YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Structure of and Meaning of the Daily Prayer**

**By Rav Ezra Bick**

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This week’s shiurim are dedicated in memory of   
Moshe Eliezer Maeir Stillman z”l   
by Isaac Ely Stillman

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**Shiur #01: *Birkot Ha-shachar***

**Introduction: *Seder Ha-tefilla***

In this course, we will try to understand the different parts of what constitutes the *seder tefilla*, the order of the prayers. On the one hand, this is the most well-known text in Judaism. On the other hand, precisely because most observant Jews begin to recite the prayers before they can read and then never examine the *seder tefilla* as adults, its deeper meaning and the significance of its structure and order (the word “*seder*” means order) is neglected and largely unexplored. The order of prayers was carefully constructed by the Sages, and it consists of different parts, based on different obligations and fulfillments, which are crafted together to form the unity with which we are familiar. We are going to try to analyze each part, understand its purpose and role, and begin to clarify the meaning of the text as well.

When the Sages speak about *tefilla*, often the reference is specifically to the *Amida*. The Rambam as well defines the obligation to pray as being fulfilled by the recitation of the *Amida*. We are examining a broader concept, the *seder tefilla*, which consists of sections which in one way or another have become part of the daily recitation and therefore have been integrated in one order of prayer. For instance, *keriat Shema* is, in essence, a separate obligation from that of prayer, yet the Sages placed it directly before the *Amida* and connected the two through the principle of *semikhat geula le-tefilla*. Different levels of integration will bring us back to the beginning of the *siddur*, and therefore we begin our discussion today with the section known as *birkot ha-shachar*, the morning benedictions, beginning with *ha-noten la-sekhvi vina* (Who gives the rooster intelligence).

***Birkot Ha-shachar* and the morning routine**

The source for the morning benedictions is the gemara in *Berakhot* 60b. The gemara presents a list of statements, each beginning with the formula “When one [does a particular activity],” followed by the instruction to recite a blessing:

When one hears the sound of the rooster, he should say: “Blessed He who gave the rooster the intelligence to distinguish between day and night.”

When one opens one's eyes, he should say: “Blessed He who gives sight to the blind….” When one washes his face, he should say: “Blessed He who removes the bonds of sleep from my eyes…”

In actuality, the first item on this list is, “When one goes to sleep on his bed, he recites *shema* and says: ‘Blessed He who causes the bonds of sleep to fall on my eyes….’” Within the list is also included the blessings on *tallit* and *tefillin*. On the other hand, the list that we find in the *siddur* includes three additional blessings taken from *Menachot* 43b, as well as one (*ha-noten la-ya'ef koach*) which has no Talmudic source at all. For the time being, we shall ignore these discrepancies and examine the list as a unit.

The language of the *Gemara* seems to present these blessings as responses to particular events. In fact, most of the chapter in *Berakhot* in which this passage is found deals with what is known as *birkot ha-re’iya*, blessings recited after seeing some particular phenomenon. Examples of such blessings include those recited when witnessing lightning, seeing natural wonders, unusual creatures, or when eating a new fruit. (The chapter is aptly known as *Perek Ha-ro’eh*). It would be natural to view the *birkot hashachar* in the same light. In fact, the Rambam (and others) rules that these blessings must be recited only immediately after experiencing the particular phenomenon which triggers them according to the list. This position has two ramifications for practical halakha. First, one who has not experienced the phenomenon – for instance, one who has not heard the crow of the rooster – does not recite a blessing at all. Secondly, the blessing should be recited immediately, more or less, after the experience, and not as a bunch when one begins to pray (*Hilkhot Tefilla* 7:4-9). The Meiri and other *Rishonim* disagree, stating that the blessings are not responses to specific experiences, but were enacted in response to “the way of the world” (Meiri, *Berakhot* 60b). The Rama codifies the latter opinion, stating that “the blessing is not on his experience; rather we bless God who satisfies the necessities of the world. That is the custom and one should not deviate” (*Orach Chayyim* 46:8).

**The Rambam’s position**

On first glance, the Rambam seems to be treating *birkot ha-shachar* as belonging to the general class of *birkot ha-re'iya*, blessings recited in response to special occurrences, places, sights or other phenomenon. In fact, these blessings are the predominant concern of *Perek Ha-ro’eh*. If *birkot ha-shachar* are indeed considered *birkot ha-re’iya*, they are not actually part of the daily prayer, even though in the natural course of things they are engendered every morning. In principle, the only difference between *ha-noten la-sechvi vina* and *oseh ma’aseh bereishit* (Who makes the works of Creation – recited upon witnessing lightning) is that the rooster crows every morning whereas lightning is relatively infrequent. In halakhic terms, the cause (*mechayev*) of the obligation in the Rambam's opinion is the occurrence, the event. The Meiri's opinion, on the other hand, implies that the **day** is the *mechayev.* A new day obligates one to recite a series of blessings, and accordingly we would be justified to view the *birkot ha-shachar* as the beginning of the daily prayer, or more properly as the beginning of the daily “order of prayer” – in other words, of the *siddur*.

I think, however, that this misrepresents the opinion of the Rambam. It is true that the Rambam rules that a blessing cannot be recited unless there is a specific event that triggers it. But the context of these blessings is essentially different than that of the usual *birkot ha-re'iya*.

Firstly, consider the Rambam's system of classification. There is a separate section of the Rambam’s *Mishneh Torah* entitled “*Hilkhot Berakhot*,” in which the Rambam not only codifies general laws of blessings, but also lists the blessings that are recited over events. After detailing the laws of *birkat ha-mazon*, the Rambam begins the tenth chapter of *Hilkhot Berakhot* by stating:

The Sages enacted many other blessings and recitations… as praise and thanksgiving to God… and these are they: One who builds a new house or buys new utensils… says “Blessed are You… who has given us life and sustained us [*she-hecheyanu ve-kiyemanu*]*…* One who sees his friend after thirty days says “Who has given us life…,” and if [he sees his friend] after twelve months he says “Blessed are You, God, who revives the dead.” One who hears good tidings says, “Blessed are You… who is good and does good.” If he heard bad tidings, he says, “Blessed is the true judge.” (*Hilkhot Berakhot* 10:1-3)

This continues for twenty-six sections, concluding:

The principle of the matter is: One should always beseech concerning the future and plead for mercy, and one should give thanks for the past, and thank and praise as well as he can; and the more one thanks God and praises him constantly, the more praiseworthy it is.

The Rambam here lists dozens of blessings, clearly establishing the character and tone of *Hilkhot Berakhot*. *Hilkhot Tefilla*, on the other hand, deals not with blessings, but with prayer. By creating two separate sections of halakhot, the Rambam clearly distinguishes between prayer and general blessings. Nonetheless, the blessings of *birkot ha-shachar* are found in *Hilkhot Tefilla* and not in *Hilkhot Berakhot*. This indicates that despite the connection to specific events, these blessings are part of the daily prayer and not merely a reaction to an event.

Secondly, the Rambam makes this point explicitly. Chapter 7 in *Hilkhot Tefilla*, which lists these blessings, comes after an extensive discussion of the daily recitation of the *Amida*, and begins: “When the Sages enacted the recitation of these prayers [*shacharit*, *mincha* and *arvit*], they enacted other blessings to be recited every day, and these are they…” The Rambam then proceeds to list the *birkot ha-shachar*, quoting *Berakhot* 60b. These blessings are an extension of the enactment to pray three times daily and basically part of the same process. Furthermore, the blessings were intended to be recited daily, "every day." It is clear that the Rambam views the morning blessings as part and parcel of the obligation to pray, and not as part of the obligation to “give thanks for the past, and thank and praise as well as he can.”

This should be obvious from the context of these blessings as well. The regular *birkot ha-re'iya* are responses to unusual – even extraordinary – events which impinge on our daily routine, and therefore require a special response. Overwhelming natural events, special good news, once-a-year occasions – all these require one to give expression to his response whereby he recognizes the presence of God. It is not surprising that the halakha generally limits the frequency of these blessings. The blessing on viewing the “great sea,” for instance, is not recited if one has already recited the blessing in the last thirty days. The reason is that these blessings are **responses**, and they are based on the natural presence of the emotional response in the observer. The events of *birkot ha-shachar* – when one opens one's eyes, when one stretches one's limbs, when one gets dressed, when one covers one's head, when one stands, when one tightens one's belt, etc., are all, practically speaking, trivial. It is not just that they are not unusual; they are the epitome of the usual. These are simply the daily occurrences that attend the process of waking up. What is more, they are trivial in another sense. The Sages have broken down the process of beginning the day into minute steps, ones which would normally not demand individual attention. Becoming aware of the light (hearing the rooster), opening one's eyes, placing one's feet on the ground, standing up, dressing, covering one's head, tightening one's belt – these are treated as separate events eliciting separate responses in the form of separate blessings. By the standards of *hilkhot berakhot*, none of these events would engender a blessing – and surely not all them one after another.

It seems clear that according to the Rambam, the genuine focus of *birkot ha-shachar* is that they should be recited daily, in exactly the same way that one should recite the *Amida* daily. The need for specific events mandated by the Rambam should not be understood as the *mechayev* of the blessings, but merely as a condition. It is understood that each of these events will occur in a normal day and the blessings refers to them. If the event is absent, then the blessing cannot be recited, since it is then meaningless. But the point is not to **respond** to a particular event, but to begin the day with a proper recognition of one's place in the world and the contingencies of human existence. Hence, the aim of the Sages is not to tell us how to respond to an imposing human experience, but on the contrary, to draw our attentionto an otherwise overlooked aspect of human existence. The actual event is important because the goal of these blessings is to force us to perceive those events, to pay attention to the minutiae of what it means to begin to be alive and active in the morning. We are not responding to the event; we are focusing on the event and placing it in the context of the creative power of God. The Sages broke down the process of getting up into tiny steps to force us to realize how amazing that process is, and how much God is doing to allow each of us to begin the day. The extreme and exaggerated division of the process of waking up is exactly the point here – the Sages are forcing us to pay minute attention to what otherwise we would totally ignore. In fact, for most of these steps, we would not notice them precisely because we would be barely awake when they took place.

The accepted halakha today is to recite *birkot ha-shachar* in series, often only after beginning the *tefilla* in the synagogue. Nonetheless, I think the point of the Rambam is correct even according to our custom. The truth is that the Rambam follows the exact formulation of the *Gemara* – “When one hears the sound of the rooster, one says… When one opens one's eyes, one says…” The ruling of the Meiri and others, which is the basis for the modern custom, does not divorce the blessing from the event, but only allows one to relate to the general “way of the world” rather than to a specific **experienced** event. This is possible because the blessing is not a response to the event (which would require personal experience of the event), but a directed instruction on how to evaluate the event, and ultimately, how to evaluate and experience being awake, and by extension, alive.

The custom of reciting *birkot ha-shachar* together, as a series, in the synagogue, does have, in my opinion, a negative effect, precisely because it inhibits the attention to the **individual** step of each blessing. All I can suggest in response is that one should recite the blessings slowly, savoring the wonder of each individual step in the process of becoming active in the world, which was the supreme goal of the Sages in instituting these blessings.

**Conclusion**

The basic idea of these blessings is that the Sages viewed the rather mundane passage from sleep to wakefulness as being a nearly miraculous transformation from inertia to activity; it is basically a passage from death to life. No one would naturally pay attention to that transformation because it occurs daily and, more importantly, because it is initial to awareness and not part of it. The initial state before the process – sleep – is unconscious, and one does not begin to pay attention to the conditions of life until one is awake and active. The Sages are trying to draw us back in time, to force us to pay attention to the very first stirrings of a new day and a new life, and to do that in near-slow motion, one step at a time. For indeed, no experience throughout the day can compare to the experience of being able to start a day, to rise and become an active participant in living.[[1]](#footnote-1)

1. The three blessings of *she-lo asani goy*, *she-lo asani eved* and *she-lo asani isha*, do fit in to the framework that we have established, and in fact are not found in *Berakhot*. The Rambam lists them separately as well. This requires a separate discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)