred Brachot every day, as the verse states, “And now Israel, what does God, your Lord, ask of you,” (Devarim 10:12)

[Rashi: Read the word “mah” (“what”) as “me’ah” (“one hundred”).]

תניא היה רבי מאיר אומר חייב אדם לברך מאה ברכות בכל יום שנאמר (דברים י, יב) ועתה ישראל מה ה' אלהיך שואל מעמך.

[רש"י: מה ה' אלהיך וגו' - קרי ביה מאה]

One hundred Brachot! That may sound like a lot, but in reality it just shows us how crucial saying Brachot really is.

#### 5. **Rabbi Reuven Leuchter, Ner Le'Elef – Brachot are the tool which enables us to perceive and internalize that God is present in the world.**

The world is full of many details, and in order for us to be able to recognize God in this world we need to learn to focus on those details. Our senses do not relate to “big things” such as the creation of the world, but rather to small details like the beauty of an apple, its smell, its texture. Small things can create awareness; generalizations cannot.

This is the purpose of Brachot – to develop a consciousness of God. Brachot are the tools to build our awareness of God. They are the tools to help us change our perspective of God from “out there,” to bring Him closer to our senses, to be able to perceive Him in our own lives.

One would think that the more inclusive a Bracha, the better. One would think that the *shehakol* blessing, “through Whose word everything came to be,” is more significant than *boreh pri ha'etz*, “Who created the fruit of the tree.” But the opposite is true. The more detailed a Bracha is, the better it is; and therefore when it comes to the order of saying Brachot, *boreh pri ha'etz* comes before *shehakol*.

This is the reason we need to say one hundred Brachot every day. We need to focus on a hundred different facets of the goodness bestowed upon us by God. This is what develops an awareness of Him.

### **PART D. THE IMPORTANCE AND CENTRALITY OF BRACHOT.**

Throughout the generations, Brachot have played an essential part of our everyday spiritual growth – they connect us to God in every aspect of our lives. Our daily routines and activities become elevated when they are placed in the framework of Brachot, which then transforms seemingly mundane actions into opportunities for spirituality.

#### 1. **Bava Kama 30a – Brachot are the path to diligence.**

One who wishes to become a pious individual should properly fulfill...the practice of reciting Brachot.

האי מאן דבעי למהוי חסידא לקיים... מילי דברכות.



Why are Brachot singled out as a path to piety?

2. **Rabbi Shmuel Hominer, Olat Tamid (Introduction) – Brachot are an especially powerful means to develop a cognizance of God and build a relationship with Him.**

One of the greatest means to develop a cognizance of God and build a relationship with Him is through prayer and Brachot. It is an especially important and elevated service, and when one reflects and concentrates his heart on prayer and Brachot, he has accomplished a pure and complete service, which sanctifies him and raises him to a very high level.

אחד מהעבודות הגדולות שהאדם עובד את בוראו בכל יום ויום הם התפילות והברכות. והיא עבודה רמה ונשאה עד מאד. וכשאדם מעיין ומכוון לבו בתפילותיו וברכותיו הרי עובד עבודה תמה ושלמה ומרוממתו ומקדשתו למעלה למעלה.

3. **Rabbi Dr. Elie Munk, The World of Prayer (Introduction) – The underpinnings of our lives.**

Whoever willingly allows himself to be guided by the Brachot, whoever utters the prescribed “hundred Brachot” daily and thus seizes every enjoyment as an occasion to thank God and to praise Him... whoever does so, will be filled with an ever deepening consciousness of the exalted, and essential awe of God.

The hundred daily Brachot have been compared to the “*me’at adanim*,” the hundred sockets of silver which supported the Sanctuary in the desert, for these blessings support the Sanctuary of our lives.

No study of Brachot is complete without mentioning the famous story of the legendary Reb Elimelech and the apple. Despite its simplicity, this story clearly highlights the perspective of our nation’s great leaders.

*Reb Elimelech of Lisensk was once visited by another Rabbi, who was also a revered scholar, but had not yet reached the heights of purity and holiness for which Reb Elimelech was famous. “Why do I not merit to be on the same level as the Rebbe?” he asked. “What is the difference between you and me?”*

*“When you wish to eat an apple,” explained Reb Elimelech, “you say a Bracha on the apple beforehand. However, I eat an apple in order to make a Bracha over it.”*

The message is clear. A Bracha is not a trivial gesture to God before we turn to our own needs and desires. On the contrary – it is a bridge to spiritual awareness.

**KEY THEMES OF SECTION I:**

- The word *Baruch* is both a praise of God and an acknowledgment that He is the source of all blessings and abundance.
- Brachot were instituted to help us remember the Creator, bringing Him into our daily routine. This is the reason for the obligation to say 100 Brachot every day. Brachot are the tools that develop in us an awareness of God in all aspects of our lives. Focusing on small details makes an impact; whereas just focusing on the “big things” does not.
- Based on this, it is clear why Brachot are one of the greatest means to develop a cognizance and relationship with God.



## SECTION II. THE RATIONALE AND IMPACT OF A BRACHA

There are three types of Brachot: blessings for deriving pleasure, blessings before performing a mitzvah, and blessings of praise.

### PART A. BIRCOT HANEHENIN [BLESSINGS UPON HAVING PLEASURE]

*Bircot HaNehenin* are recited when we derive pleasure from this world. We are required to recite Brachot both before and after we eat and drink, as well as before we inhale pleasant fragrances. The purpose of these Brachot is to help us recognize that God is the Source of our pleasure, and to focus our minds on how to use this pleasure to fulfill our purpose in this world.

The following Talmudic passage cites a fundamental aspect of the Brachot recited prior to partaking of any pleasure: their recitation allows us to take benefit from the physical world.

#### 1. Talmud Bavli, Brachot 35a – This world is given to us only after we recognize its Source.

Rabbi Levi contrasted two verses. One states, “The world and all that is contained within it belongs to God.” Another verse says, “The heavens belong to God, but the earth He gave to man.” He resolved the contradiction by stating that one verse refers to the status of the world before reciting a Bracha and the other to after its recitation.

Said Rabbi Chanina Bar Pappa: When someone derives enjoyment from this world without a Bracha, it is tantamount to stealing from God...

רבי לוי רמי כתיב לה' הארץ ומלואה וכתיב השמים  
שמים לה' והארץ נתן לבני אדם. לא קשיא כאן קודם  
ברכה כאן לאחר ברכה.

אמר רבי חנינא בר פפא כל הנהנה מן העולם הזה בלא  
ברכה כאילו גזול להקב"ה...

The enigmatic statement being made here – that a Bracha avoids “stealing” from God – has been explained in a number of ways. A few possible explanations are offered below.

#### 2. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, Devarim 8:10 – The recompense for sustenance.

A Bracha said before partaking of any pleasure expresses the resolution that we will employ any renewed vital energy gained from this pleasure, to serve God's purposes. Only if we make this resolution will we become worthy of enjoying that pleasure.

הברכה הנאמרת קודם האכילה מבטאת את קבלת  
ההתחייבות שתוספת הכח שזוכה בה ע"י האכילה  
תנוצל לעבודת ה', ורק בזכות התחייבות זה נהיה  
ראויים לאכילה.

This explanation takes the Gemara's statement literally. A Bracha is, indeed, a form of “payment” for the benefit received, inasmuch as it represents a commitment to use the material world to advance the purpose for which God intended it.

### 3. Rav Shimshon Pincus, Nefesh Shimshon, Siddur Ha'Tefilla, Chapter on Bircat Hashachar (the morning blessings) – How to get a free lunch.

A simple analogy: If a man goes to the supermarket to buy bread and other foods, he must pay for them. But suppose the same man comes to the shopkeeper's home for a meal and eats exactly the same food; he doesn't pay a penny.

So it is with Brachot. God has His "business" – the universe. Anything one wants in life is [within the domain of] God's business and must be paid for. But if he develops a loving connection and relationship with God, he can eat from the Heavenly table. [This is accomplished by making a Bracha]. And when you eat by the shopkeeper you don't receive a bill!

משל פשוט לכך - אדם הולך למכולת וקונה לחם... הוא משלם עליהם. אך אם אותו אדם בא אל המוכר הביתה ומקבל בדיוק אותה ארוחה... הוא לא משלם כלום.

כך גם לעניינינו - להקב"ה יש עסק, העולם הוא העסק שלו. וא"כ כשאדם רוצה לחם או עינים בחנות של הקב"ה עליו לשלם על כך. אך אם האדם... מתקשר אליו בקשר של אהבה הוא אוכל משולחן גבוה, משולחנו של הקב"ה. וכשאוכלים משולחנו של החנוני לא מקבלים אה"כ חשבון.

According to this explanation, a Bracha is not a "payment" for one's food. Rather, it is a means of developing a relationship with God, which circumvents the need to "pay."

The commentators offer additional understandings for the institution of *Bircot HaNehenin*.

### 4. Kuzari, 3:13,17 – Reciting Brachot maximizes the enjoyment of physical gain by making a person cognizant of the gift of receiving it.

The constant practice of Brachot will add sweetness to sweetness... Readiness for receiving pleasure, as well as imagining its absence, together result in doubled pleasure. This is one of the benefits for those who are accustomed to saying Brachot with thought and mental preparation... For example, the Bracha "Who has given us life and sustained us" automatically entertains the possibility of the absence of life... and therefore illness and death are easier to bear, because they have already been considered... and you will ultimately realize that by rights you deserve no goodness... and then you will enjoy all your days on earth.

וממה שיוסיף לו עריבות על עריבות שיברך תמיד... ההזדמנות להנאה והרגשתה ושיחשוב בהעדרה קודם לכן כופל ההנאה. וזה מתועלת הברכה למי שהוא רגיל בהם בכונה והכנה... כמו שאתה אומר "שהחיינו וקיימנו" וכבר היית מזומן למות... ויקל בעיניך החולי והמות כאשר יבא מפני שכבר חשבת עם נפשך וראית... שאתה ראוי להעדר ממך כל טוב בטבעך... ותהיה נהנה כל ימך.

### 5. Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, Alei Shur Vol. I, p.112 – Reciting Brachot helps us remain sensitized to everything in Creation.

How does one come to "see" God? Through recognizing His goodness and praising Him for it. One of the wondrous achievements of the Sages was to ensure the continued awareness of the "Hand of Creation."

איך ובמה רואים את ה' ממש? בהכרת טובתו ובהודאה.

The world before us is neither fully developed nor completed. Rather, day by day, hour by hour, creation is renewed. All that our eyes see and every pleasure we taste is a new creation which God has created from nothingness to bestow upon us, so that we realize His kindness and His wisdom... A world like this, which is renewed before our eyes day in and day out, ensures that we do not become rusty [in our acknowledgement of God] due to monotony.

מגפלאות תקנות חז"ל להעמידנו תמיד על יד היצירה. אין כלל עולם מגובש ועתיק לפנינו. אלא יום יום, שעה שעה, בריאה חדשה. כל אשר עינינו רואות וכל הנאה שאנו טועמים - בריאה חדשה אשר הושיט לנו הבורא מהאין כדי שנכיר חסדו עלינו וחכמתו... עולם כזה המתחדש לפני עינינו יום יום אינו מעלה חלודת שיגרה.

The above explanations focus on the way that Brachot impact the frame of mind and cognizance of the person reciting them. Kabbalistic wisdom identifies other benefits of the recitation of Brachot, which help infuse the world with vital spiritual energy.

**6. Rabeinu Bachya, Devarim 8:10 – In Kabbalistic terms, reciting Brachot brings about a flow of Divine blessing to the world.**

According to the Kabbalah, a Bracha is not only to help a person nor is it only a way to express thanks and recognition... Rather, when we say a Bracha, this increases the Divine spiritual power [in the world], and our Brachot cause blessing to flow from God upon all of creation.

ועל דרך הקבלה אין הברכה צורך הדיוט בלבד וגם אינו הודאה בלבד... וכאשר אנו מברכים להקב"ה יש בזה תוספת רוח הקודש וברכותינו היא סיבה שיתברכו כל בריותיו ממונו.

**7. Zohar, Vayechi 844 – Our blessings are the catalyst that brings down heavenly bounty to earth.**

As a result of the Bracha said to God, all the upper and lower worlds become blessed.

ובברכה שמברך להקב"ה מתברכים עליונים ותחתונים.

In addition to bringing blessing to the world at large, a Bracha brings spiritual energy to the person who recites it.

**8. Ma'yana Shel Torah (Anthology), Devarim 8:3, citing Arizal – Saying Brachot releases the food's spiritual energy and hence nourishes the soul.**

It is difficult to understand how the soul, which is entirely spiritual, finds sustenance in physical food. However, since every object in the universe came into existence solely through God's word, therefore the spiritual power of those Godly words that lies hidden within the food is what nourishes the soul. When a person takes a piece of fruit and recites a Bracha... the Divine powers dormant in the food are activated... and that provides the spiritual nourishment for the soul.

וקשה להבין איך יכולה הנשמה שכל עצמה אינה אלא רוחניות להיות ניזונת ממאכל חומרי. ברם מכיון שכל עצם נברא אינו מתקיים אלא בדיבורו של ה' יתברך בשעת הבריאה, הרי אותו כח של הדיבור האלוקי הטמון בתוך המאכל הוא המזון לנשמה. שעה שאדם מישראל נוטל פרי ואומר ברוך אתה ה'... מתעוררים הכחות הפנימיים הרוחניים שטמונים בתוך הפרי... והם מהווים מזון רוחני עבור הנשמה.

With all of these profound explanations for the institution of bircot hanehenin, we must still keep in mind the simplest and most obvious impact that they are meant to have: the recognition of God's great kindness,

and that He is the source of all that we have.

*The Bracha is not to dampen our pleasure by forcing us to give thanks; it is to heighten our pleasure by reminding us how truly fortunate we are. Look a potato in the eye and say the Brachah, “Borei p’ri ha’adamah, Who creates produce from earth!” All the world’s scientists together cannot create a potato, but God arranges for them to be available in supermarkets for pennies. A thoughtful Bracha makes a potato so much more tasty, and it does the same for every food and beverage you enjoy, every day.*

*A young couple getting married once sent a wedding invitation to Richard Nixon, President of the United States at the time. They had never met the President, but why not? Maybe the White House would mail back the reply card, and they could paste it in their wedding album as a souvenir. The names on the invitation were totally unfamiliar to the President, but politicians meet so many people that he figured he must know them from somewhere; so, along with his regrets that he and Pat could not attend, the President sent the newlyweds a serving set of sterling silver.*

*And today, when visitors to that couple’s home admire their serving set, and the hostess says, “Yes, that was a wedding gift from the President,” we can be certain that the coffee or tea has a richer taste. And how much more pleasure is there for those who received a Presidential gift which was indeed intended for them?*

*And therefore, when we bite into an apple, orange or a piece of bread (and don’t forget the potato !), our Bracha reminds us that this gift is not from the President, not even from a king or queen, but from the King of Kings; a gift given to you, because God thinks of you and wants you to enjoy. (Rabbi Yisroel Miller, What’s Wrong With Being Happy, pp. 203-204.)*

## **PART B. BIRCOT HAMITZVOT [BLESSINGS UPON MITZVOT].**

*Bircot HaMitzvot* are said prior to fulfilling a mitzvah. They help us focus on how fortunate we are to be able to do the will of our Creator, and prepare us for accepting the spirituality that is latent within a mitzvah.

### **1. Rabbi Aharon of Barcelona, Sefer HaChinuch 430 – Thanking God for the ability to do His mitzvot.**

[The Sages] obligated us to bless God and to thank Him for the good He bestowed upon us by enabling us to do His precious mitzvot.

חייבנו לברך השם ולהודות לפניו על כל הטובה אשר  
גמלנו בעשותנו מצוותיו היקרות.

### **2. Rabbi S.D. Friedman, Metzuba Ve’oseh, (in the name of the Kuzari) – Reciting a Bracha helps one to become a “vessel” for holiness.**

The essence of a Bracha is to prepare oneself to receive the holiness of the mitzvah. Through reciting the Bracha one becomes a vessel worthy of receiving the divine influence of the mitzvah.

דענין הברכה הוא להיות הכנה לקבל באמצעותה אור  
קדושת המצוה וע”י שמברך נעשה כלי ראוי ומוכשר  
לקבל אור המצוה וקדושתה.

*Bircot Hamitzvot* provide another dimension in the way we perform mitzvot. In classic Torah philosophy we serve our Creator utilizing our three primary capabilities: thought, speech, and action. Every mitzvah we perform with our bodies automatically includes thought and action. Thought is invested when we contemplate the content of the mitzvah, and Who commanded us about its observance. Action is the mitzvah itself. The Rabbis instituted Brachot over mitzvot in order to involve the dimension of speech as well, so that we will fulfill every mitzvah with all aspects of our being.

The standard text of *Bircot Hamitzvot* also highlights the special relationship between God and the Jewish people, a fitting theme to ponder when one is about to perform one of God's commandments.

### 3. **Abudraham, Order of the Weekday Morning Prayers – The Jewish people are considered as if they are married to God.**

“...Who sanctified us (*kidishanu*) with his mitzvot.” ... Some explain that “*kidishanu*” is an expression of betrothal (*kidushin*), because God betrothed the Jewish nation by commanding mitzvot... (i.e., God created the bond by giving us the mitzvot).

אשר קדשנו במצוותיו... יש מפרשים הוא לשון אירוסין וקידושין שקידש הקב"ה לישראל במצוות.

## PART C. *BIRCOT HASHEVACH* [BLESSINGS OF PRAISE]

Brachot were instituted even where we do not experience physical pleasure, in order to involve God in every dimension of our lives. Thus, the Sages instituted a wide variety of blessings to recite on various occasions, such as when seeing lightning or hearing thunder, upon seeing a rainbow, mountains or an ocean, and so forth. There is also a sequence of Brachot that we recite every morning, as one of our first activities of the day, to praise God for many of the things that we would otherwise take for granted: our liberty, our eyesight, our clothing, our ability to walk erect, the ground beneath our feet, our shoes, etc. This wide panoply of Brachot has the potential to fill our entire day with awareness of God.

### 1. **Rambam, Hilchot Brachot 1:3 – Blessings of praise connect us to God even when we are not actively enjoying something or doing a mitzvah.**

Many Brachot were instituted in the form of praise and thanks and in the form of request so that one will always remember the Creator, even when he is not experiencing pleasure and did not do a mitzvah.

ברכות רבות תקנו דרך שבח והודיה ודרך בקשה כדי לזכור את הבורא תמיד אף על פי שלא נהנה ולא עשה מצוה.

Although we do not have the license to fabricate our own Brachot, the institution of Brachot should awaken us to the need to constantly involve ourselves in praising God and appreciating His all-encompassing kindness.

### 2. **Rabbi Alexander Aryeh Mandelbaum, Vezot HaBracha, p. 13 – Bringing God into our lives even in places where the Sages did not institute Brachot.**

The Rambam concludes the Laws of Brachot (10:26) as follows: “The principle is, one should always cry out [to God] for the future and request [His] mercy, and give thanks for the past, thanking and praising to the best of his ability. The more one thanks and praises God, the better.” These words teach us that the ultimate purpose of Brachot is to always praise God, and to bless and glorify Him to the best of our ability...

הרמב"ם חותם את הלכות ברכות (פ"י כ"ו) "כללו של דבר לעולם יצחק אדם על העתיד לבא ויבקש רחמים, ויתן הודיה על מה שעבר ויודה וישבח כפי כחו. וכל המרבה להודות את ה' ולשבחו תמיד הרי זה משובח." דברים אלו באו ללמדנו כי התכלית הסופית של ענין ברכות הוא לשבח את ה' תמיד, ולהרבות כפי יכולתנו ברכה ותהילה...

We should always remember that even for things which our Sages did not institute specific Brachot...we should not absolve ourselves from praising God, rather we should do our utmost to bless Him as much as we can, until we accustom ourselves to thanking Him at all times, for everything.

נזכור תמיד שאף באותם מקומות שלא תקנו לנו חז"ל ברכה מסוימת... אל לנו לפטור את עצמנו מלשבח לה', אלא אדרבה עלינו להרחיב ולהוסיף על כל תהילותיו יתברך עד קצה גבול כוחנו, עד שנרגיל עצמנו להודות לה' בכל רגע ורגע על כל דבר ודבר.

## KEY THEMES OF SECTION II:

- ⌘ There are three types of Brachot: those recited before partaking of a pleasure (such as eating food), those recited upon performing a mitzvah, and those recited to offer praise and thanks to God.
- ⌘ Everything in this world ultimately belongs to God. God not only permits us but actually wants us to benefit from this world – as long as we recognize Him as the source of all things. This is the purpose of Brachot recited before partaking of a pleasure. Recognizing that God is the source of all things is what brings down blessings upon the world. Thus, in order to benefit from the world, we must first bless God for whatever we are about to receive.
- ⌘ Additionally, there are Brachot said prior to performing a mitzvah. In reciting these Brachot, we thereby thank God for granting us the privilege of doing His will.
- ⌘ Brachot were also instituted for every occasion, even when we do not experience physical pleasure, in order to bring God into every aspect of our lives.

## SECTION III. KAVANA – CONCENTRATING ON THE MEANING OF THE BRACHOT

The objective of Brachot is not met merely by reciting the Bracha. A person must understand the Bracha and actually articulate the words with awareness of its meaning. This is no small task. In fact, mastering the art of reciting Brachot with *kavana* is a lifelong endeavor.

### PART A. INVOLVING THE MIND

It is not enough to just recite a Bracha; one has to say it with intent, understand the words, and be mindful of its inner meaning.

#### 1. Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim, with Mishnah Berurah, 5:1 – The imperative of mindfulness.

While reciting Brachot, one must be cognizant of the simple meaning of the words.

As our sages teach, “One should not ‘throw’ a Bracha from one’s mouth.” Rather, one should concentrate and say the Bracha slowly.

יכוון בברכתו פירוש המילות.

כמו שאמרו חז"ל שלא יזרוק הברכה מפיו אלא יכוון בעת האמירה ויברך בנחת.



## 2. Sefer HaChasidim, 46 – A Bracha should not be said by rote.

One should not conduct himself like those who perform by rote, and utter with their mouths without thought and feeling. About this matter God became angry at his people and told us through the prophet Isaiah, “For this nation approached Me with their mouth, and with their lips did they honor Me, but their hearts were far from Me.”

ולא יעשה כאדם העושה דבר כמנהג ומוציא דברים מפיו בלא הגיון הלב, ועל דבר זה חרה אף ה' בעמו ושלח לנו ביד ישעיה ואמר "יען כי נגש העם הזה בפיו ובשפתיו כבודני ולבו רחק ממני".

## 3. Rabbi Hadar Margolin, Besimcha U'Vetuv Levav, p. 225 – One must internalize the Bracha.

A Bracha should be said in a way that all of one's senses, capabilities, thoughts and ideas, his whole “being,” are focused on the Bracha. It is not said under the duress of time, trying to rush to finish it; it is not recited while the mind is even slightly distracted; rather one must be totally immersed in the Bracha and its meaning, and in the wish to assimilate, internalize and live that which his mouth and lips are expressing.

אמירת הברכה צריכה להיות באופן שכל החושים, כל הכחות והמחשבות והעשתונות, הכל באשר לכל “נמצא” בתוך הברכה. היא אינה נאמרת בלחץ של זמן וברצון להגיע לסיומה, אינה נאמרת בפה בלבד כאשר המחשבה נתונה לנושא אחר ואפילו במעט, אלא הכל שקוע אך ורק בברכה ובכוונתה וברצון לעכל ולהפנים ולהיות את אשר פיו ושפתיו מביעים.

A person should strive to have as much kavana as possible. There is virtually no limit to the potential growth in this area.

## 4. Adapted from the Introduction to Meah Brachot Ki'hilchata – “Never stop growing!”

One of our greatest leaders in the last century, Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, was visited daily for advice, blessing, and encouragement by people from all walks of life. One day a man who was suffering a serious illness approached Rabbi Auerbach to ask his advice on how to invoke Divine mercy to spare his life.

“I am unworthy of advising definitively on such a serious issue,” he replied. “However, I will tell you what I would do in such a situation. I would strengthen myself in the reciting of Brachot, making sure to enunciate each word carefully and clearly and with the proper concentration. If I were to succeed in that,” concluded the sage, “that would be for me a great accomplishment.”

Now, it is well known that Rabbi Auerbach was always particularly careful with his Brachot and said them with much concentration and mindfulness. So much so, people would come just to observe him utter a Bracha and would be duly uplifted as they watched this holy man connect with his Creator in a deep, meaningful way. Nevertheless, he would still strengthen himself constantly in this area. Even in the last year of his long life (which is when this incident happened) he felt that there was room for improvement and growth.

It seems there is no limit to the levels of perfection and growth in the purity of heart and mind that can be attained in the recitation of a simple Bracha.



## PART B. WHY VERBALIZE?

Since God knows all our thoughts, one might ask why it is necessary for Brachot to be spoken. Is it not enough that we love and praise God in our hearts and feel thankful to Him?

### 1. Sefer HaChinuch 430 – Brachot must be enunciated in order to arouse our souls.

The purpose of saying Brachot to Him is only to awaken our souls through the words of our mouth...

ענין הברכה שאנו אומרים לפניו איננו רק הזכרה לעורר  
נפשנו בדברי פינו...

True, God can read our thoughts and we do not need to verbalize them in order to communicate with Him. However, by articulating the words of the Brachot, we create and instill within ourselves the awareness of God, which Brachot are meant to engender. It is specifically the power of speech utilized for sacred purposes that has the ability to shape a person's thoughts and attitudes.

### 2. Michtav Me'Eliyahu, Vol. IV, p. 257 – Our speech is like an engine.

If one becomes accustomed to speaking words of Torah and holiness frequently, it will affect his thought patterns and his heart. Imagine a heavy truck as it begins to slide backwards down a hill because the brakes stopped working. Even ten men cannot physically stop it, but one man who jumps into the front seat and starts the engine can save the situation.

So too the mouth of a person is his "engine," in that it has the ability to bring him to internalize spirituality... This is the meaning of the verse, "It is in your mouth and in your heart, to carry out [the Torah]."

ואם האדם מתרגל לדבר דיבורים של תורה ושל  
קדושה דבר זה ישפיע על מהלך מחשבותיו וגם על  
לבו. נצייר לעצמנו: משאית כבדה מתחילה להידרדר  
אחורה במדרון כי הבלמים הפסיקו לפעול. גם אם  
עשרה בני אדם ינסו לעכבה בכח גופם לא יועילו  
מאומה, אבל אם אחד יקפוץ לתוכה ויפעיל את המנוע  
יוכל להציל את המצב.

פיו של האדם הוא המנוע שבכחו להביאו לידי השבה  
אל הלב... והיינו "בפיו ובלבבך לעשותו".

One should not misunderstand the above, however, and think that the **only** purpose of verbalizing our Brachot and prayers is for the impact they will have upon us. Quite the contrary – enunciating the words is an intrinsic part of the practice of Brachot, and it is only when they are verbalized that our Brachot can bring about their spiritual effects.

### 3. Rabbi Chaim Volozhiner, Nefesh HaChaim, Perakim Chapter 5 – The requirement to verbalize the words of prayer and Brachot is an inherent part of the mitzvah.

It is not only with regards to mitzvot of action that the main feature is the action involved. This is so even with regard to the mitzvah of prayer. Even though it is called "the service of the heart" (as our Sages derived in the first chapter of Tractate Taanit from the verse "and to serve him with all your heart"), nevertheless the main requirement is for a person to specifically pronounce with his lips every word of the text of the prayers. Our Sages (in the beginning of the

ולא זו בלבד שבמצות מעשיות העיקר בהם הוא חלק  
המעשי אלא שגם במצות התפלה שנקראת עבודה  
שבלב. ולמדוהו ז"ל ברפ"ק דתענית מכתוב ולעבדו  
בכל לבבך. עכ"ז העיקר שצריך האדם לחתך בשפתיו  
דוקא כל תיבה ממטבע התפלה כמשרז"ל בר"פ אין  
עומדין מקראי דחנה דכתיב בה רק שפתיה נעות מכאן  
למתפלל צריך שיחתך בשפתיו. וכ"א בשו"ט שמואל  
פ"ב יכול יהא מהרהר בלב ת"ל רק שפתיה נעות וכו'  
הא כיצד מרחיש בשפתיו.

chapter *Ein Omdin*) learned this from the verses about Channah, where it says that only her lips were moving, teaching us that a person who prays must pronounce [the prayers] with his lips. This idea is also found in the Midrash Shocher Tov on Shmuel (the Book of Samuel), Chapter 2: “You may think that a person should [merely] think [the words of prayer] in his mind. However, the verse states, ‘Only her lips were moving’... What should one do? He should whisper the words with his lips.”

It is clear that the Sages did not make this statement merely to teach us a preferable and more desirable way to do the mitzvah. Rather, it is intrinsic [to the mitzvah], and if a person merely thought the words of the prayers in his mind, he has not fulfilled his obligation of prayer at all. If the time for prayer has not yet passed, he would be obligated to pray again and pronounce every word with his lips, and if the time did pass, he would be required to recite a double prayer during the next prayer service, as the halachah mandates for a person who did not pray at all.

וברור הוא דלאו לענין לכתחיל ולמצו' בעלמ' הוא  
דאגמורוהו אלא גם לעכוב' דיעבד שאם הרהר תיבות  
התפלה בלב לבד לא יצא י"ח תפלה כלל ואם עדיין לא  
עבר הזמן צריך להתפלל פעם אחרת בחתוך שפתים  
כל תיבה ואם עבר זמנה צריך להתפלל שתיים תפלה  
שאחריה כדין מי שלא התפלל כל עיקר.

Prayer and Brachot serve many functions beyond the fact that they instill a crucial awareness of God in the person reciting them. Like all of the mitzvot, they are imbued with immense power to affect untold spiritual dimensions or worlds – and this power can be tapped only when the prayers are verbalized, not when they are merely thought.

### KEY THEMES OF SECTION III:

- ∞ The real essence of a Bracha is the thought that goes into it. The more one focuses on what one is saying, the more one *lives* what one is saying, the greater the Bracha. This is a lifelong job. There is no end to the levels of perfection and growth one can attain in the recitation of a simple Bracha.
- ∞ On the other hand, it is not enough merely to think about the content of a Bracha; Brachot must be verbally articulated. Through speech our heart is awakened.

## SECTION IV. INSIGHTS INTO BRACHOT

As we have already mentioned, saying a Bracha means following the texts of Brachot that were established by the Sages. In their great wisdom, our Sages imbued every Bracha with many layers of depth and meaning. Consequently, every word and letter of every Bracha contains a world of significance. While it may be beyond our ability to grasp the full extent of the meaning of Brachot, we can uncover some illuminating ideas by analyzing the basic wording of a Bracha.

## PART A. SECOND PERSON, THIRD PERSON

An interesting observation from the commentaries is the seeming grammatical inconsistency within the Brachot themselves. Whereas initially we address God in the more direct second person (“Blessed are You...”), the conclusion of some Brachot appear in the third person (“Who does such-and-such”). Why is this so? The commentators offer several explanations.

### 1. Rashba, Responsa Vol. 5, 52 – God’s existence vs. His true essence.

You asked why the text of the Bracha was created in such a way that part of it is in the second person and part is in the third person. You should know that the Kabbalists have a great secret reason for this, but we do not get involved with the esoteric and the hidden. However, there is also an important rational reason for this... There are two foundations upon which everything is based... God’s existence is clear and known to all, but His true essence is above and beyond any human comprehension. In order to affirm these two principles in our souls, [the Rabbis] instituted to say part [of the Bracha] in second person and part in third person.

שאלת למה נתקן נוסח הברכה מחצה נמצא ומחצה נסתר. דע שיש לבעלי החכמה סוד נשגב, ואין לנו עסק בנסתרות. ואמנם יש טעם נגלה גדול התועלת... דשני יסודות יש שעליהם נבנה הכל... הוא במציאותו נגלה לכל ובאמתת מהותו נסתר ונעלם מהכל. וכדי לקבוע שתי הפינות אלה בנפשותינו קבעו הנוסח בנגלה ונסתר.

The Rashba explains that we address God directly to allude to the fact that we are clearly aware of His existence, but we switch to the third person to indicate that we can never truly grasp His essence. The following sources explain this phenomenon in a similar fashion. How *do* we perceive God? Only through His actions – the way His will is carried out in the world. However, His true essence is beyond our comprehension.

### 2. Rabbi Chaim Volozhin, Nefesh HaChaim, Second Gate, Chapter 3 – God’s infinite Self vs. His relationship with us.

All Brachot on mitzvot are in second and third person, because with regard to His connection with the [upper and lower] worlds, through which we understand Him in some infinitesimally small sense, we speak directly... but the One who instructs [us to do mitzvot] and sanctifies us is His infinite self, the most unfathomable concept in the world [therefore addressing in the third person is more fitting].

כל ברכות המצוות לשון נוכח ונסתר... שמצד התחברותו יתברך ברצונו אל העולמות, שע"י זה יש לנו קצת השגה כל דהו, אנו מדברים לנוכח... והמצווה אותנו ומקדשנו הוא עצמותו יתברך א"ס ב"ה לבדו הסתום מכל סתימין.

Another layer of significance is expressed by the Noam Elimelech, who explains that this shift in the language of a Bracha embodies a very important message about a person’s relationship with God.

### 3. Noam Elimelech, Parshat Bechukotai – One must continually build and strengthen one’s relationship with God.

We say “Blessed are You” in the second person, and “Who has sanctified us” in the third person,

הנה אנו אומרים “ברוך אתה” הוא נגלה, “אשר קדשנו” הוא נסתר, שבהתחלת האדם לעבוד הבורא נראה

because at the outset of a person's service to God, it seems that he is already very close to Him indeed. But then, with continuous dedication to this service comes the realization of the great distance between him and the Almighty, and it is as if his service of God has not even begun.

ונדמה לו שהוא כבר קרוב לה' מאוד. אבל בהתמדתו בעבודתו יתברך בתמידות אז מבין ורואה שהוא רחוק מאוד מהבורא ב"ה ועדיין לא התחיל בעבודה כלל.

It is easy for one to be taken by a false sense of his true spiritual standing. We relate to God as a loving God and naturally feel close to Him. Only when we attempt to draw closer to God do we begin to see our true stature for what it really is. It may sound paradoxical, but the closer we get, the more clearly we see how far we are.

## PART B. "OUR GOD"

Most Brachot refer to God as *Elokeinu*, "our God." Since God rules the *entire* world, what does it mean to refer to Him specifically as "our God"?

### 1. The Gaon of Vilna, Aderet Eliyahu, Devarim 1:6 – Our God, personally and globally.

*Hashgacha* [Divine intervention] has two aspects: general hashgacha, namely God's general watching over the whole world and all its inhabitants, and a more specific hashgacha, distinctively for the Jewish people.

Therefore the syntax for every bracha is: "...The Lord, our God, King of the Universe" which means: "The Lord" who is hidden, "our God" who supervises us individually, and "King of the universe" – for even though He watches over us in particular, he also watches over the entire world in general, and rules over them.

בהשגחה יש ב' ענינים, השגחה כללית – דהיינו על כל בריותיו ועל כל העולם בכללותו. והשגחה פרטית, שמשגיח על ישראל לבד.

"... ולכן אומרים בכל ברכה 'ה' אלקינו מלך העולם', דהיינו 'ה' – מצד הנעלם, ו'אלקינו' – שהוא משגיח עלינו בפרטית. ו'מלך העולם' – שאף על פי שמשגיח עלינו בפרטית משגיח על כל העולם כולו בכללותו, ומושל עליהם.

### 2. Rabbi Reuven Leuchter – the meaning of our God, in the Brachot.

The simple meaning of the word *Elokeinu* is as follows: *Elokim* means the All Powerful, namely that He alone runs the world. Our *Elokim*, means that God orchestrates and runs the world based on *our* deeds, i.e., specifically the Jews' deeds. (Clearly this puts a great responsibility on our shoulders.)

This seems to be the most simple understanding of the Name *Elokeinu* in the context of all Brachot.

אפשר להסביר את המילה "אלקינו" בצורה פשוטה: אלקים – היינו בעל הכחות כולם. אלקים שלנו – פירושו של דבר שהוא מסדר ומנהיג את כל הכחות כולם לפי המעשים שלנו, וזה שייך במיוחד לכלל ישראל. (כמובן שזה מטיל עול נורא על האדם.)

כפירוש על המילה "אלקינו" בכל הברכות, אני חושב שזה הפירוש הפשוט ביותר.

## PART C. INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE OF A BRACHA

Often, the Sages' choice of words in a Bracha sheds light on the message that the Bracha is meant to convey. These powerful words also help us internalize the message. The following are two examples of Brachot on routine events, which the Sages composed in a way that should awaken us to God's immense kindness in those aspects of our lives.

### 1. Adapted from Besimcha U'Vetuv Leivov, p. 224 – The Bracha of Asher Yatzar [He Who fashioned man], the blessing said after relieving oneself.

Imagine someone who got a piece of refuse stuck in his body. At a doctor's appointment he is told that he needs emergency surgery. While the surgery itself is risky, it would be even more dangerous to avoid doing it. He goes through with the surgery, and all goes well without any complications.

The feelings of thanksgiving such a person has to God are tremendous – to the extent that he makes a public meal to publicize the miracle God did for him.

Every person experiences the above description every day. We would not be able to exist if the waste which is in our body were not removed. God created our body in such a way that the body cleanses itself from waste without any pain, without needing to be hospitalized, without surgery and recovery – He “Who heals all flesh and acts wondrously” is truly a wondrous healer. The feelings of thanksgiving which should have been present at the above-mentioned meal should be felt every time we say the Bracha of Asher Yatzar (the Bracha after visiting the bathroom, thanking God for a healthy and functioning body). A Bracha said in such a fashion is an unforgettable experience.

*A story is told of a Rebbe who was walking along the street when he heard a loud voice. On closer inspection this voice was the voice of the famous Biala Rebbe. He was reciting “Asher Yatzar” at a very high decibel level. The Rebbe was surprised. “Does everyone need to know where you’ve just been?” he reprimanded. The response was immediate. “Pirsumei Nissa (publicizing the miracle) is a very important mitzvah!” The Rebbe was so impressed with the clarity and insight of this great individual that he publicized the story and told it over often.*

If we succeed in realizing that the myriads of functions which take place in our bodies every second are nothing short of a miracle, then surely our life experience will be happier and more greatly enhanced.

The following story is told of Rabbi Yisrael Salanter:

*R' Yisrael once walked into a restaurant and noticed that they charged an exorbitant sum for a cup of tea. R' Yisrael asked the owner of the restaurant why the tea was so expensive. After all, the ingredients only cost a few cents.*

*The owner replied, “You are correct. But for that sum go drink a cup of tea in your home. Here there are fancy couches, there’s music in the background, there’s a nice view, there are fancily dressed waiters and the tea is served in expensive china – that all costs money.”*

*R' Yisrael thanked the owner in a very moving way.*

*“What are you thanking me for?”*

*“Thanks to you I just understood the Bracha of ‘Shehakol nihye bidvaro, (through Whose word everything came to be).’ When someone enjoys food, he blesses God for everything. Not only for what he ate but for everything else around; for the sun which enables him to see the food; for the music of the birds in the background; for the flowers, for the air – for the whole atmosphere. We have to thank Him, for through His word everything came to be.” (Adapted from Vezot HaBracha p. 8 – The Bracha of Shehakol)*

## KEY THEMES OF SECTION IV:

- ≈ Many gems are hidden within the text of the Brachot. The more one studies them and pays attention to their every nuance, the more one discovers.
- ≈ All of the blessings start off addressing the Almighty in the second person. But some of the Brachot switch midway to the third person. We begin by speaking to God directly; we address the aspect of God we can relate to, be it knowing His existence, His relationship with us, or His deeds that we can comprehend. But God's true essence is something we cannot relate to, and therefore we switch to third person. Also, the closer we get to Him, the more we realize how far away we really are.
- ≈ Daily miracles happen within our body every day. We are so accustomed to them, we don't pay attention – until something goes wrong. The Bracha of *Asher Yatzar* was instituted to help us focus on the miracles happening every minute in our bodies.

## SECTION V. THE AMEN RESPONSE

The experience of a Bracha is not restricted to the individual reciting it. The Sages instituted a requirement that one who hears a Bracha respond with the word “Amen,” which constitutes an affirmation of the contents of the Bracha.

1. **Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 124:6 – The Sages mandated that a person respond with “Amen” whenever he hears a Bracha.**

They should answer “Amen” to every Bracha, whether they have already fulfilled their obligation of prayer or they have not fulfilled it yet. They should have the intent that “the Bracha that was recited is true, and I believe in it.”

ויענו אמן אחר כל ברכה בין אותם שיצאו ידי תפלה בין אותם שלא יצאו ובכוונה שיכוין בלבו אמת היא הברכה שבירך המברך ואני מאמין בזה.

The Amen response should not be viewed as a trivial matter. The Sages attached great importance to it, instituting various rules to ensure that it is pronounced correctly and at the appropriate time. (For details, see Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 124:8 and The Laws of Brachot by Rabbi Binyomin Forst, Artscroll/Mesorah Publications, Chapter 2.) The Sages emphasize the vast reward granted to a person who is careful to respond Amen.

2. **Talmud Bavli, Shabbos 119b – A person who responds Amen to a Bracha merits eternal reward.**

Reish Lakish taught: When a person answers “Amen” with all his might, the gates of Gan Eden are opened before him.

אמר ריש לקיש כל העונה אמן בכל כחו פותחין לו שערי ג"ע.

3. **Zohar, quoted by Shelah (on the subject of prayer) – The Amen response has an immeasurable spiritual impact, which brings benefit to the entire world.**

Anyone who pays attention to every Bracha that

ומי שמכוון לכל ברכה וברכה היוצאת מפי המברך



is recited, and who answers Amen with intent and in the proper way, brings about much sanctity in the upper spheres, and an abundance of good in Creation, for he opens the upper Source of the waters of life, just as he would open a spring to irrigate all that need water. A voice announces in the upper spheres of Heaven that all of this good and joy was caused by this person, servant of the Holy King.

ועונה אמן בכוונה וכדינו גורם למעלה קדושה הרבה מאוד ושפע רב טוב לכל העולמות כי הוא פותח המקור העליון מקור מים חיים כמו שפותח המעיין להשקות לכל הצריכות השקיה. והקול יורד בשמים מעל ומודיע שכל זו הטובה והשמחה גורם פלוני זה עבד מלך הקדוש.

The importance that the Sages attach to the Amen response is a clear illustration of the way a seemingly simple practice can actually have great profundity and spiritual meaning. But there is an added dimension of significance to the Amen response, which places it on an even higher level than the Bracha itself.

4. **Talmud Bavli, Brachot 53b – The Amen response is considered even greater than the actual Bracha itself!**

The one who answers Amen is greater than the one who recites the Bracha.

גדול העונה אמן יותר מן המברך.

On the surface, this statement is somewhat puzzling. How can the Amen response, which is an affirmation of the Bracha, have more meaning and value than the Bracha itself? In order to understand the answer to this question, we must first explore the meaning of the word “Amen.” The word itself is, in fact, a deep expression of faith and belief.

5. **Talmud Bavli, Shabbos 119b – The letters of “Amen” stand for “E-I Melech Neeman,” which means “God is the trustworthy King.”**

What does Amen mean? Rabbi Chanina taught: [It is an acronym for] “God is the trustworthy King.”

מאי אמן א”ר חנינא אל מלך נאמן.

With regard to Brachot of thanksgiving, the Shulchan Aruch (source #1 above) rules that the Amen response should be intended as an expression of one’s belief in the content of the Bracha. However, the Mishnah Berurah adds that there is another meaning of “Amen” which can be relevant for other types of Brachot.

6. **Mishnah Berurah, Orach Chaim 124:25 – “Amen” can be an affirmation of belief, a prayer that the blessing be fulfilled, or both.**

This applies to blessings of thanksgiving...but in [blessings of] supplication, a person’s intent should be, “It is true, and I also pray that it should be God’s will that this be fulfilled.”

וזהו בברכת הודאה... אבל בתפילה צריך שיכוין אמת היא וגם אני מתפלל שיהי רצון שיקויים דבר זה.

With this introduction, we can understand one explanation as to why the person who answers Amen is considered greater than the person who recited the Bracha:



**7. Rabbi Menachem Nissel, audio shiur “The Power of Amen” – A Bracha creates only one of two possible spiritual impacts, while the Amen response has the capacity to do both.**

Human beings were placed in this world to perform two very different, even opposite, types of spiritual service of God. One, which the Kabbalists call “from above to below” is to take all the spiritual energy from the upper worlds and bring it down to the physical world, imbuing this world with spirituality. The other, which is called “from below to above,” is to take every part of the physical world and elevate it to the spiritual realms. Through these two activities, we sanctify the physical world.

There are two types of Brachot. One type includes Brachot that are recited on physical benefits as well as Brachot that are recited before doing a mitzvah. When you make a Bracha on a food, you are bringing the spiritual energy of that food down to this world; as the Kabbalists teach, everything physical in the world has a spiritual underpinning. Similarly, when a person does a mitzvah, Rav Chaim Volozhiner teaches that he is waging war against the forces of evil, and thus bringing spirituality down into this world. Those types of Brachot represent the type of sanctifying the world that is “from above to below.”

The other type of Brachot consists of Brachot of praise and thanksgiving to God. These Brachot spread awareness of God throughout the physical world. When we make a Bracha thanking God for providing for our needs, or praising Him for His greatness, we make the whole world aware of Him. Thus, the Bracha spreads sanctity throughout the physical world, bringing spiritual energy “from below to above.”

Every Bracha accomplishes only one of these two things, but the word “Amen” encompasses both meanings. When a person says Amen, he aligns himself with the Bracha that has been said. He fortifies the Bracha with spiritual energy so that it can come down to this world. But “Amen” also represents a prayer that the Bracha be fulfilled. Thus, when a person says “Amen,” he also spreads the spiritual energy of the Bracha throughout the physical world. That is how “Amen” can be greater than a Bracha itself, because “Amen” accomplishes both forms of sanctification, while a Bracha can only accomplish one.

The following story illustrates the great importance that a Torah sage attached to the Amen response.

*A doctor working in a hospital in Israel related an incident that had a major impact on his life. "About eighteen years ago, I was treating a terminally ill patient. His body was gradually ceasing to function – his days were clearly numbered. After deliberating the case with a number of specialists, I presented the following option to the patient and his family: He could undergo complicated surgery that might lengthen his life by another six months, but it would be expensive and very painful."*

*The son said that he could not make the decision on his own. "Only Rav Moshe Feinstein can answer that question."*

*The doctor offered to accompany him and personally present the intricacies of the case. He was interested to see how the Rov would deal with the situation.*

*"What followed [he relates] will forever be etched in my memory. Rav Feinstein began to cry. He cried real tears, bitter tears, his sobbing was audible in the room. For almost twenty minutes he wept. As a professional, I know how we gradually learn to detach, how years of experience numb our sensitivities. Yet this Rav, who met countless people a day, was moved so intensely..."*

*Rav Moshe asked for a day to consider. When they returned, he replied with confidence, "Go ahead and have the surgery."*

*"The expression on my face must have revealed my skepticism, because Rav Feinstein then addressed me, saying, 'In the half-year reprieve this surgery will grant our friend, he will have the merit of answering Amen to many Brachot. Each Amen will create a guardian angel for him. These angels will defend him...and he will be granted a long life in their merit.'"*

*The doctor was amazed that Rav Moshe felt it would all be worthwhile...What is more, Rav Feinstein believed that these words could actually interfere with nature. "At that moment, I realized that there must be something profound to Torah and mitzvot."*

*Indeed, the patient outlived the doctors' grim prognosis by several years. (Excerpted from Just One Word: The Power of Amen by Esther Stern, Feldheim Publishers.)*

Indeed, the Amen response is considered to be an extremely potent and powerful spiritual force. The book *Just One Word: The Power of Amen* records numerous incidents in which people's lives were changed when they developed the simple habit of responding to Brachot with Amen.

#### KEY THEMES OF SECTION V.

- ∞ The Sages instituted that one who hears someone else recite a Bracha should affirm the Bracha by reciting "Amen." Kabbalistic literature ascribes tremendous reward for doing so.
- ∞ Amen is both an affirmation of faith as well as a prayer that the blessing be fulfilled.

## CLASS SUMMARY:

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### WHAT IS THE PHILOSOPHY AND REASONING BEHIND THE INSTITUTION OF BRACHOT?

The main purpose of the institution of Brachot is to take every opportunity to remind ourselves of God, to make us feel connected and realize that He is a part of our lives. As we go about our daily routines, it is often difficult to remember that God is the Source of everything we have. For this reason, the Sages required us to recite Brachot, reminding us at every juncture in our daily routines that everything emanates from God. The requirement to recite 100 Brachot every day is predicated on the notion that we will increase our cognizance of God by focusing on His involvement in every individual facet of our lives.

### GOD KNOWS MY THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS, SO WHY MUST I ARTICULATE THEM EXPLICITLY?

Indeed, God is aware of our thoughts and feelings, but the purpose of verbalizing Brachot is to increase our own awareness of God. Using our power of speech to express our recognition of God instills and deepens the recognition within ourselves.

Furthermore, the recitation of Brachot brings about massive effects in spiritual worlds, but the power to achieve those effects exists only when the *Brachot* are verbalized. Since the power of *Brachot* lies in their ability to connect the worlds of action, speech, and thought, if the component of speech is lacking, the *Brachot* will not achieve their effect.

## WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THE WORD BRACHA?

There are various explanations of the meaning of the term “Baruch” (literally “blessed”) when applied to God. After all, it would be ludicrous for us to assume that we can bless God. One explanation is that the word “Baruch” is merely an expression of praise. Another explanation is that when we say that God is “Baruch,” we acknowledge that He is the Source of all blessing and abundance of the world. In this sense, the word “Baruch” is related to the Hebrew “*bereicha*,” or “reservoir,” which is also the source of abundance.

## HOW IMPORTANT IS KAVANA (MINDFULNESS) IN BRACHOT?

In truth, it is imperative to recite Brachot with *kavana* – with intent and devotion, paying attention to their meaning. A person should not recite a Bracha by rote. If he does so, it is unlikely that the Bracha will have the desired effect and succeed in instilling cognizance of God within the person reciting it. Nevertheless, if a person does recite a Bracha without *kavana*, he has still fulfilled his obligation.

## IN WHAT WAY DOES A BRACHA AFFECT THE ONE WHO RECITES IT, THE JEWISH NATION, AND THE WORLD AT LARGE?

The Sages teach that scrupulous recitation of Brachot is one of the central paths to piety. A person who expends effort to say Brachot properly will be a person who is constantly aware of God in all areas of his life. Furthermore, Kabbalah teaches us that the recitation of Brachot engenders a flow of Divine energy and succor which brings abundance to the Jewish nation and the entire world.