

Lesson 8-Introduction To Birchos Ha'Shachar

Welcome to this session of Take 5 for Tefila, a program sponsored by the Orthodox Union, as part of their Tefila Education Initiative. In this session, I would like to provide an introduction to the section of Tefilas Shacharis known as Birchos Hashachar.

Birchos Haschachar are the Brachos by which we begin Tefilas Shacharis. The obligation to recite those Brachos is already found in the Gemara. The Gemara provides that we are to recite each Bracha as we perform the task associated with that Bracha. For example, upon hearing the rooster crowing, we recite the Bracha of **אֲשֶׁר נָתַן לְשִׁכּוּי בִּינָה לְהַבְחִין בֵּין יוֹם וּבֵין לַיְלָה**; who gave the rooster the ability to distinguish between day and night. Upon opening our eyes, we recite the Bracha of **פּוֹקֵחַ עֵינַיִם** who opens the eyes of the blind.

It is our current practice not to recite those Brachos until we begin Tefilas Shacharis. Why do we not follow the instructions found in the Gemara? Two reasons are given. The first reason: because our hands become unclean when we sleep. As a result we may not recite any of those Brachos until we wash our hands. A second reason: through much of Jewish history, few had access to a written Siddur. Those who did not own a Siddur and who could not recite the Brachos of Birchos Haschachar from memory needed to hear the Brachos recited by the prayer leader in synagogue and to answer Amen to each Bracha in order to fulfill their obligation to recite Birchos Hashachar. This second reason may have been the primary force behind our Sages transferring the recital of Birchos Haschachar to the Tefilas Shacharis.

Perhaps I can suggest a more meaningful explanation. Each of the Brachos in Birchos Haschachar represents an acknowledgement that G-d is involved in the mundane acts that we perform each day. That is a unique feature of Jewish prayer. As a rule, most people rarely consider thanking G-d for helping them perform everyday activities. Even in Tanach we do not find the Jewish people acknowledging acts of G-d unless G-d performed an extraordinary act such as the Splitting of the Sea. Chazal recognized that most people do not experience that kind of interaction with G-d during their lifetimes. As a result, they could grow distant from G-d by waiting for G-d to perform such extraordinary acts on their behalf. Chazal may have moved Birchos Hachaschar to Tefilas Shacharis so as to cause those Brachos to become public pronouncements, reminders that we encounter G-d throughout the day and particularly when we perform everyday activities. The fact that we open our eyes after sleeping; that we have clothes to wear or that we stand erect are all gifts from G-d. That theme continues in the Bracha of Baruch Sh'Amar. Baruch Sh'Amar opens with the words: Baruch Sh'Amar V'haya Ha'Olam. G-d said and the world was created. Chazal wanted us to also consider the reverse: G-d can say and the world is no more.

The fact that G-d is involved in all our activities is also brought forth in the verse that we

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recite before beginning Shemona Esrei: Hashem Sifasei Tiftach Oo'Phi Yagid Tehilasecha. G-d open my lips and my mouth will speak Your praises. In that statement we acknowledge that we rely on G-d to open our mouths so that we may praise Him. If G-d did not want us to open our mouths, our mouths would remain shut.

Is that theme within Birchos Haschachar consist with the three Brachos that we recite in which we make negative statements: that G-d did not make me a non-Jew; that G-d did not make me a slave and that G-d did not make me a woman. Let me add one more that is found in early versions of these Brachos: that G-d did not make me an animal. These Brachos may be among the most misunderstood Brachos found in Jewish liturgy. The Brachos do not represent sexist or racist attitudes. They are statements about our relationship with G-d that results from the performance of Mitzvos. In reciting those Brachos I acknowledge that as a male Jew I have greater responsibility for the performance of Mitzvos than the other groups named. Those groups are listed in reverse order of responsibility. The three Brachos begin with the responsibility of non-Jews to perform Mitzvos. They are commanded to observe only the seven Noahide laws. I thank G-d that I observe more than the seven Noahide laws. The next Bracha concerns the responsibility to observe Mitzvos of a non-Jewish slave who works for a Jewish master. He is required to observe the seven Noahide laws and several more. I thank G-d that I observe more Mitzvos than that individual. The next Bracha concerns the responsibility of women to perform Mitzvos. They are commanded to observe all the negative commandments and all the positive commandments other than those that are time bound. I thank G-d that I am required to observe all the negative and all the positive Mitzvos. What those Brachos share with the other Birchos Haschachar is the acknowledgement of a mundane act; in the case of these three Brachos, it is the accident of our birth.

You may be wondering: why those Brachos were composed as negative statements; why do we not simply make one positive statement acknowledging that G-d made me a Jewish male, *שעשני איש יהודי*? In truth, we do find some early versions of the Siddur that contained such a Bracha but that practice was not widely accepted. Why not? Perhaps it has to do with self-image. Acknowledging who I am does not remind me of who I am not. In other words, if every day I were to state that I was born a male Jew, I would eventually look myself in the mirror and say: no kidding. I would forget who I am not. I need to state who I am not in order to appreciate who I am.