

Brachot, Blessings – traditionally a Jew is to say 100 brachot each day. That may sound like a lot blessings, but if you do the shaharit service in the morning, mincha in the afternoon and mariv in the evening and recite the appropriate brachot before eating and then Birkat Hamazon after meals, you are most of the way to your daily goal of 100 brachot. So why did the rabbis want us to recite 100 brachot a day? In a word – gratitude. Our tradition seeks to impart to us a world view that we should be thankful for everything that we have, that everything comes from God. Consequently, every time we are going to enjoy something, is an opportunity to say a bracha, showing our gratitude to God for the bounty we are about to partake. Pick up an apple, say the bracha for fruit and bite in; suddenly rather than just a snack, it is a moment filled with *Kedusha*/holiness.

There are two types of brachot those that we say over things we enjoy and those that are mitzvot. So how do you know which one is which? Well, every bracha begins the same way, *Baruch ata Adonai, Eloheynu Melekh Haolam*, Praised are You Adonai our God, who rules the universe; however, if we are doing a mitzvah then the words, “*asher kidshanu b’mitzvotav vitzivanu*, instilling in us the holiness of mitzvot by commanding us” are added. When we light Shabbat or Festival candles this is the type of bracha that we use; when we put on talit or tefilin it is a bracha shel mitzvah/a blessing for a mitzvah. So just look for the phrase, if it’s there, then it’s a mitzvah; if not, then it’s just a bracha thank God for something that you enjoy.

There are actually many different enjoyment brachot used for all sorts of different occasions. There are those that we say frequently and others that we say rarely. There is a blessing for fruit and one for veggies, another for baked goods and a generic blessing for most everything else. There are the two special food blessings of course, *borey pore hagafen* for grape wine or juice; make sure that you don't pick up a bottle of cherry or blackberry kosher wine for this blessing, different fruit, different blessing. And then there is the super bracha, the *motzi* over bread, that covers everything else in the meal, once you've said the *motzi*, you are covered. So in fact, if you are trying to get to your 100 brachot for the day saying the *motzi* is not helpful. There is a Sephardic tradition that at the Shabbat Kiddish, you don't have bread and a *motzi*, but rather you say individual brachot over everything you eat and drink. If you are not sure what bracha to say these days, you can go online and google brachot and find websites devoted to the proper bracha for every food. Most are rather straight forward, but some surprise us – for example, bananas get the vegetable not the fruit blessing.

Brachot are not limited to the foods we eat, there are brachot related to sights, sounds & smells too. Have you ever been to a havdalah ceremony? We say *borey prei hagafen*, thanking God as the creator of the fruit of the vine for the wine or grape juice that we drink; we say *borey miney bisamim*, thanking God for creating fragrant spices that we smell; and we say *borey mi'orey ha'aish*, thanking God for creating the light of fire. Historically, the spices came from burning incense that could not be used on Shabbat, but could be brought after Shabbat was over and the early rabbis taught that we have an extra soul that lives in heaven that enters

us on Shabbat, but leaves at havdalah time and so the spices are like smelling salts to revive us as we become faint when our extra soul departs. The flame reminds us of the midrash, the legend, that God gave fire to Adam & Eve when they were evicted from the Garden of Eden which was on a Saturday night after Shabbat. There is a fourth bracha in havdalah, *hamavdil ben kodesh lichol*, thanking God for differentiating the holy from the secular; an intellectual bracha as it were.

Most of us associate brachot with the synagogue and services, but we need not limit ourselves thusly. Saying brachot is a mindset, you can begin to look for opportunities to say brachot. You'll find them everywhere. I still remember clearly the time when my children were young and frightened by a thunder storm; Dassy took them to the sliding glass door to the back yard and taught them the bracha upon hearing thunder – *shekocho ugivurato maley olam*/acknowledging God as the one whose power and might fill the universe. It gave them something to do when there was thunder and it was calming for them to think that it was provided by God.

In most siddurim you can find a section, often in the back, that lists brachot for various occasions. There is a bracha for hearing good news and one for hearing bad news – *hatov vihametiv*/thanking God as the creator of all that is good, which we rarely say, but should more often; and *dayan ha'emet*/recognizing God as the true Judge – it familiar to anyone who has lost a loved one; it's what we say at a

funeral. There are brachot for various smells of nature – trees, shrubs, plants, herbs, fruits, perfumes and oils.

There are brachot associated with actions too – one for going to Israel and one for being rescued or being in a place where your ancestors were miraculously rescued. There is also a bracha to be said after using the bathroom, the *asher yatzar*, which thanks God for making our bodies in wondrous ways; after all if anything went wrong, we'd be in pretty bad shape rather quickly, so we are thankful when everything works properly.

Most of us are familiar with the bracha recited when doing something new, the *shehechyanu*, which was recited tonight when we said Kol Nidre. It is said the first time you are using something like a new car, or doing something like celebrating a festival or eating something new – there is a tradition that many of us follow of eating a new fruit at the start of the second day of Rosh Hashanah to give us an extra reason to say the *shehechyanu* on the second day – this year I had star fruit and dragon fruit.

The most powerful of all our senses is sight and there are many many brachot related to seeing. There is a bracha for seeing trees bloom for the first time each year, there is a bracha for seeing a beautiful creature and one for seeing an unusual creature. There is one for seeing a head of state and one for seeing a scholar and one for seeing a Torah scholar; there is one that I like for seeing a

friend that you have not seen for a long time (at least a year) and one for seeing a friend who has recovered from a serious illness.

One of my favorite brachot is for seeing a rainbow – first of all, who besides Mr. Monk, doesn't like a rainbow? It is an interesting bracha, you say, *zocher habrit vine'eman bevrito vikayam bima'amaro*, it's a mouthful, it thanks God as the one who faithfully recalls the covenant by keeping the divine promise. To understand this one you need to know your Bible. If you remember the Noah story, he builds an Ark, it rains for 40 days and 40 nights all life on earth is destroyed other than that which is on the Ark. After the waters recede God makes a covenant with Noah and all the earth that never again will waters flood the earth and destroy all life and the rainbow is the sign of that covenant. So when you see a rainbow, stop and admire its beauty and then think of the Torah and God's covenant and the bracha that goes with it.

There is a bracha for seeing the ocean and one for the various wonders of nature – lighting, shooting stars, vast deserts, high mountains, or a spectacular sunrise or sunset. There are brachot that we say all the time and brachot that we say rarely. This year we have the opportunity to say one of the rarest of brachot – Birkat HaChamah, the blessing of the sun, it is only said once every 28 years.

The Jewish calendar is complicated. We have a luni-solar calendar, meaning that it is based on both the moon and the sun. A lunar year is 354 days long, like the

Muslims use. Since it is 11 days shorter than a solar year, the months appear to float backwards from year to year. So the famous month of Ramadan when Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset was in September this year, but will start in August next year. However, our calendar requires us to celebrate Rosh Hashanah in the fall and Pesach in the spring, so we have a 19 year cycle were we add a leap month seven times – in years 3, 6, 8, 11, 14, 17 & 19. According to the counting this last year was year 11 of 304th cycle since creation. This is known as the Machzor Hakatan – the small cycle. The extra month we added last spring is what makes Rosh Hashanah feel late this year and why it seemed early last year.

However, there is also a Machzor Hagadol – the great cycle. The rabbis of the Talmud (Brachot 59b) calculated that every 28 years the sun would be back in the very spot where it began at creation and that we should celebrate this fact. There are varying rabbinic traditions about creation, some put creation in the fall – after all we just sang *Hayom Harat Olam*, today is the birthday of the world during shofar blowing on Rosh Hashanah; but in the Torah Rosh Hashanah is the first day of the seventh month - creation having taken place in the springtime! So the Machzor Hagadol is based on the idea that creation took place in the spring and the sun was created at the spring equinox on the fourth day of creation i.e. a Wednesday. Birkat Hachamah was last observed on April 8, 1981; do you remember what you were doing then? Did you bless the sun? Have you done the calculation yet? Do you know when the next one takes place? It will next be observed on Wednesday, April 8, 2009 at sunrise - 6:28 AM. It will be just days after the NCAA Final Four concludes and just before NASA is scheduled to launch

its next mission searching for extrasolar planets in the Milky Way, but most significantly for us it is Erev Pesach i.e. the First Seder is that night. It is the day when all first born children come to the synagogue to participate in a Siyyum/study session to avoid the fast of the firstborn. So this year we're going to have to get up a little earlier, so that we can welcome the sun as it rises and we can bless it. The blessing we will say is *oseh ma'ase biraysheet*, thanking God for renewing the work of creation. We will gather together and watch the sun rise and recite not only this bracha, but the entire seder or order for Birkat Hachamah. We will thank God for giving us the sun that we see everyday, but take for granted and ignore most of the time. The sun gives us heat and light that we need to survive. It provides the gravity that keeps everything in place; it is the source of energy for our solar system; without the sun there would be no life on earth. So let's take a moment to appreciate the sun. Besides, if you miss it, you'll have to wait until April 2037 for it to happen again; so I suggest that we get it right. I hope to be around for the next one too, but you never know.

It's not only the sun that we take for granted, we often take everything around us for granted, we are so absorbed with life that we can forget to live it. We need special moments like Birkat Hachamah and Yom Kippur for that matter to remind us to stop and smell the roses – of course, we have to remember to say the appropriate bracha for smelling the roses! Our lives are very hectic, we rush everywhere. We need Shabbat and Chagim to slow us down, to give us breathing room. If you stop breathing, you stop living; you can extend the metaphor for yourself.

So why do we need bother with brachot? Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught, “The insights of wonder must be constantly kept alive. Since there is a need for daily wonder, there is a need for daily worship.... This is one of the goals of the Jewish way of living; to experience commonplace deeds as spiritual adventures, to feel the hidden love and wisdom in all things.”

May each of us find opportunities to feel the hidden love and wisdom in all things; I invite you to join me in making the commonplace a spiritual adventure. Cherish life, life it fully, appreciate what you have and give thanks to God for all of it.

May you have an easy fast/wishing you a tzom kal – and may you be inscribed and sealed in the Book of Life for a Good Year – Gemar Hatima Tova.