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Refuah Shleima to Aaron Meir Ben Silah

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**Shiur #04: *Berakha Le-Vatala***

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**Introduction**

The Torah encourages us to at times invoke God’s name: “In every place where I cause My name to be mentioned, I will come unto thee and bless you” (*Shemot* 20:21). We are similarly enjoined to take oaths with God’s name: “And by His name you should swear” (*Devarim* 6:13; see Rambam, *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot*, *Mitzvat* *Asei* 7). Furthermore, the Talmud relates that “it was also laid down that greetings should be given in [God's] name, in the same way as it says, ‘And behold Boaz came from Bethlehem and said unto the reapers, ‘The Lord be with you;’ and they answered him, ‘the Lord bless you’” (*Berakhot* 54a).

One should say the actual name of God when reading complete Biblical verses. Regarding one who is the studying Talmud or Halakhic texts, R. Yaakov Emden (1697–1776) writes in his She’eilat Ya’avetz (1:81) that one should pronounce God’s name when it appears in the text. Although many are accustomed not to pronounce God’s name while studying (see Arukh Ha-Shulchan, *OC* 215:2), other disagree and insist that one should pronounce God’s name (Mishna Berura 215:14; see also Iggerot Moshe, *OC* 2:56 and Yechave Da’at 3:13). Similarly, while some are careful not to pronounce God’s name while singing *zemirot* (see Nefesh Ha-Rav, p. 160, citing R. Moshe Soloveitchik; see also Rema 188:7), others pronounce the name of God (R. Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, Halikhot Shlomo, *Tefilla*, ch. 22, nt. 29; see also Magen Avraham 188:11).

While invoking God’s name for greetings, study, *zemirot* etc. may be encouraged, the Talmud interprets the Torah’s warning to “fear God” (*Devarim* 6:13 and 10:20) as avoiding uttering God’s name with no purpose (*Temura* 4b). The Talmud (*Nedarim* 7b) even teaches that one who hears another mention God’s name in vain should place him in excommunication, and one who does not should himself be excommunicated!

This week we will discuss the taking of God’s name in vain while reciting *berakhot*, known as a “*berakha le-vatala*” (a *berakha* said in vain) and a “*berakha* *she-eina tzerikha*” (an unnecessary blessing).

The Prohibition of Reciting a *Berakha Le-Vatala*

As mentioned above, the Talmud (*Temura* 4b) teaches that one may not pronounce God’s name for no purpose. In addition, the *gemara* (*Berakhot* 33a) declares: “Whoever says a blessing which is not necessary transgresses the command of ‘You shall not take [God's name in vain]’ (*Shemot* 20:7).”

The *Rishonim* debate whether this passage should be understood literally – that is, that one who recites a *berakha le-vatala* violates the Biblical prohibition of “You shall not take God’s name in vain” – or whether the prohibition is of Rabbinic origin. Most *Rishonim* (Tosafot, *Rosh Ha-Shana* 33a, s*.v. ha*;Rosh, *Kiddushin* 1:49; *Chinukh*, *mitzva* 410, et. al.) maintain that the prohibition of reciting a *berakha le-vatala* is only *mi-derabbanan*. However, the Rambam (*Hilkhot Berakhot* 1:15) and the Shulchan Arukh (*OC* 215:5) imply that one who recites a blessing in vain violates a Biblical prohibition. (See Eliya Rabba 215:5, who insists that even the Rambam believes that reciting blessing in vain only violates a Rabbinic prohibition.)

This question may lead to a fascinating halakhic ramification. The *Acharonim* discuss a case in which a woman gave birth or miscarried before she was married. After marrying, she gives birth to a son, which her husband believes to be her first son. He therefore expects to perform a *pidyon ha-ben* thirty days after the birth. If she reveals to her husband that this child is not the “first of her womb” due to a previous birth or miscarriage, this may severely strain her relationship with her husband, or her communal reputation. Some *Posekim* (see *Piskei Teshuvot* 206, nt. 104; Yabi’a Omer, *YD* 8:32) suggest that one may employ the principle of *kavod ha-beriot*, which generally sets aside Rabbinic prohibitions (see *Berakhot* 19b, *Shabbat* 81b and 94b), and allow the husband to perform the unnecessary *pidyon ha-ben*, including the recitation of the *berakhot*, instead of revealing the truth.

The Rambam (*Hilkhot Berakhot* 1:15) writes that one should not respond “*amen*” to a blessing recited in vain.

*Berakha She-Eina Tzerikha*

The *Acharonim* distinguish between two categories: a *berakha le-vatala* and a *berakha she-eina tzerikha*. A *berakha le-vatala* refers to a blessing which serves no purpose. For example, if a person recites a blessing but does not eat, or even if one recites the incorrect blessing, he has said a *berakha le-vatala*.

One who recites a “*berakha she-eina tzerikha*,” an “unnecessary blessing,” also violates the Biblical or Rabbinic prohibition of *berakha le-vatala*. For example, if one recites a blessing over food which was already exempted by a previous blessing (Mishna Berura 215:18), over food which was already exempted by bread, over a beverage which was exempted by wine, or over a food which was exempted by the more important part of the meal (*ikkar* and *tafel*), the blessing is called a “*berakha she-eina tzerikha*” – an unnecessary blessing.

The Rosh (*Hilkhot Tefillin* 15) rules that one is not permitted to recite two blessings when one blessing would suffice. He cites the Talmud (*Yoma* 70a), which relates that on Yom Kippur, the *kohen gadol* would read two *parshiyot* from the book of *Vayikra* and then a third *parasha* from the book of *Bamidbar* by heart. The *gemara* explains that the *kohen* did not read from a second *sefer Torah* in order not to cause him to recite an unnecessary blessing over the second reading. Based upon this passage, the Rosh rules that one may not cause the recitation of an unnecessary blessing. However, when there is a specific purpose in reciting numerous blessings, the second blessing is no longer called “unnecessary.”

Some maintain the one may cause the recitation of an unnecessary blessing in order to remove one’s self from doubt. For example, generally when one intends to eat two foods, and one is “*tafel*” (subordinate) to the other (the “*ikkar*”), one says the blessing over the primary food (*Berakhot* 44a). Sometimes, however, one has a doubt whether or not to view one the foods as “tafel” to the other, in which case there would be no need to recite an additional blessing on the *tafel*. Some suggest that one may say blessing on the tafel, and afterwards on the *ikkar*, or say the blessing on the *ikkar* with intention not to exempt the *tafel*, and then recite the second blessing, in order to remove oneself from doubt (see Shulchan Arukh 174:7 and Piskei Teshuvot 212:2 8-9).

Furthermore, the Shelah (*Shabbat*, *Ner Mitzva*, *Inyanei Teillot*, *s,v, ve-katav*) writes that if one is brought fruits to eat during a meal, he should eat them during the meal and not after the meal, which would entail reciting two additional *berakhot* – one before and another afterwards. However, if one causes “unnecessary *berakhot*” in order to recite the “one hundred *berakhot*” that one is obligated to recite each day, this may be permissible. The Magen Avraham (215:6) disagrees.

Similarly, the Shulchan Arukh (*OC* 291:3) rules that if one’s Shabbat lunch lasts until late in the day, he may recite *birkat ha-mazon* and then wash again and say *ha-motzi*, and this will count as one’s *seuda shlishit.*

Correcting a *Berakha Le-Vatala*

The Yerushalmi (*Berakhot* 6:1) relates that one who recites a blessing over food and is then unable to eat the food should say, “*barukh shem kavod* *malkhuto le-olam va-ed*” in order not to mention God’s name in vain. Tosafot (*Berakhot* 39a *s.v. batzar*), based upon this passage, rules that “it is proper to say *barukh shem kavod malkhuto le-olam va-ed* for every *berakha le-vatala*.” Similarly, the Shulchan Arukh (*OC* 206:6) rules that one should say “*barukh shem kavod*” after reciting a *berakha le-vatala*.

The Yerushalmi does not explain why one should say “*barukh shem kavod*” after reciting a *berakha le-vatala*. On the one hand, one might suggest that “since he took God’s name in vain, he should then accept upon himself the yoke of heaven” (Arukh Ha-Shulchan, *OC* 206:16). The Rambam seems to offer a different approach. In *Hilkhot Berakhot* (4:10), he cites the Yerushalmi and rules:

When a person took food in his hand and recited a blessing, but [before he could eat it] it fell from his hand and was burned or washed away by a river, he should take other food and recite another blessing. [This applies] even when the food is of the same species. He should also say, "Blessed be the Name of Him whose glorious kingdom is forever and ever" for the first blessing, so that he will not be considered to have recited a blessing in vain.

Elsewhere (*Hilkhot Shavuot* 12:11; see Kesef Mishna), however, the Rambam seems to extend the Yerushalmi’s principle to any false mention of God’s name:

Therefore, if because of a slip of the tongue, one mentions [God's] name in vain, he should immediately hurry to praise, glorify, and venerate it so that it will not have been mentioned [entirely] in vain. What is implied? If he mentions God's name, he should say: "Blessed be He for all eternity," "He is great and exceedingly praiseworthy," or the like so that it will not have been [mentioned entirely] in vain.

The Rambam apparently maintains that one does not atone for taking God’s name in vain, but rather simply redefines one’s sentence or blessing as a praise of God.

The *Acharonim* differ as to how quickly one must say “*barukh shem* *kavod*.” Seemingly, if “*barukh shem kavod*” is merely an acceptance of the yoke of Heaven in order to repent for taking God’s name in vain, then one need not say it immediately after the *berakha le-vatala*. If, however, one hoped to amend and correct the apparent misuse of God’s name, then is should be said immediately, within the time span of “*tokh kedei dibbur*.”

The Rosh (*Berakhot* 6:20; see also Shulkhan Arukh) writes that if one began unnecessarily saying a blessing, but stopped before saying “*Elokeinu Melekh Ha-Olam*,” he should continue “*lamdeini chukekha*,” thus completing a verse (*Tehillim* 119:12). He is then considered to have merely read a Biblical verse. Furthermore, if one realizes that he has begun reciting an unnecessary blessing before completing the word “*Elokeinu*,” he may continue the verse *“Elokei Yisrael* *avinu mei-olam ve-ad olam*” (Tzelach, *Berakhot* 39b; Kitzur Shulchan Arukh 6:4), thus completing a Biblical verse (*Divrei Ha-Yamim* I 29:1). The Chayei Adam (5:1) adds that in this case, one should still conclude with “*barukh shem kavod*.”

Next week, we will begin our study of the *Birkot Ha-Nehenin*.