

## The Difference between Blessing (*bracha*) and Prayer (*tefilah*)

### What is a Bracha?

**On the most basic level, a bracha is a means of recognizing the good that God has given to us.** As the Talmud<sup>2</sup> states, the entire world belongs to God, who created everything, and partaking in His creation without consent would be tantamount to stealing. When we acknowledge that our food comes from God – i.e. we say a bracha – God grants us permission to partake in the world's pleasures. This fulfills the purpose of existence: To recognize God and come close to Him.

Once we have been satiated, we again bless God, expressing our appreciation for what He has given us.<sup>3</sup>

So, first and foremost, a bracha is a "please" and a "thank you" to the Creator for the sustenance and pleasure He has bestowed upon us.

The Midrash<sup>4</sup> relates that Abraham's tent was pitched in the middle of an intercity highway, and open on all four sides so that any traveler was welcome to a royal feast. Inevitably, at the end of the meal, the grateful guests would want to thank Abraham. "It's not me who you should be thanking," Abraham replied. "God provides our food and sustains us moment by moment. To Him we should give thanks!" Those who balked at the idea of thanking God were offered an alternative: Pay full price for the meal. Considering the high price for a fabulous meal in the desert, Abraham succeeded in inspiring even the skeptics to "give God a try."

### Source of All Blessing

Yet the essence of a bracha goes beyond mere manners. This is evident from the text of the bracha itself. Every bracha begins with the phrase "*Baruch Ata Adonai*" – "Blessed are You, God." This expresses our will that God should be blessed.

Many commentators, however, take issue with this translation, because of its implicit philosophical difficulty. How can man bestow blessing upon God, who is lacking nothing, who created all existence, and has infinite ability and power?! What could God possibly need from man, a mere creation?<sup>5</sup>

These commentators therefore explain "*Baruch Ata Ado-nai*" as a statement of recognition: "You, God, are the *Source* of all blessing."<sup>6</sup> In this way, a bracha serves as a humbling reminder that it is not our "own strength that brought this prosperity" (Deut. 8:17). Rather, we express our dependence on God, acknowledging that He is the source from which our good has come.<sup>7</sup>

This concept is reflected in the word *bracha* which shares a root with the word *berech*, meaning "knee."<sup>8</sup> In reciting a bracha, we "bend our knees" to God, so to speak, bowing in recognition of our need for, and in our appreciation of, His kindness.

### **The Power of a Bracha**

Another word that shares a common root with bracha is *breicha*, which means "wellspring."<sup>9</sup>

This alludes to the fact that reciting a bracha opens a wellspring of blessing that flows down from the heavens. This theme is hinted in the root letters of the word "bracha" – *bet, reish, chaf* – whose numerical values are 2, 20 and 200. While the number one signifies the minimal amount of anything, two begins the series of multiplicity. The word bracha is made up of all the "two's," hinting to the power of a bracha to bring additional good into the world.<sup>10</sup>

There is an interesting halacha that one should have bread on the table when reciting Birkat Hamazon (Grace After Meals).<sup>11</sup> One reason given for this is that God's blessing always manifests itself on something that already exists; if there would be no bread on the table, there would be no "receptacle" for God's blessing.<sup>12</sup> So we see that even as we are reciting a bracha, we are simultaneously receiving God's blessing of increased prosperity. A bracha, therefore, is a key to open the flow of God's blessing into the world.<sup>13</sup>

In this regard, one who neglects to say a bracha is considered as having stolen not only from God, but also from the Jewish people,<sup>14</sup> and ultimately all of humanity, having denied them an opportunity to receive God's blessing.

### **Holy Sparks**

Understanding the meaning behind blessings and the power they possess can transform the mundane act of eating into a deeply spiritual experience. Before

biting into an apple, we thank God for making the apple, thus making the physical act of eating into a holy act. And in doing so, we elevate ourselves from the level of "animal behavior" to the unique and lofty level of "human being."<sup>18</sup>

The Torah says: Man does not live by bread alone, but rather on the word of God.<sup>19</sup> The kabbalists cite this verse to show that food is more than just nourishment for the body. There are also "sparks of holiness" contained in food, and when we eat that food in an appropriate way (i.e. kosher food, and saying a bracha), the holiness in that food is unlocked and nourishes the soul. This is crucial to our overall health, because "Man does not live by bread alone."<sup>20</sup>

Just as food helps the soul connect to the body (because without food, eventually the soul will separate from the body), brachot connect the soul to the Infinite. The kabbalists explain that the mouth is where the soul fuses with the body, which is why food goes in there and why brachot are spoken there – as they maintain the soul's connection to the Infinite.<sup>21</sup>

### **A Life of Praise**

The material world presents us with two choices: to enjoy it as a gourmet (spiritually) or as a glutton (materially). To enjoy it only in itself, or to use the aesthetic experience to leap toward transcendental awareness. The bracha is a user-friendly method for elevating the aesthetic experience into the wow! that every moment of life can and should be.<sup>22</sup>

Maimonides codifies the laws of brachot with the mitzvot that bring one to love of God. Every blessing expresses our yearning to connect with God. A true story is told that illustrates this idea:

"One time, a chassidic rebbe, Rabbi Aaron from Karlin, took an apple in his hand, and his student took an apple as well. Each of the men said a bracha and began to eat. When they were finished, the rebbe said to his student:

"Do you know the difference between you and me? You were hungry and wanted to eat an apple. But to do so, you first needed to say a bracha. In my case, I looked around at the beauty of our world and desperately wanted to call out in praise of God. Since our Sages made brachot the context to praise God, I needed to take an apple. In other words, you said a bracha to eat the apple, and I ate the apple to say a bracha!"<sup>23</sup>

## What Is Tefillah?

Prayer – in Hebrew, Tefillah, and in Yiddish, davening – is the pulse and heartbeat of Jewish spiritual life. Each turn of the daily, weekly, and yearly cycle is accompanied by specific Jewish prayers that set the tone of religious practice for the individual and the community.

The process of praising God and asking for His help is included in major occasions like marriage and holidays, as well as the most mundane daily activities, adding daily meaning and structure to all life events.

Our daily prayers trace their roots back to our Biblical forefathers. When we pray, we step into this ancient relationship, an uninterrupted chain of communication between humanity and God. Although it is permissible to pray in whatever language one understands, there is special significance attached to saying the prayers in their original Hebrew.

## What Does “Tefillah” Mean?

Tefillah (Heb. תפילה; te-feel-ah) is the Hebrew word for prayer. The word itself contains a range of meanings. The Hebrew root פלל connotes “executing judgement” (Exodus 21:22) or “thinking” (Genesis 48:11). In this sense, the word ללהתפלל, to pray, may also refer to a process of accounting or contemplation.

The Mitzvah of Tefillah: Is Prayer a Biblical Command?

Even though the Bible is full of stories that involve prayer, nowhere is there an explicit commandment that says, “Thou shalt pray.” But, in the Talmud (Ta’anit 2a) the Rabbis identify the root of this mitzvah in the following passage:

“To love Hashem your God, and to serve Him with all your heart” (Deuteronomy 10:12).

What is the service that uses the heart? It must be prayer.

Based on this statement, Maimonides writes (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Prayer, 1:1) that there is a commandment from the Torah to pray every day. However, the exact timing and substance of those prayers were instituted later by the Rabbis.

But, Nachmanides, his rabbinic sparring partner, takes him to task for this. According to Nachmanides, the origin of prayer is not a mitzvah at all... it's a gift.

He writes (Hasagot HaRamban al Sefer Hamitzvot, Aseh 5):

“Certainly, the basic matter of prayer is not an obligation at all. Rather, it stems from the Blessed Creator’s kindness towards us, that He listens to us and responds when we call to Him.”

This view posits prayer as a fundamental gift of God’s Creation. God willingly extends Himself to humanity to hear and answer prayer. This touches on the Divine kindness (chesed) that underlies our very ability to pray. It makes prayer first and foremost, a loving invitation from our Creator.

### **How do I do it?**

Anytime you share whatever is on your heart with your Creator—whether praising, blessing, kvetching or requesting—you are davening. It could happen at any time, at any place, as long as it comes from the heart’s genuine concerns and the mind’s awareness of a higher presence.

Traditionally, aside from speaking to G-d whenever they feel the need, Jews daven three times a day—and, whenever possible, together. When Jews were exiled to Babylon, the Men of the Great Assembly saw that the younger generation wanted to speak to G-d as they had seen their fathers and mothers do but could not find the words. They then institutionalized this raising/blessing/kvetching/requesting into a formal liturgy.

### **Who do I do it with?**

Although tefillah expresses a person’s most intimate concerns, a Jew generally communes with G-d communally. Oneness below is the best way to get the attention of the Oneness Above.

### **Why not just meditate?**

You can’t commune with someone you don’t know, so *knowing G-d* is an integral part of tefillah. The Talmud tells us of those who would meditate for an hour before tefillah. The Code of Jewish Law prescribes pondering “the greatness of G-d and the smallness of man” before every tefillah.

Nevertheless, the halachic consensus is that the mouth must be engaged as well.

Two reasons:

1. Speaking the words out loud helps focus your attention.
2. A human being is principally a speaking being. Tefillah brings the ability to speak of that being closer to G-d. If you lift up your heart and mind but leave behind your words, you've effectively left behind the human being.

There are three daily prayers in Judaism that take place every morning, afternoon, and evening:

- Shacharit – morning prayers
- Mincha – afternoon prayers
- Maariv/Arvit – evening prayers
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### **The reason for prayer**

We human beings don't really pray to have our needs met; we have needs in order that we pray. This is how we remind ourselves that God exists; this is how we build a relationship with Him.

The shortest prayer recorded in the Bible is the prayer of Moses when he discovered that his beloved sister Miriam has been afflicted with leprosy. He cries out to God from the depths of his being: "Please, Lord, heal her now."

His prayer is as searing as it is simple, and it captures his anguish and his complete faith in God that his prayer can and will be answered. And it is.

One of the most renowned of the Hassidic masters, Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, advocated finding a secluded place for prayer, and there trying to address God from the heart, not worrying too much about the words at first:

*"As often as you can, take a trip out to the fields to pray. All the grasses will join you. They will enter your prayers and give you strength - when no words come, do not despair. Come back day after day to your secluded spot and wait. Just wanting to speak to God is in itself a very great thing. Even if all you can say to God is 'Help!' it is still good. Repeat this over and over again, until God opens your lips and words begin to flow from your heart."*

Rebbe Nachman's message is as simple as it is powerful: Be real before God and He will always meet you half-way.

### **Why Pray?**

What changes through prayer is not the "mind" of the Almighty. What changes through prayer is us. By recognizing the source of all of our blessings - our sustenance, our health, our success, our very existence - we bring ourselves to a higher spiritual level. We elevate ourselves by drawing closer to the Almighty. And through this act of elevation, we become more "fitting" to receive those things we've prayed so hard for. In having grown through prayer, we can now use our gifts more properly to perfect ourselves and the world around us.

Prayer is most effective when combined with effort. We live in a world of "doing." Prayer helps us to focus on what we need to do in order to succeed. Only for a very holy individual, prayer alone might be sufficient.

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### **Prayer for Good Health**

Blessed are You, the Lord our God,  
King of the Universe,  
Who fashioned man with wisdom  
And created within him many openings and cavities.  
It is obvious and known before Your Throne of Glory  
That if but one of them were to be ruptured,  
Or but one of them were to be blocked  
It would be impossible to survive and stand before You.  
In the merit of my appreciation for Your wondrous works,  
May You grant me good health and long life.

### **Prayer for the Sick**

Almighty, Master of the Universe,  
my God and the God of my forefathers:  
May it be Your Will that You speedily send  
a complete recovery from Heaven,  
a healing of the body and a  
healing of the spirit to:

[*the name of the person*]  
 the son/daughter of  
 [*the person's mother's name*]  
 amongst all of the sick of  
 the Children of Israel.

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### **Prayer for Livelihood**

It is You, the Lord our G-d,  
 Who nourishes, sustains, and supports  
 every living creature.  
 Provide me with my allotment of bread,  
 and bring forth food for me  
 and all members of my household  
 before I have need for it.  
 May we be supported  
 in contentment but not in pain, in a  
 permissible but not a forbidden manner,  
 in honor but not in disgrace,  
 for life and for peace.  
 May we be supported  
 from the flow of blessing and success,  
 and from the flow of the Heavenly spring,  
 so that I will be able to do Your will,  
 engage in Your Torah,  
 and fulfill Your commandments.  
 Make me not dependent on the generosity of other people.  
 And may there be fulfilled in me the verse that states, "You open up Your hand  
 and satisfy the desire of every living thing" (Psalms 145:16).  
 And also the verse that states,  
 "Cast Your burden upon God  
 and He will support you" (Psalms 55:23).

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### **A Personal Request**

Almighty, Master of the Universe,  
 Who has given me my life, my health,  
 my family, my friends, and  
 my potential to develop as a human being -



to grow and to come close to You,  
Please -

***(ask here for your every need)***

Thank you, Almighty,  
for this and for everything  
that You have given me.

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### **Prayer of Gratitude**

#### **Psalm 100**

Call out to the Almighty  
Everyone on earth!  
Serve God with gladness.  
Come before Him with joyous song!  
Know that the Almighty, He is God.  
It is He who made us and we are His,  
His nation and the sheep of His pasture.  
Enter His gates with thanksgiving.  
Enter His courts with praise.  
Give thanks to Him, bless His name.  
The Almighty is good.  
His loving-kindness endures forever.  
And His faithfulness continues  
From generation to generation.

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### **Prayer for Easy Birth**

Master of the Universe, I thank You for Your graciousness in granting this pregnancy.

May it be Your will, O G-d, our G-d, and G-d of our fathers, that You have mercy upon all pregnant women of Your nation that are giving birth, and specifically upon:

***(the woman's name and her mother's name).***

Let no sickness or blemish affect the mother. At the time that she is giving birth, may You speed the labor, so she may give birth easily and without any pain or suffering.

In the merit of our holy matriarchs - Sarah, Rivka, Rachel and Leah - may the baby be complete in all his limbs and senses. May the baby come forth to a good and peaceful life, at a good time and with good fortune.

May she deliver the placenta in its proper time, and may she be healthy and well for Your service.

May You heed our prayers, and answer our beseeching. For You are merciful and You hear the prayers of every mouth. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing before You, O G-d, my Rock and my Redeemer.

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### **Prayer for a Safe Journey**

May it be Your will, God, that You lead us toward peace, and make us reach our desired destination in life, gladness and peace.

May you rescue us from the hand of every foe, ambush, bandits and evil animals along the way, and from all manner of punishments that assemble to come to earth.

May you send blessing in our every handiwork, and grant us grace, kindness and mercy in Your eyes and in the eyes of all who see us.

May you hear the sound of our supplication  
Because You are God who hears prayers.

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**Blessings channel energy. They bring good into the world.**

**Prayer can change destiny.**