



5776/2015-2016: HILCHOT BRACHOT

**Note: All משנה ברורה (סימן ו-ז) taught in this course follow the rulings of the פסקי הלכה with insights from R' Shimon Schwab זצ"ל in his work עיון תפילה (Artscroll, 2002)*

ברכת אשר יצר - WEEK 4, Lesson 2

This unit will cover the following:

- The parameters of when one is **obligated** to say ברכת אשר יצר
- The simple **definition** of the ברכה, as is written by the שלחן ערוך

Introduction

1. This unit marks the transition from ברכת הנהנין, blessings recited on physical pleasures such as food and pleasant smells, to ברכת השבח, blessings recited in praise of Hashem in particular circumstances.
2. R' Shimon Schwab, זצ"ל quotes the famous explorer and founder of modern biogeography [Alexander von Humboldt](#) (Germany, 1769-1859) as having said that in all of his travels across the world he had never found any religion or faith that had a blessing similar to אשר יצר. It is a testament to the beauty of Judaism and its unique appreciation of the wonders of the blessings of good health.
3. We recommend reading the following inspirational [STORY](#) which highlights the beauty and meaning associated with the recitation of this ברכה. The story appears below on pages 5-6.

Obligation

4. Whenever one relieves himself, either by urinating or defecating, ברכת אשר יצר is said afterwards.
 - a. The ברכה should be said immediately, but can be said as long as you do not feel the need to use the bathroom again. (It is also praiseworthy to recite the ברכה while standing still to aid in concentration).
 - b. If you did not say אשר יצר after using the bathroom and now feel the need to relieve yourself again, you should not say אשר יצר any longer and instead say it after the second time relieving yourself.

- i. A question now arises: do you now recite the ברכה twice - to thank Hashem for both times you relieved yourself, just as one who forgot to daven one תפילה recites שמונה עשרה twice during the next תפילה, or does one ברכה suffice for both instances? The שלחן ערוך says that one should say the ברכה twice, but we follow the general rule of ספק ברכות להקל and when in doubt we make as few, if any ברכות. In this case you should therefore only say אשר יצר once.
(Note that according to the שלחן ערוך students who have not been particular about saying אשר יצר might need to spend the weekend reciting the ברכה thousands of times to pay up the accrued debt).
- ii. The משנה ברורה points out how careful one should be to recite אשר יצר as soon as possible so as to avoid the above question.
- c. If, חס ושלום, one suffers from severe diarrhea, or if one takes medication to clean out the intestines before a procedure and is in a constant state of needing the bathroom, he should not recite אשר יצר until the sense of urgency subsides fully.
- d. We will see soon that the ברכה is said on the relief and health provided by excreting waste. Therefore, as long one excreted any waste, even the smallest amount, the ברכה must be said.
- e. There is a general הלכה that תדיר ושאינו תדיר - תדיר קודם, meaning that if one is presented with two conflicting מצוה obligations, the one that occurs *more often* comes first and then the second obligation is fulfilled. Based on this idea, the משנה ברורה quotes that if you finished eating and then used the bathroom, you *first* say אשר יצר and *afterwards* say the ברכה אחרונה. This is because אשר יצר is תדיר, it happens more often, than ברכה אחרונה. (It might be worthwhile to note how frequent this occurrence is and how great our obligation to be thankful is).

Definition

5. R' Schwab points out that the (סימן ו, סעיף א) שלחן ערוך writes a lengthy explanation of the ברכה, expounding on each phrase. This is a level of focus and detail not found elsewhere in prayer. This shows the great concern and care allotted to this ברכה.
6. We will now explain the ברכה line by line, as per the שלחן ערוך:
 - אשר יצר את האדם בחכמה: that G-d formed mankind using His wisdom.
 - The physical body and its millions of processes, all synchronized and detailed express the incredible חכמה employed by Hashem in His creation of mankind
 - Additionally, the body is porous and has many openings, yet the lungs contain the oxygen breathed in and do not deflate. (It might be worthwhile to discuss the calamity of a collapsed lung or how in the case of a tracheal [intubation](#) (video [here](#)), incredible care must be taken

to secure the tube, allow air to be breathed in and kept in, all while keeping out foreign matter and bacteria).

- A third definition provided by the שלחן ערוך is that the חכמה refers to the *plan* executed in creating mankind. G-d created a world capable of fully sustaining mankind before creating אדם וחיה.
- גלוי וידוע לפני כסא כבודך שאם יפתח אחד מהם או יסתם אחד מהם אי אפשר להתקיים: it is blatantly known before Hashem's Throne of Glory that if one of these orifices were to seal shut, or if one of these hollows were to burst (such as in the case of a ruptured appendix), it would not be possible to exist and stand before ה'. Some versions of the ברכה add: "אפילו שעה אחת" - even for one moment.
 - The שלחן ערוך notes that this praise really refers to the overall health and biological functioning of the body. It includes *all* functioning orifices such as those that are part of the respiratory and digestive systems. It is therefore proper to have in mind the fact that we can breathe and eat.
 - Because the excretory system is also included as one of the wonders of the "orifices and hollows," it is appropriate to recite this ברכה after using the bathroom where one can reflect on all of the many complex processes involved in the process of ingesting and digesting food and eliminating wastes.
- ברור... רופא כל בשר ומפליא לעשות: we acknowledge and recognize Hashem (we are not blessing Him!) as He who heals all flesh and works wondrously.
 - One explanation of the "wonder" is that one eats food and, at the molecular level, the body distinguishes between nutrients and waste, and processes each accordingly.
 - The רמ"א adds to this list a wonder of a different sort: Hashem tethers a spiritual soul to a physical body and the soul relies on the health of the body to maintain the person's life. In this manner "רופא כל בשר" keeps his soul within his body and a part of this world. This is the פלא being referred to.

5. R' Schwab analyzes the text further and raises several questions:

- a. Why do we focus on "אשר יצא את האדם" in the ברכה - aren't the concepts of anatomy and health discussed in the ברכה true of all mammals? In fact, the ברכה itself ends "רופא כל בשר" - including mammals and all animals as well?

- b. Why do we say “נקבים נקבים חלולים חלולים” and not that Hashem made many נקבים and חלולים? Shouldn't it rather say “וברא בו נקבים וחלולים רבים”? Why repeat each word twice?
 - c. The words “גלוי וידוע לפני כסא כבודך” are very exalted and powerful. (In fact, this phrase is only found *one other time* in the entire סידור - in the ברכה of זכרונות (ראש השנה) Why do we speak in such lofty terms about such mundane and physical processes and organs?
6. R' Schwab goes on to answer these and other questions by analyzing and expounding on the overall theme of the ברכה:

This ברכה is not just discussing the physical properties of human existence. If so, there would be no need to mention the כסא הכבוד. It is from beneath His הכבוד that Hashem selects נשמות and sends them down to inhabit human bodies. It seems antithetical to take something of such spiritual origin, and tie it to a physical body full of waste. We know that when you feel the urge to relieve yourself you cannot say תורה or recite a ברכה because of the baseness and lowliness of that state. Yet Hashem inextricably binds the two together for a lifetime. This is true only of the אדם and not members of the animal kingdom whose bodies do not contain a נשמה. We say “אשר יצר את האדם בחכמה” because the אדם has not only the wondrous and complex body that mammals have, but it contains a נשמה drawn from the כסא הכבוד as well.

We know that in the body there are 248 limbs and 365 sinews. It is taught in ספרי קבלה that the נשמה also contains the same number of (metaphysical) “limbs” and “sinews.” The second “נקבים” and “חלולים” thus refer to these parts of the נשמה.

We say that “גלוי וידוע לפני כסא כבודך” שאם יפתח אחד מהם או מסתם אחד מהם אי אפשר להתקיים ולעמוד לפניך” - we could not *exist* (להתקיים) without the body or *stand in prayer* (לעמוד) before Him had the body's waste not been contained properly. It is only because of the wonders of the body as well as the synthesis of the body and נשמה that we can fully function both physically - the mention of existence - and spiritually - the mention of standing in prayer.

We see this double theme again in the ברכה's conclusion:

כל בשר - רופא כל בשר - the physical element of the body, found in all flesh, is constantly monitored and healed by Hashem.

Hashem is wondrous in how He combines the body with the נשמה - ומפליא לעשות

FOR EVERYTHING A BLESSING

By Kenneth M. Prager, M.D. of Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center, New York

When I was an elementary school student in yeshiva - a Jewish parochial school with both religious and secular studies - my classmates and I used to find amusing a sign that was posted just outside the bathroom. It was an ancient Jewish blessing, commonly referred to as the asher yatzar benediction, that was supposed to be recited after one relieved oneself. For grade school children, there could be nothing more strange or ridiculous than to link to acts of micturition and defecation with holy words that mentioned God's name. Blessings were reserved for prayers, for holy days, or for thanking God for food or for some act of deliverance, but surely not for a bodily function that evoked smirks and giggles.

It took me several decades to realize the wisdom that lay behind this blessing that was composed by Abayei, a fourth-century Babylonian rabbi.

Abayei's blessing is contained in the Talmud, an encyclopedic work of Jewish law and lore that was written over the first five centuries of the common era. The Jewish religion is chock-full of these blessings, or brachot, as they are called in Hebrew. In fact, an entire tractate of Talmud, 128 pages in length, is devoted to brachot.

On page 120 (Brachot 60b) of the ancient text it is written: "Abayei said, when one comes out of a privy he should say: Blessed is He who has formed man in wisdom and created in him many orifices and many cavities. It is obvious and known before Your throne of glory that if one of them were to be ruptured or one of them blocked, it would be impossible for a man to survive and stand before You. Blessed are You that heals all flesh and does wonders."

An observant Jew is supposed to recite this blessing in Hebrew after each visit to the bathroom. We young yeshiva students were reminded of our obligation to recite this prayer by the signs that contained its text that were posted just outside the restroom doors.

It is one thing, however, to post these signs and it is quite another to realistically expect preadolescents to have the maturity to realize the wisdom of and need for reciting a 1600-year-old blessing related to bodily functions.

It was not until my second year of medical school that I first began to understand the appropriateness of this short prayer. Pathophysiology brought home to me the terrible consequences of even minor aberrations in the structure and function of the human body. At the very least, I began to no longer

take for granted the normalcy of my trips to the bathroom. Instead, I started to realize how many things had to operate just right for these minor interruptions of my daily routine to run smoothly.

I thought of Abayei and his blessing. I recalled my days at yeshiva and remembered how silly that sign outside the bathroom had seemed. But after seeing patients whose lives revolved around their dialysis machines, and others with colostomies and urinary catheters, I realized how wise the rabbi had been.

And then it happened: I began to recite Abayei's bracha. At first I had to go back to my siddur, the Jewish prayer book, to get the text right. With repetition - and there were many opportunities for a novice to get to know this blessing well - I could recite it fluently and with sincerity and understanding.

Over the years, reciting the asher yatzar has become for me an opportunity to offer thanks not just for the proper functioning of my excretory organs, but for my overall good health. The text, after all, refers to catastrophic consequences of the rupture or obstruction of any bodily structure, not only those of the urinary or gastrointestinal tract. Could Abayei, for example, have foreseen that "blockage" of the "cavity," or lumen, of the coronary artery would lead to the commonest cause of death in industrialized countries some 16 centuries later?

I have often wondered if other people also yearn for some way to express gratitude for their good health. Physicians especially, who are exposed daily to the ravages that illness can wreak, must sometimes feel the need to express thanks for being well and thus well-being. Perhaps a generic, non-denominational asher yatzar could be composed for those who want to verbalize their gratitude for being blessed with good health.

There was one unforgettable patient whose story reinforced the truth and beauty of the asher yatzar for me forever. Josh was a 20-year-old student who sustained an unstable fracture of his third and fourth cervical vertebrae in a motor vehicle crash. He nearly died from his injury and required emergency intubation and ventilatory support. He was initially totally quadriplegic but for weak flexion of his right biceps.

A long and difficult period of stabilization and rehabilitation followed. There were promising signs of neurological recovery over the first few months that came suddenly and unexpectedly: movement of a finger here, flexion of a toe there, return of sensation here, adduction of a muscle group there. With incredible courage, hard work, and an excellent physical therapist, Josh improved day by day. In time, and after what seemed like a miracle, he was able to walk slowly with a leg brace and a cane.

But Josh continued to require intermittent catheterization. I know only too well the problems and perils this young man would face for the rest of his life because of a neurogenic bladder. The urologists were very pessimistic about his chances for not requiring catheterization. They had not seen this occur after a spinal cord injury of this severity.

Then the impossible happened. I was there the day Josh no longer required a urinary catheter. I thought of Abayei's asher yatzar prayer. Pointing out that I could not imagine a more meaningful

scenario for its recitation, I suggested to Josh, who was also a yeshiva graduate, that he say the prayer. He agreed. As he recited the ancient bracha, tears welled in my eyes.

Josh is my son.