YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

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

**By Rav Ezra Bick**

This shiur is available in the archives at:

[www.vbm-torah.org/archive/siddur/10siddur.htm](http://www.vbm-torah.org/archive/siddur/10siddur.htm)

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

In memory of our parents, Helen and Benjamin Pearlman *z”l* and Jack Stone *z”l*,  
and in honor of my mother, Esther Stone, *Yibadel L’chayim Tovim*   
by Gary and Ilene Stone

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

**Shiur #10: *Birkot Kriat Shema – Yotzer Or***

The next section of the daily prayer is "*kriat shema u-virkoteha*" – *Shema* and its attendant blessings. There is a dispute among the commentators concerning the precise nature of the relationship between the blessings and the *Shema*, but there is no doubt that the blessings are related to the *Shema* in one way or another, and that together they form one unit. This is clearly indicated by the wording of the *mishna* (*Berakhot* 11a): "In the morning, one recites two blessings before [the *Shema*] and one after; in the evening, two before it and two after it." The dispute in the *Rishonim* concerns whether the blessings have the status of *birkot ha-mitzva* for the *mitzva* of *kriat Shema*. (Among other things, this would affect the permissibility of reciting the words “*Kel melekh ne’eman*” before the *Shema*.) However, there is no question that the blessings all relate to the *Shema* itself.

The three blessings that surround the *Shema* have interesting and unique structures. All three of them seem to encompass somewhat different themes than might be indicated by examination of the technically significant formulations of the *peticha* and *chatima*, the opening and closing of each blessing. For instance, the first blessing, *Yotzer Or*, is about God's creation of all of nature, yet the *peticha* and *chatima* refer specifically to the creation of light. The second blessing announces at the outset that it is about God's love for Israel, and concludes *"*Who chooses His people Israel with love," yet most of the blessing is about Torah. The final blessing is called "*Geula*" and concludes "Who redeems Israel," but most of it is specifically about the redemption from Egypt in the distant past. Of course, there is a clear connection between the wider themes and the specific conclusions in each case – light and specifically the heavenly lights are a prime example of creation, the Torah may be understood as the expression of God's love for Israel, and the redemption from Egypt is the archetype of all future redemptions. But we still need to understand in each case why the Sages chose to elaborate on one specific theme related to the general one when formulating these blessings.

The general relationship of all three blessings to *kriat Shema* is clear. The *Shema* is defined by the Sages as "the acceptance of the yoke of the kingdom of heaven." In other words, it is about the kingship of God. The kingship of God is expressed in two areas – nature, which He created, and the people of Israel, whom He chose as His people. His law and dictates are expressed in the laws of nature, on the one hand, and the laws of the Torah, on the other. These are preliminaries to our accepting the yoke of heaven, for we need to understand what we are accepting. Finally, as a **consequence** of His being king over Israel, He redeems Israel, and so this blessing follows the *Shema*. This is, I think, the universally accepted understanding of the unit of *Shema u-virkhoteha*.

Within this overall framework, we wish to understand the specifics of each theme and of each blessing. In this *shiur*, we will address the first *berakha*, the blessing of *Yotzer Or*.

The first blessing is very long, or so it appears in our *siddurim*. Examination reveals that it consists essentially of two parts. The first (as well as the last) praises God as master of creation and of nature:

Who fashions light and creates darkness; Who makes peace and creates everything.

Who gives light to the land and the inhabitants thereof with mercy,

and **in His goodness renews each day always the act of creation**.

The end of the blessing refers back to this theme:

For He alone performs acts of might, does new things, master of wars, sows righteousness, grows redemptions, creates healings, awesome of praises, master of wonders,

**Who in His goodness renews each day always the act of creation**.

As is written, “To He who makes great lights, for forever is His kindness.”

Blessed are You *Hashem*, Who creates the luminaries.

The repetition of "Who in His goodness renews each day always the act of creation" is clearly designed to remind us of the main theme, which might have been lost in the extremely long intervening section. The conclusion of the blessing is "Who creates the luminaries," which requires a recapitulation before it (*me'ein chatima samuch la-chatima*). The act of creation is the generality of which the creation of the sun and moon is the particular.

Between these two elements is a long section about – **angels**! The central part of the section is a form of *Kedusha* – “*Kadosh*”and “*Barukh*” – which is introduced by describing the daily service of the ministering angels, including their recitation of the *Kedusha*. There does not appear to be any connection between this theme and that of creation, nor does it include any reference to light or to the sun and moon. What is it doing here?

The *Kedusha* that appears in the middle section actually presents a halachic problem. There is a well-known rule that a *davar she-bekdusha*, such as the prayer we call *Kedusha*, can only be recited with a *minyan* of ten. Many authorities, including most of the *Geonim* as well as the Rambam, were therefore of the opinion that an individual should skip this part of the blessing. In his *Siddur*, R. Saadia Gaon spelled out exactly what part of the original the individual may recite.

ברוך אתה ה' אמ"ה יוצר אור ובורא חשך עושה שלום ובורא את הכל.

המאיר לארץ ולדרים עליה ברחמים, ומחדש בטובו בכל יום תמיד מעשה בראשית.

כאמור, לעושה אורים גדולים כי לעולם חסדו.

ברוך אתה ה' יוצר המאורות.

This very short blessing, without any additions, has a clearly defined theme: God created and creates everything. The one addition to simply stating that God created the world is the line that praises God for "renewing in His goodness every day always the act of creation." R. Saadia Gaon himself was one of the first to propose a theory of "continual creation," whereby God is as active at every second in maintaining the existence of the world as He was at the first instance six thousand years ago. He presumably therefore understands the line "Who in his goodness renews every day always the act of creation" literally, as meaning that God actually renews every day – every minute, even – the act of creation.

But even without this particular philosophical doctrine, the line clearly means that God is intimately involved in the natural order, renewing it before us. Given that the only concrete example offered in this short version is that God brings light to the world, I think that what is being stressed here is the **cycle** of the natural order, the rising of the sun every morning. The "renewing" thus refers to the "new again" nature of nature, a continuous cycle of day and night, of winter and summer, of life and death, to which the blessing adds, somewhat unexpectedly, a moral dimension – good and evil. Even if you do not subscribe to the understanding that there is a metaphysical creation *ex nihilo* every morning, the blessing stresses the dynamic nature of the world.

This is reflected in the opening of the blessing, which not only states that God created everything, but rather that He creates pairs and opposites – light and darkness, good and evil. The verse that the opening is based on in fact reads, "Fashions light and creates darkness, makes peace and creates evil" (*Yeshayahu* 45:7). The Sages apparently did not want us to explicitly state in our daily prayer that God creates evil, perhaps because they feared that some would not understand the point, so they replaced the evil with a euphemism – "creates everything." Nevertheless, the structure is the same. The phenomenon that this blessing is responding to is the dynamic duality and cyclical nature of creation, and this gives rise to the statement that God renews creation every day.

This formulation of the blessing is a halachic requirement. The *gemara* (*Berakhot* 11b) explains the choice of words for the opening of the blessing thus:

He fashions light and creates darkness… Rava said: In order to mention the attribute of day in the night and the attribute of night in the day.

As the *gemara* proceeds to point out, this is reflected in the formulation of the parallel blessing at night as well – "He rolls (*golel*) away light before darkness, and the darkness before the light."

The *gemara* does not explain, however, why this is important. The usual rule in blessings of praise is to only relate to the immediate experience, to the event that elicits the blessing. If that were true here, then in the morning, one should bless God for the light and in the evening for darkness. The *gemara* makes the explicit point that it is necessary to refer to both on both occasions.

The Beit Yosef explains that this insistence of the *gemara* is in order to reject and negate dualism. There is a natural tendency to attribute divinity to the opposite sides of nature – a god of day for day and one of night for night – and more importantly, a god of good and a god of evil. The Sages were insistent that we combat this tendency in the very act of recognizing God's hand in the natural forces we face.

I think this is undoubtedly correct, but the outcome is that although the event that elicits the blessing in the morning is the advent of light, the object of the blessing is the cycle – the "rolling" of one before the other and the "renewing every day always the act of creation." It is precisely the duality of nature, the tension and even contradiction inherent in it, that would give rise to the dualistic heresy. The Sages do not merely reject the conclusion; they find the one God, the object of the unification that is the *Shema*, in the dynamic cycle of nature.

In our long version of the blessing, the line about the renewal of nature is repeated, once at the beginning and once at the end, which clearly indicates that it is the essential point. Why?

One possible explanation is that a blessing of praise is always engendered by an impressive experience. Praise is not the result of mere intellectual perception; it arises from an impression, from an emotional response to a stimulus that arouses us to perceive a truth that was experientially dormant previously. Although God's creative powers are fully present in the fact that a tree stands in my garden, I do not recite a blessing on it, precisely because it psychologically does not overwhelm me with its truth. I recite "whose power and strength fills the world" when I hear thunder and not when I hear the wind sighing in the willows, although anyone with a religious metaphysic knows there is no difference. Thus, one might claim, the Sages based this blessing on the "changing of the guard" of light and darkness, rather than on the light itself, because the renewal of nature every day is experientially more moving and more impressive, and hence more able to elicit a deep response.

This would be correct and sufficient were this merely a blessing a praise. But in this context, as a blessing of *kriat Shema*, a blessing that reflects God's kingship in our world, I think the intent of the formulation is not merely to arouse us to recognize a truth; it is also focusing on a particular aspect of that truth. There is a difference between the existence of nature, static and immutable since creation, and the dynamic, ever-changing picture of nature that we experience when we awake in the morning, and that difference is the immediacy of God's presence. The blessing is not about **creation** per se, but about God's presence within creation, a presence we face daily. It is not God the Creator, but God the King, the Ruler, who "rolls" the darkness away and who raises up the sun and shines it upon us every day, always. The world is the reflection of God, the garment, as it were, of God himself, through which we can perceive His presence.

When you recite the *Shema*, when you declare His majesty, it is not an affirmation of metaphysical truth, but a response to being in His majestic presence. The dynamism of nature reflects God's power, or His goodness (*be-tuvo*), or His presence, before us – and that is the experience which will lead to *kabbalat ol malkhut shamayim* in a few minutes.

This explains why the angels “invaded” this blessing. The angels here are not the angels of the Torah, who are messengers to fulfill God's will or bear His message. These angels, as they always are in Rabbinic literature, are the angels of *Ketubim* or of Isaiah, the hosts who are in God's presence and "sing song." They are those who recite *Kedusha* every day, calling one to the other and saying “*Kadosh Kadosh Kadosh*. R. Yehuda ben Yakar, in his commentary to the prayer, on the words, "Who renews in His goodness every day always the act of creation," cites the verse "The new of each morning, great is Your faithfulness" (*Eikha* 3:23). This is the verse on which the *midrash* bases the statement that angels are created anew every day in order to recite one song of praise and are then returned to the "river of fire." An angel is the direct reaction of God's presence at the moment. I wish to suggest that the Sages introduced the *kedusha* of the ministering angels into this blessing as an example to us of what to do, how to make ourselves ministering humans who are present before the immanent active majesty of God. (This is, in fact, the halakhic rationale of why we do recite this *Kedusha* without a *minyan*. Rabbeinu Yona explains that we are not reciting *Kedusha*, but only describing how the angels recite *Kedusha*). For the angels, God's presence is immediate, and they therefore praise and sing and recite *Kedusha* daily. That is the definition of their existence. We should do the same – which is what we will do if we perceive that "in His goodness, He renews every day always the act of creation."

This can help explain, I believe, a halakhic problem in our version of the blessing. At the end, right before the conclusion of the blessing, there appears a sort of request – "Prepare in Zion a new light, and may we all merit quickly its light." You probably noticed that the version of the blessing cited above from R. Saadia Gaon did not include this line. In fact, R. Saadia vehemently opposed its recitation. One reason is because it is a request, and this is a blessing of praise, which therefore should not have a request in it. This is not that serious an objection (although the request is especially out of place right before the conclusion, which is supposed to contain a recapitulation of the central theme of the blessing). Occasionally, a request can be added to a blessing of praise (as takes place in the next blessing, *Ahava Rabba*). R. Saadia argues, however, that in fact this request has nothing to do with the subject of the blessing, which is nature. Light in this blessing is the light of the sun and moon, which is actually no more than a symbol of the natural order in general. The "new light over Zion," in contrast, is a reference to redemption, to a miraculous shining of God over Zion in the time of the Messiah. He therefore argues that it does not belong in this blessing at all, surely not in the recapitulation before the conclusion. Interestingly, even in R. Saadia's own yeshiva in Sura, they continued to recite this line and ignored his stricture.

Given our explanation, I think the inclusion of this line can be explained. Were this only a regular blessing of praise for creation six thousand years ago, or even for the existence of the world of nature now, there would be no place for a request for God's light over Zion. But now that we understand that this is a blessing for the immediate presence of God in nature, for the perception of God as the angels perceive Him before them, we can understand how the "light of Zion" came into this blessing. What is the light of Zion? The Sages explain that the light created on the first day of creation was too pure, too holy, to be present in the regular world, and was therefore put aside and replaced by the light of the sun (on the fourth day). But in the future, in the time of messianic redemption, God will remove the original light from its *geniza* and restore it for the righteous in the world. Obviously, this means not just brighter light, but holier light. It is an expression of more direct, more full, expression of God's presence in the world – sanctity expressed in nature. This is therefore not merely a prayer for future improvement; it is an expression of the truth, an expression of how the world should look as a garment cloaking the presence of God. If God is in the world, then we should see it as a great light shining in Zion. If we do not, it is because our eyes are not worthy. The light is not turned off, but is hidden (*ganuz*). The angels, as it were, see it. And so, this blessing, which is our recognition of God's presence in the world, reaches its climax in the recognition that God is fully in the world, behind the cloak of nature, and we can only pray for the merit of being able to see it. Prepare the light – and may we merit seeing it. It is a part of creation in reality; after all, it was the first created thing. Yet our normal eyes do not see it. Nevertheless, our eyes of faith know it and yearn to experience it, for that is the true meaning of God-in-the-world that we celebrate in this blessing. I actually experience this light and not only the light of the sun – even if I only experience it as a yearning and a wish.