

'Baruch' and 'Beracha' – Blessing in Judaism

Dedicated to John D. Rayner: a blessing to us all.

The Root 'brk' as Foundation of a Jewish Understanding of Faith

Beracha in the Hebrew Bible means *blessing*. 'Baruch' also means 'the one who is blessed'. The words 'baruch' and 'beracha' are both derived from the Hebrew root bet-resh-kaf, which means 'knee'.¹ This refers to the practice of bending one's knee and bowing as signs of respect. In the understanding of the Hebrew Bible it is not only God who blesses human beings, but humans praise God through blessings as well (cf. for example Ps. 16:7; 34:2; 63:5).

'Baruch', therefore, is the attribute which describes God as the source of all blessing.² When one recites a blessing, one does not bless God, but expresses astonishment and wonder about God's acts of blessing towards us humans.

Blessing as God's Promise

As one of the first promises God says to Abraham: 'and all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you' (Gen 12:3).

Blessing and curse are not simply about the provision of information or the relation of a wish, but they intend to effect what they promise. In the Hebrew Bible the result is dependent on God and does not happen as if by magic. Blessing and curse are therefore related to prayer and magic, but they are not identical with them. While blessing is given a central role, magic is not approved in the Bible.

Blessing promises what humans have asked of God. In the Hebrew Bible, promises are generally related to concrete things, such as descendants, fertility, prosperity, a good harvest, affluence, but promises can also refer to more abstract concepts such as peace and happiness. The overarching category communicated through blessing is participation in God's saving action. Blessing is thus an expression and concretisation of the relationship of Jews with God.

Most important is the distinction between blessing and *wish*. Blessing is different from wishing well, since it promises more. Blessing is also more than strength derived from positive thinking. As an expression of faith, blessing lives in the relationship of human beings to God and receives its power and reality as well as its framework and limitations from this relationship. A blessing promises what is received in faith from God. Trust against all reason is shown by Job, who even in his suffering does not curse God (Job 1:11; 2; 5; 9), but continues to praise him (1:21).

Blessing has a high status in the Hebrew Bible, often becoming a legacy (Dtn 33). The patriarchs bless their children, in particular before they die (Gen. 27:49ff.). Here, a blessing is very concrete, *it exercises authority*. Once pronounced, a blessing cannot be taken back,

¹ Keller, C. A., 1984, p. 353.

² Richards, K. H., 1992.

even if based on an error: in Gen. 27 Yacov obtains the blessing of the firstborn by devious means and hangs on to it even after Yitzchak discovers his error.³ Thereby the younger brother, Yacov, receives authority and power over the older brother, Esav.⁴

The Priestly Blessing

The classic biblical blessing is the *aronitic blessing* (Num. 6:24-26) which has been used widely in its present format since the 7th century B.C.E. The evidence for this widespread use are engravings in silver jewellery found in graves at Ketef Hinom, southwest of the Old City in Jerusalem, which use the blessing almost in its biblical wording. Even the dead need blessing. Since earliest times, the priestly blessing closed the Temple service (Lev. 9:22f.; Num. 6:23-27; Ps. 118:26; II Chron. 30:27, etc.).

This usage of the priestly blessing continues in the service of the synagogue. It is used in liberal services primarily at the end of the prayer service, after kaddish and the final hymn, in orthodox communities in the morning service on Shabbat before the last beracha 'sim shalom' of the Amidah and on the Day of Atonement during musaf, mincha and ne'ila (Ta'anit 26b). In orthodox communities, the descendants of priests, the kohanim, are sometimes called up to recite this blessing. Conservative and liberal communities do not adhere to this practice of distinguishing between kohanim, levites and israelites.

The same wording of the blessing is used on Friday night during kiddush and on the eve of the Day of Atonement when parents bless their children, and it is also part of the blessings said under the chuppa during a Jewish wedding.

From Getting Up to Lying Down: A Hundred Blessings

The Mishna – the codification of Jewish religious law edited around 200 C.E. – begins with a tractate about blessings (Berachot).⁵ This underlines the importance blessing has in particular in postbiblical Jewish tradition. In early Judaism, as well as in contemporary Chassidism, receiving a blessing from a famous and admired 'Zaddik' or 'Rebbe' is significant. More widespread, however, is the frequent saying of a blessing.

'Berachot', blessings, are a particular form of prayer and are said frequently in everyday life. Jewish tradition appeals to every Jew to say one hundred blessings every day.

The thrice daily recitation of the 'Shemone Esrei', with its 19 petitions, already amounts to 57 berachot on every weekday. And there are plenty of opportunities to complete the 100 blessings.

At the beginning of the morning service one says the birchot ha-shachar. Historically, upon awaking, Jews began their day with these blessings, which were incorporated into the formalised morning service in the 9th century by Rav Amram. The Babylonian Talmud, in particular Berachot 60b, contains a whole list of blessings.

A blessing accompanies many daily recurring occasions and events. Jewish religious life is a way of interpreting daily life through blessings.

³ Keller, C. A., 1984, p. 365.

⁴ Rayner, J. D., 1997, p. 34.

⁵ Mischnajot, 1968, Vol. 1, Tractate Berachot, pp. 1-16.

From this develops a culture of blessing which extends beyond the confines of the prayer service. Thus it can be concluded that blessing is of central importance in Jewish practice.

Blessings as Acceptance of God

Three types of blessings can be distinguished: (1) those which are said before enjoying a physical pleasure (birchot ha-ne'henin), (2) those which are said before fulfilling a commandment (birchot ha-mitzvot), and (3) those which refer to a particular time or a specific event (birchot hoda'ah).

1. Blessings before enjoying a physical pleasure (for example, eating, drinking, wearing new clothes) praise God as the creator of the things we are about to use. The blessing over bread honours God as the one who brings forth bread from the earth. The blessing before wearing new clothes describes God as the one who clothes the naked. By using this beracha we are accepting God as the creator of all things whose permission we need before we enjoy his creation. In practice, the beracha asks God for permission to use something which originates – like everything – not from us but from God.

2. The blessings we say before fulfilling a commandment praise God as the one who makes us holy through his commandments and who instructs us to do that which we are about to do.

The recitation of the beracha belongs to the act of fulfilling the commandment. Jewish tradition knows no hierarchy of mitzvot. There is no greater merit in performing a mitzvah because one is commanded to do so than performing one by chance or on a whim. By saying the beracha, we are concentrating on the fact that we are responsible to God for this religious obligation we are about to fulfil. It is important to say blessings over all the mitzvot we do, whether the blessing is derived from the Hebrew Bible or formulated later by the rabbis. The interpretation of Jewish tradition by the rabbis is almost as highly regarded as the biblical text itself and therefore binds us with similar force.

3. Blessings which are said at a particular time or on a specific occasion (witnessing events in nature such as a rainbow, sighting a king or head of state, upon hearing good or bad news, encountering unique beauty, etc.) acknowledge God as the origin of all good and bad in the universe.

Berachot are not only recited about good things but also about bad things. In the latter case, God is praised as the 'just judge', underlining that even when we cannot understand it, bad things happen for a just reason.

Strangeness and Closeness as Paradox of Faith

Many of the blessings used today were formulated about 2,500 years ago by Ezra and the Great Assembly. All berachot use the formula 'Baruch ata adonai elohenu melech ha-olam', 'Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the universe'. Our closeness to God and our intimate relationship with God is expressed through the use of the familiar 'ata' as informal personal pronoun in the second person singular.

Immediately after this opening formula the beracha switches to the third person singular. A good example may be taken from the birchot ha-mitzvot which are formulated according to

the following format: 'Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the universe'. In Hebrew the third person singular in an address expresses great respect and high praise.

Thus a blessing combines the suggestion of particular closeness to God with the expression of transcendental distance and inaccessibility. The Jewish relationship with God is characterised by this paradox of simultaneous nearness and infinite distance.

The Blessing After the Meal: Birkat Ha-Mazon⁶

One of the most important Jewish prayers is already commanded in the Hebrew Bible. This prayer is never said in the synagogue, but it is particular to the table, the altar of the home. The blessing after the meal is based on Dtn 8:10 'When you have eaten your fill, give thanks to the Lord your God for the good land which He has given you.'

This commandment is fulfilled by the blessing after the meal.⁷ The Birkat ha-mazon (The Blessing After the Meal) is recited after every meal at which the staple was bread. In Yiddish, this prayer is called 'benchen', a word derived from the Latin 'benedicare', 'to bless'.

The blessing after the meal is preceded by three blessings before the meal. The birkat ha-mazon consists of four groups of blessings, three of which were formulated at the time of Ezra and the Great Assembly, and the fourth was added after the destruction of the Temple.

1. The Birkat hazan (blessing for the food) thanks God for the provision of food.
2. The Birkat ha-aretz (blessing for the land) thanks God for leading us out of Egypt, for giving us the covenant and for granting us the land of Israel as an inheritance.
3. The birkat Yerushalaim (blessing for Jerusalem) brings to mind a rebuilt Jerusalem as God's throne and the advent of the messianic time.
4. The birkat ha-tov ve'ha-metiv (blessings for who is good and does good deeds) emphasises God's kindness as the origin of all that is good. This is an old thought, but it was added here after the destruction of the Temple.

To complete the blessing after the meal, Psalms and Proverbs may be added, depending on the occasion.

Blessing as Recurring Obligation

The ubiquity of blessings is central to Jewish religious practice. Through blessings Jews experience that their lives in the face of God are blessed, and acknowledge that their actions, which originate in God's creating power, should become a blessing for all humanity.

'Tikkun olam' – the repairing of the world – can only come about if we allow God's salvation to work in the world through bringing God's blessing into the world.⁸

Through every blessing we turn anew to the world and its creatures, relate with them and gain a new perspective on the world.

Blessed are you, Eternal one our God, King of the universe who has not created us to be

⁶ Böckler, A./Homolka, W., 2002, pp. ix-xxiv.

⁷ Romain, J./Homolka, W., 1999, p. 142.

⁸ Hirsh, R., 2003.

strangers to him.

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