**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**THE LAWS OF THE BERAKHOT**

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***Shiur* #64: *Birkot Ha-Rei’ach***

**Introduction**

This week, we will discuss the blessings reciting before enjoying different smells, the *Birkot Ha-Rei’ach*. The Rambam writes (*Hilkhot Berakhot* 9:1):

Just as it is forbidden to benefit from food or drink before reciting a blessing, it is similarly forbidden to benefit from a pleasant fragrance before reciting a blessing.

The Talmud derives this obligation from a verse:

From where do we learn that a blessing should be said over sweet odors? Because it says, “Let every soul praise the Lord” (*Tehillim* 150:6). What is it that gives enjoyment to the soul and not to the body? You must say that this is fragrant smell.

The *Rishonim* explain that this verse is an “*asmachta*;” the obligation to recite blessings over fragrant smells is really of Rabbinic origin.

The Rabbis did not institute that a *berakha acharona* should be recited after smelling a pleasant fragrance. Rashi (*Nidda* 52a) explains that since the enjoyment from fragrances is “*mu’etet*,” minimal, the Rabbis did not institute a blessing afterwards. The Kolbo (24) adds that the enjoyment is only experienced in one’s nose; one does not feel the sensation of being satiated, as one experiences after eating.

The *Acharonim* question why one does not say of blessing before enjoying other pleasures. R. Moshe Isserles, in his Darkhei Moshe (216), explains that one does not say a blessing before enjoying a pleasant voice because one only says a blessing when one’s body (*guf*) derives benefit. The Magen Avraham (216:1) adds that one does not say a blessing before bathing or anointing oneself because the benefit is only external. Therefore, aside from eating and drinking, smelling is the only other physical enjoyment upon which the Rabbis instituted a blessing.

Similar to the blessings reciting before eating, the Rabbis instituted different blessings to be recited before different types of smells. This week, we will study the *halakhot* of these five blessings.

**The Blessing Upon Smelling Trees and Shrubs**

*Chazal* established five different *berakhot* that relate to scent, each for a different category of fragrance: *Borei Atzei Vesamim*, *Borei Isvei Vesamim*, *Borei Minei Vesamim*, *Ha-Notein Rei’ach Tov Ba-Peirot*, and *Borei Shemen Arev*.

The first two categories relate to smelling trees and bushes. The Talmud (*Berakhot* 43b) mentions two blessings: “*Borei Atzei Vesamim*" – “The Creator of fragrant wood (or trees)" – and “*Borei Isvei Vesamim*” – "The Creator of fragrant grasses." We recite these blessings before smelling these plants, their parts, and extracts.

The *Rishonim* disagree regarding the distinction between the blessings “*Borei Atzei Vesamim*” and “*Borei Isvei Vesamim*.” How do we distinguish between the smell of a “tree” and “shrub”?

One might suggest that that definition of a tree should match the definition with regard to *Birkot Ha-Nehenin*, when it is distinguished from a vegetable. In that context, we assume that one says *Borei Peri Ha-Etz* before eating the fruit of a plant or tree whose roots and branches last from year to year. Thus, one even says *Borei Peri Ha-Etz* before eating raspberries and blueberries, which do not grow on “trees,” since their bushes remain from year to year. Most authorities apply this distinction to the *Birkot Ha-Rei’ach* as well (see, for example, Rabbeinu Yona, *Berakhot* 31b). Others suggest that regarding blessings over smells, one says *Borei Atzei Vesamim* over a smell produced by any hard branch or stalk.

Accordingly, all agree that if one smells a tree (or product of a tree) whose branches and roots remain from year to year – such as *hadasim*, roses, jasmine, and rosemary – or even a plant whose roots remains from year to year but whose branches dry up each season (*Shulchan Arukh* 216:9) – such as the pancratium (*chavatzelet*) – one says *Borei Atzei Vesamim*. On the other hand, if one smells small, bushy herbs, such as mint leaves, even though they are perennial, and certainly if one smells flowers that do not grow on braches from a trunk and are annuals, one says *Borei Isvei Vesamim*.

The *Acharonim* debate which blessing to say over perennial plants whose branches come from the root, and not the tree, as well as a perennial plant whose stalk and branches are thin, such as a honeysuckle. The Bi’ur Halakha (216:3) concludes that one should simply say *Borei Minei Vesamim*.

The *Rishonim* question which blessing to say if in doubt regarding whether the appropriate blessing is *Borei Esvei Vesamim* or *Borei Atzei Vesamim*. Some *Rishonim* (Tosafot, *Berakhot* 43a, s.v. *ve-al*; Mordekhai, *Berakhot* 147) suggest that one should say the blessing of *She-Hakol*. Others (Semak, cited by Tosafot; Rambam, *Hilkhot Berakhot* 9:1, 5) rule that one should say *Borei Minei Vesamim*. The *halakha* follows the second view.

**The Blessing Before Smelling a Fruit**

In addition to these blessings, the Talmud (*Berakhot* 43b) teaches that one should say “*Ha-Noten Rei’ach Tov Ba-Peirot*,” "He who bestows pleasant fragrances in fruits," before smelling an *etrog*. (While it is customary to say the blessing in present tense, “*Ha-Noten*,” some *Acharonim* rule that the blessing should be said in past tense, “*Asher Natan*.”) This blessing is said before smelling fruits and vegetables.

This blessing is only said before smelling a fruit that can be eaten alone. Although the Shulchan Arukh (216:2) rules that *Borei Atzei Vesamim* is recited over cloves and cinnamon, the *Acharonim* (see *Mishna Berura* 16) write that one should say *Borei Minei Vesamim*, as they cannot be eaten alone.

The *Rishonim* (see Mordekhai, *Berakhot* 147) debate whether one should say the blessing even before smelling an *etrog* that is to be used for the *mitzva* (Ra’avia) or not (Rabbeinu Simcha), as it is not intended to be smelled. The Shulchan Arukh (116:14) cites this debate and concludes that one should preferably not smell an *etrog* that is to be used for the *mitzva*. The Magen Avraham (116:21) explains that this debate applies only to one who wishes to smell the *etrog* while taking it to perform the *mitzva*. He cites the Maharshal, who rules that one may say the blessing before smelling the *etrog* if he takes it before or after the *mitzva*. The Bi’ur Halakha cites *Acharonim* who disagree, but notes that the Talmud itself (*Sukka* 37b) teaches that “it is a *mitzva* to smell the *etrog* of the mitzva.” He concludes that in deference to the latter *Acharonim*, one should preferably not smell an *etrog* used for a *mitzva*, even before or after the *mitzva*.

The Shulchan Arukh (653:1) rules that one should definitely not smell the *hadas* during Sukkot, since it is designated exclusively for *mitzva* use, as unlike the *etrog*, it cannot be eaten.

Some *Rishoinim* (Tosafot 43b; Rosh, *Berakhot* 8:3) write that one only says this blessing when taking the fruit with the intention of smelling it. One who takes the fruit in order to eat it, but also enjoys the smell, does not say a blessing (Shulchan Arukh 216:2). However, the *Acharonim* debate whether one who takes the fruit with the intention of eating it, but then intentionally smells the fruit, says a blessing (see Bi’ur Halakha 216:2; Shulchan Arukh Ha-Rav, *Seder Birkat Ha-Nehenin* 11:3).

***Borei Minei Vesamim***

The Shulchan Arukh (216:2) rules that before smelling something that does not come from a tree or a plant, such as musk (an aromatic glandular secretion), one says *Borei Minei Vesamim*. Furthermore, he rules that when in doubt which blessing to recite, one should say *Borei Minei Vesamim*.

Should one say the blessing *Borei Minei Vesamim* before smelling a synthetic fragrance, such as perfume, or a scented candle? Contemporary authorities disagree regarding this question. On the one hand, R. Shlomo Zalman Auerbach (see *Shemirat Shabbat Ke-Hilkhata* chapter 61, fn. 32) expressed doubt whether one may say a blessing over a substance that may not have a pleasant fragrance in its natural form. Indeed, this substance may be considered to be a “*rei’ach she-ein lo ikkar*,” a smell whose source is not present (see below). Since most perfumes nowadays are synthetic, one should not say a blessing over perfume (see *Sefer Ve-Zot Ha-Berakha*, *Berur* 43:3). Others disagree and rule that one should say a blessing before smelling synthetic fragrances (see *Peninei Halakha, Hilkhot Berakhot*,p. 292).

It is customary for Ashkenzim to say *Borei Minei Vesamim* during the *Motzei Shabbat Havdala* ceremony when smelling spices, as many are not familiar which these laws and may therefore say the wrong blessing (Mishna Berura 297:1).

Interestingly, the *Rishonim* discuss whether one should say a blessing before enjoying the smell of fresh bread and pastries. Some suggest saying the generic blessing said over smells, *Borei Minei Vesamim* (see Orchot Chaim, *Berakhot* 42). The Rema (216:14) cites a view (see Abudraham 24) that suggests that one should say *She-Natan Rei’ach Tov Be-Fat* (He who bestows pleasant fragrances to bread). Others insist that no blessing is said before smelling bread (Rema, ibid.).

***Ha-Noten Shemen Arev***

The blessing *Ha-Noten Shemen Arev* is said before smelling an “afarsimon”, Balsam oil. The Rabbis instituted this special blessing for the afarsimon, which grows in Israel, in order to highlight the importance and uniqueness of the Land of Israel (Mishna Berura 216:23).

***Re’ach She-ein Lo Ikkar***

In the cases discussed above, one smells the actual tree, bush, or fruit. Does one say a blessing before smelling a substance that received its smell from another substance? In other words, what is the *halakha* regarding a fragrance “*she-ein lo ikkar*,” when the source of the smell is not there? For example, does one say a blessing over clothes that absorbed the smell of incense?

The Rambam writes (*Hilkhot Berakhot* 9:8):

A blessing is not recited when incense is burned to perfume utensils or clothes because the incense was not prepared with the intent that it be smelled itself. Similarly, a blessing should not be recited on clothes that were perfumed in this manner because the fragrant substance itself is not present; there is merely a fragrance without any substance.

Although the Tur (217) disagrees, the Shulchan Arukh (217:3) rules in accordance with the Rambam.

The *Rishonim* discuss this issue in the context of oils and perfumes as well. On the one hand, the Shulchan Arukh (216:18) rules that one says a blessing over perfume that is extracted through squeezing, cooking, evaporation, etc. On the other hand, the Shulchan Arukh (117:6), based upon a Talmudic passage (*Berakhot* 43a), rules that one should only say a blessing over oil if the spices are still found in the oil. If not, one does not say a blessing.

This *halakha* has many ramifications. Regarding oils and perfumes, for example, it seems that one should not say a blessing as all, as the liquid carrying the fragrance is most usually a “*rei’ach she-ein lo ikkar*.”

**Situations in Which One Does Not Say the Blessing**

There are numerous situations in which one does not say a blessing over a fragrance.

One does not say a blessing over a fragrance from which one is prohibited to benefit. For example, incense that is used for idolatrous worship is prohibited (*Devarim* 13:18), and one may not say the blessing over it (*Shulchan Arukh* 217:6). Similarly, the Radbaz rules that one may not say a blessing upon smelling a fruit from a tree that is under three years old, as it is prohibited to derived benefit from *orla* (see Sha’arei Teshuva 217:2). The Shulchan Arukh (217:4; see Sefer Chareidim, *Mitzvot Aseh Ha-Teluyot Ba-Af*) also rules that a man should not say a blessing upon smelling a woman’s perfume, even if it is on a table (*Mishna Berura* 217:18).

One does not say a blessing over a fragrance that is not intended for benefit, but rather to disguise unpleasant odors. Therefore, one may not say these blessings over perfumes used to disguise the smell of a dead body or a bathroom, nor over body deodorant (*Shulchan Arukh* 217:2). Similarly, one should not say a blessing upon smelling the fragrance of soap (Arukh Ha-Shulchan 217:5).

Should one who enters a perfume store and smells the pleasant fragrances say a blessing? The Shulchan Arukh (217:1) writes that if one enters a store in which there is a pleasant smell of perfume or incense, one should say a blessing. The *Acharonim* explain that the store owner leaves the bottles open so that people will smell and then purchase the perfume. The Mishna Berura (217:1) notes that if the perfume is not sitting in the open, but rather in a side room, then it is not intended to be smelled and a blessing is not recited.

Nowadays, if one enters a perfume store, one should not say a blessing, as the smell is most likely a *rei’ach she-ein lo ikkar*. Similarly, if one enters a store that sells spices, one should not say the blessing, as the spices are sold for their taste, not their smell. However, one who enters a plant nursery or flower store and pauses to enjoy the pleasant smell should say the blessing *Borei Minei Vesamim* (Arukh Ha-Shulchan 117:3).

One does not say a blessing over a fragrance that is intended to cause another object to smell pleasant. Therefore, if one smells a detergent that is intended to make clothing smell pleasant, a *berakha* is not said (Shulchan Arukh 217:6).

As noted above, one does not say a blessing over a *rei’ach she-ein lo ikkar*, a smell that does not emerge from the original substance. Therefore, one does not say a blessing over pleasant smelling clothing, perfume on one’s body, or even the perfume in the air of a perfume store unless there are open bottles from which one is meant to smell.

**Saying These Blessings Before Smelling or Drinking Coffee**

Should one say a blessing upon smelling coffee beans? R. Yeshua Shababu (17th century, Egypt), in his Perach Shushan (OC 1:13) writes that one should say the blessing *Ha-Noten Re’ach Tov La-Peirot* upon smelling ground coffee beans. The Mishna Berura (216:16) cites this view as well. Others (*Sefer Ve-Zot Ha-Berakha*, p. 381; *Peninei Halakha*, *Hilkhot Berakhot*, p. 298), however, suggest that nowadays, since coffee beans are not eaten, the blessing *Borei Minei Vesamim* should be recited.

Regarding one who prepares a cup of fresh coffee, we learned above that one only says the blessing if the food is taken to smell as well as to eat.

Should one who enters a coffee store, with a strong coffee aroma, say a blessing upon enjoying the smell of coffee? Seemingly, the coffee store is interested in customers smelling the coffee, which may arouse people to purchase coffee. Therefore, it seems that one may say the blessing if the coffee beans are exposed and he enjoys the fragrance of coffee.