

## Morning Blessings

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*When you use a map to get to Paris, once you have arrived, you can put the map away and enjoy being in Paris. If you spend all your time with your map...you'll miss the reality.*

—Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*

**F**ew prayers can equal *Birkhot Ha-Shachar* as a way to begin one's day. This set of fifteen blessings forms the heart of the traditional preliminary morning service. Although they are usually recited in shul, most of the blessings were originally intended to be said during the course of waking up, getting dressed, and other parts of the morning routine. Those of us who do not make it to shul regularly can incorporate these blessings into our daily life, reciting them while preparing coffee, driving carpool, or doing yoga.

To do this, however, you must memorize the blessings, freeing yourself from the siddur. As Thich Nhat Hanh taught, it's worth spending time with the map (or siddur) *before* you visit your destination. If you keep your head in the book all the time, you may miss the experience itself.

Freed from the siddur, it's easier to close your eyes and become one with the words. You can move your body as you pray, pondering each blessing or prayer without the pressure of reading the next. You can rearrange the blessings in your mind, to fit the needs of the day. And you can add new ones as appropriate. In short, you can achieve the blend of *keva* and *kavannah*—fixed prayer and spontaneous intention—that our sages prescribed.

Although it is quite daunting to imagine memorizing the siddur, it isn't so hard to memorize fifteen short blessings. Each one starts with the same opening formula, which is familiar to many Jews—*Barukh ata Adonai Elohaynu melekh ha-olam*. Except for the first and last blessing, each closes with just a few words of content, called the *hatimah*—the seal of the blessing.

That can be recited in Hebrew or English. The Hebrew tends to be shorter, punchier, and more alliterative, but either one will do.

Fortunately, in addition to their succinctness, several things can help in memorizing the blessings (which are reprinted on the next page with a modern translation). First, break down the fifteen blessings into two groups. Three blessings deal with status or identity, and the remaining twelve blessings with awareness.

### *Status/Identity Blessings*

Traditionally, men recite three blessings relating to their status as free male Jews, which represents the traditional Jewish ideal of a fully responsible human subject to the mitzvot. These blessings, which come from the Talmud (MENACHOT 43B), were always said in the negative—Blessed are you, God, Lord of the Universe, for not making me a non-Jew, a woman, a slave. To replace the blessing thanking God *she-lo asani islah*—*who did not make me a woman*, women were given an alternative blessing—*she-asani kirtzono*—*for making me as He wished*.

Over the last few decades, liberal movements in Judaism have formulated these blessings in positive terms—thanking God for making me a Jew, for example—and substituted other formulations. Men and women together might thank God for creating them in the image of God (*she-asani b'tzalmo*), recalling the language of Genesis I. Or men might thank God for creating them male (*she-asani ish*), and women for creating them female (*she-asani islah*). The shift from negative to positive has brought about a subtle shift from a concern with status to a celebration of identity.

### *The Awareness Blessings*

The remaining blessings come to us almost straight from the pages of the Talmud. As the Talmud makes clear, the blessings were simple accompaniments to the morning routine of getting out of bed and getting ready for the day:

*When he hears the cock crowing he should say: 'Blessed is He who has given to the cock understanding to distinguish between day and night.'*

*When he opens his eyes he should say: 'Blessed is He who opens the eyes of the blind.'*

*When he stretches himself and sits up he should say: 'Blessed is He who loosens the bound.'*

## Morning Blessings בְּרִכּוֹת הַשַּׁחַר *Birkhot Ha-Shachar*

(Repeat with each phrase)

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם

Blessed are You Adonai our God, who rules the universe...

*Barukh ata Adonai elohaynu melekh ha-olam...*

אֲשֶׁר נָתַן לְשִׁכְוֵי בִּינָה לְהַבְחִין בֵּין יוֹם וּבֵין לַיְלָה

...who gives the bird of dawn discernment to tell day from night

... *asher natan la-sekhvi vinah l'havchin bayn yom u-vayn lailah*

שֶׁעָשָׂנִי בְּצַלְמוֹ

...who has made me in the divine image. ...*she-asani b'tzalmo*

שֶׁעָשָׂנִי יִשְׂרָאֵל

...who has made me of the people Israel. ...*she-asani Yisrael*

שֶׁעָשָׂנִי בֶן/בַּת חוֹרִין

...who has made me free. ...*she-asani ben/bat horin*

פּוֹקֵחַ עֵוְרִים

...who makes the blind to see. ...*pokayach 'ivrim*

מַלְבִּישׁ עֲרוּמִים

...who clothes the naked. ...*malbish 'arumim*

מַתִּיר אֲסוּרִים

...who releases the bound. ...*matir asurim*

זוֹקֵף כְּפוּפִים

...who straightens up those who are bent over. ...*zoref kefufim*

רוֹקֵעַ הָאָרֶץ עַל הַמַּיִם

...who stretches forth the earth upon the waters. ...*rok'a ha-aretz 'al ha-mayim*

שֶׁעָשָׂה לִי כָּל צְרָכֵי

...who has given me all I need. ...*she-'asah li kol tzorki*

הַיְמָכִין מַצְעָדֵי גִבּוֹר

...who prepares our steps. ...*ha-maykhin mitz'aday gaver*

אוֹזֵר יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּגִבוּרָה

...who girds Israel with strength. ...*ozar Yisrael big'vurah*

עוֹטֵר יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּתִפְאַרָה

...who crowns Israel with beauty. ...*'oter Yisrael b'tifarah*

הַנוֹתֵן לְיַעַף כֹּחַ

...who gives energy to the weary. ...*ha-noten la-ya'ef koach*

הַמַּעֲבִיר שְׁנָה מֵעֵינַי וּתְנוּמָה מֵעַפְעָפַי

...who removes sleep from my eyes and slumber from my eyelids

...*ha-ma'avir shaynah may'aynai u-t'numah may'af'apai*

When he dresses he should say: 'Blessed is He who clothes the naked.'

When he draws himself up he should say: 'Blessed is He who raises the bowed.'

When he steps onto the ground he should say: 'Blessed is He who spread the earth on the waters.'

When he commences to walk he should say: 'Blessed is He who makes firm the steps of man.'

When he ties his shoes he should say: 'Blessed is He who has supplied all my wants.'

When he fastens his girdle, he should say: 'Blessed is He who girds Israel with might.'

When he spreads a kerchief over his head he should say: 'Blessed is He who crowns Israel with glory'...

When he washes his face he should say: 'Blessed is He who has removed the bands of sleep from mine eyes and slumber from mine eyes...' (BERAKHOT 60B)

The concrete associations of the blessings help in memorizing them. Unlike traditional services, where we tend to block out all other activity in favor of concentrated davening, these blessings are intended to accompany physical activities. The kavannah of the morning blessings is perhaps closer to that of blessings over food, or over the lighting of candles.

Putting the blessings back into their life context can open up their true power. When I first started reciting the morning blessings as part of my own waking-up, I found myself rolling over in bed, reaching for my glasses—*aah! Pokayach 'ivrim—who opens the eyes of the blind.*

Today's morning routine may differ from our ancestors' 1500 years ago, but there is enough in common that one can still follow the blessings roughly in order. Every step of one's way, and particularly during the morning routine which so often becomes rote, one blesses God. Such mindfulness and a sense of gratitude puts one in a state of constant dialogue with the Creator.

The Talmud conveys a sense of this ongoing chatter as it runs through a plethora of blessings and occasions for saying them. For example, just before the passage containing the fifteen blessings, the Talmud discusses what one should say when entering and leaving a bathroom. One proposal was as follows:

On entering a privy one should say: 'Be honored, ye honored and holy ones that minister to the Most High. Give honor to the God of Israel. Wait for me till I enter and do my needs, and return to you.'

The sage Abaye offered a different formulation designed to keep the accompanying angels from taking off, leaving one in the hands of the evil spirits that haunt privies. But what is remarkable is the pervasive sense of the presence of God and angels. It reminds me of the marvelous line in the Talmud that cautions people against lifting up their noses or chins in haughtiness—because one is then likely to bump one's head against the soles of the Shekhinah's feet. God, in other words, is all around us.

### *Kavannot/Meditations*

The first of the blessings is over consciousness, which dawns anew each morning, and specifically the awareness of the difference between night and day. That awareness comes to us indirectly through the *sekhvi*, variously translated as rooster, watchman, celestial appearance, or meteor, according to the Reconstructionist siddur *Kol Haneshamah*. The siddur points out that in urban settings, we are more likely to hear the chirping of sparrows at dawn than a rooster crowing, and therefore translates *sekhvi* as bird of dawn. Some of us rarely hear even birds, and it is lovely to recall their role in the wake-up cycle.

When reciting the three identity blessings, I like to include the common variations as well. Thus:

who has made me free—*she-asani bat horin*

who has made me Jewish—*she-asani Yehudi/Yisrael*

who has made me a woman—*she-asani ishah*

who has made me in God's image—*she-asani b'tzalmo*

who has made me as God willed—*she-asani kirtzono.*

To me, the blessing of being made in God's image is not encompassed by my sexuality. So I say both blessings—*she-asani ishah* and *she-asani b'tzalmo*. But I also value the ambivalence that seems to me to leak through the blessing of *she-asani kirtzono*—an acknowledgment that we have limitations, of genetics and nurturance and environment. After all, teaches the Talmud, it is incumbent upon us to bless God for the bad as well as the good.

It can be instructive to give oneself some freedom in reciting these identity blessings, and then see what happens: do I say them at the beginning, or only after getting my bearings with the awareness blessings? What order do I say

them in—what aspects of my identity am I most aware of, and thankful for? What are the different feelings evoked in saying *she-asani Yisrael* (who has made me of the people Israel) versus *she-asani Yehudi* (who has made me a Jew)?

I often think of the twelve awareness blessings in groups. The first four—opening the eyes, clothing the naked, loosening the bound, straightening the bent-over—are the equivalent of yoga stretches—getting one’s bearings, opening up physically to the world and a new day.

Over the years, as the blessings have become part of communal prayers, they have acquired collective or allegorical meanings. Of course, even in their original formulation, the blessings echoed other parts of the Tanakh, and so evoked a sense of divine beneficence and power, which we imitate, in a sense, in our daily acts. Thus, *pokayach ’ivrim*, *matir asurim*, and *zokef kefufim* are all quotes from Psalm 146, where God opens the eyes of the blind, unbounds the bound, and lifts up those who are bent.

When we open our eyes, stretch, and so on, we are reminded of the ways in which God acts in the world to alleviate suffering, to expand our awareness, to release us from fears and limitations that imprison us. Most siddurim translate the blessings in ways that convey these wider meanings. For example, in the Conservative Movement’s *Siddur Sim Shalom*: “Praised are You Adonai our God, who rules the universe, giving sight to the blind/ clothing the naked / releasing the bound / raising the downtrodden.” The *Kol Haneshamah* siddur translates these last two as “who makes the captive free” and “who raises up the humble,” suggesting that the last phrase covers both those suffering a physical deformity and those humbled by adverse circumstances.

I’m always a little surprised by the next blessing—*rok’a ha-aretz al ha-mayim*—which praises God for creating solid ground to walk on. It’s something I wouldn’t otherwise think about when swinging my feet off the bed and onto the floor in the morning, but saying the blessing recalls the story of Creation, and the ever-present fear in ancient Judaism that the waters of the sea would sweep over the land and return civilization to chaos. I usually recite this blessing together with *ha-maykhin mitz’aday gaver*—*who makes ready a person’s steps*, and I think of both blessings as reminders that we can meet whatever challenges the day ahead poses—there is solid ground to step on, and our job is simply to put one foot ahead of the next.

The blessing *she-asah li kol tzorki*—*who has given me everything I need* seems like an all-encompassing blessing of gratitude. Traditionally,

though, this blessing and *ha-maykhin mitz’aday gaver* refer to having shoes and limbs that allow a person to walk and thereby take care of his or her needs. I prefer to make this a very individual blessing, and to thank God for that which meets my deepest needs—in my case, my husband and my son. It’s only a momentary reflection, but it means there is a place in the liturgy where I can bless God each day for sending me these gifts of love. *She-asah li kol tzorki* has become a very precious blessing to me.

I connect this blessing to the next two as well, thinking about what brings me strength and courage, honor and beauty. I like the idea that both men and women bless God for both strength and beauty, and that these attributes were originally associated with the simple acts of fastening a girdle/belt and putting on a head covering or kerchief. Finally, *ha-noten la-ya’ef ko’ach*—*who gives energy to the weary* is a marvelous acknowledgment that we may be tired even after a night’s sleep, while simultaneously giving us a boost of verbal energy to see us through the day.

### *Degrees of Freedom*

Once you have memorized the traditional blessings, you may wish to elaborate, expand on, or alter them. While I still cringe at blessings that alternate male and female terms for God—a holdover of the traditional Jewish aversion to any hint of divine dualism—there are a variety of options for making the language gender-neutral and less hierarchical. Common ones include substituting *hay ha-olamim* (life of all the worlds) or *ruach ha-olam* (spirit of the world) instead of *melekh ha-olam* (ruler of the universe).

At the National Havurah Institute in 2003, I watched Rabbi Mitch Chefitz ask participants in a Shabbat morning service to stand up, put down their siddurim, and call out their own morning blessings—which poured forth, as eloquent as anything in the siddur.

In experimenting with adding this opportunity for spontaneous prayer, I’ve noticed that people will most often bless God for the community coming together in prayer, for relationships of family and friends. People often also bless the natural environment—sun, moon, stars, flowers, trees. All this is good. But it can also be useful to direct people’s attention to the type of things covered in the *Birkhot Ha-Shachar*—namely, everyday, quite physical things that we take for granted, particularly relating to our own needs and ways of living in the world.

*Barukh ata Adonai elohaynu melekh ha-olam, who heals our cuts and bruises.*

*Barukh ata Adonai elohaynu melekh ha-olam, who gives us clean water.*

*Barukh ata Adonai elohaynu melekh ha-olam, who has given us the wisdom to create traffic lights.*

*Barukh ata Adonai elohaynu melekh ha-olam, who gives us coffee.*

One can also add a physical movement to the blessings, for example, tracing the outline of one's body and lifting one's arms up in the air. One idea is to bend down as far as one feels comfortable on each *Barukh*, then slowly fold up to a standing position while reciting the rest of the brakhah formula, so that one's hands are at shoulder height at *ha-olam*, and then reaching upward with arms and hands while saying the *hatimah*. Each blessing then is a full body movement of awareness and praise.

I have noticed that children in particular take to this movement, at once thrilled to have something physical to do at services, pleased that they can do something easily that some adults find difficult, and delighted to be able to come up with blessings on their own that the rest of the congregation either repeats or responds to with Amen.

Although the traditional set of morning blessings numbers fifteen, adding spontaneous blessings that meet the demands of the moment is all to the good. We are, after all, instructed by our sages to recite one hundred blessings a day. That's a tall order, if one does not have the habit of daily prayer. One hundred times a day, to lift your awareness up from the daily rush of life, and with whatever means are at hand—a fruit, a fragrant tree, a thought—to bless God.

We are not, of course, blessing the apple, the challah, or whatever object or activity is in front of us. We're blessing God for sending it our way, and sending us its way, for that "coming together." A connection has been made, a circuit has been closed, and the electricity that flows through it, the light that comes on—that's the holy energy of God. We are the ones who can complete the circuit...or let the moment pass by.

May we be blessed with many blessings in our lives.