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Birkas HaTorah

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How often is Birkas HaTorah recited?

Who must recite Birkas HaTorah?

There are two sets of blessings referred to as *Birkas HaTorah*. One set is recited during *kri'as hatorah* (public Torah readings), and one is recited every morning. This article will examine the nature and laws of the *Birkas HaTorah* which is recited daily.

The obligation of Birkas HaTorah: The Gemara (Nedarim 81a) cites two verses in Yirmiyahu (9:11-12). The verses state, "Who is the man who is wise and will explain this? Or the one to whom the mouth of Hashem speaks and he will relate it? Over what was the land lost, parched like a desert with no passerby? Hashem said, 'Because they abandoned My Torah that I placed before them, they did not listen to My voice, and they did not walk with it.'"

The Gemara expounds that this question, "Over what was the land lost?", was posed to the Torah scholars and to the prophets, but nobody could answer it, until Hashem Himself provided the answer. The Gemara wonders what the difference is between "they did not listen to My voice" and "they did not walk with it." The Gemara cites a teaching from Rav Yehuda in the name of Rav that the extra verbiage in the verse teaches that they did not recite *Birkas HaTorah* before studying Torah. From this passage, the importance of reciting *Birkas HaTorah* is clear.

There is a dispute in the Rishonim whether these three *brachos* are three separate blessings or are actually two blessings, with the first two *brachos* regarded as one long blessing. Rabbeinu Tam (cited in Rosh Brachos 1:13) says that there are only two blessings, but the Rambam (Hilchos Tefilah 7:10) says that they are three blessings. There are two practical differences between these opinions: One is whether a listener should answer *amein* following the first *bracha*. The Mishna Berura (47:12) writes that the consensus of most *poskim* is not to answer *amein*. The second difference is whether the second *bracha*, which begins with the words *ha'arev na*, should begin with a conjunctive *vav* (and would thus be *vaha'arev na*) or not. If these two sections are, indeed, one blessing, a *vav* should be inserted, as it connects it with the previous *bracha*. If, however, it is a second blessing, no *vav* should be inserted. The Shulchan Aruch and Rema (Orach Chaim 47:6) conclude that one should say *vaha'arev* with a *vav*. This is in line with the Mishna Berura's ruling that no *amein* is said between the two sections, as they are regarded as one long blessing.

What is the purpose of each blessing? There are numerous explanations found in the commentators to explain the different blessings (see Bach Orach Chaim 47:4; Levush Orach Chaim 47:6). One explanation, presented by Rabbi Tzvi Kushelevski (Sefer Sha'arei Bina) based on various sources in the Rishonim, is that the first blessing, *la'asok bidvrei Torah*, is a *birchas hamitzvah* (blessing recited upon the performance of a mitzvah), as indicated by the text, "Blessed are You Hashem... Who sanctified us with His mitzvos, and commanded us to be involved in words of Torah." The second blessing is a *birchas hanehenin* (blessing recited upon a pleasure or benefit); the text focuses on requesting that Hashem make the study of Torah sweet for us and our descendants. The third *bracha* is a *birchas hoda'ah* (blessing which expresses gratitude), as the text of *bracha* thanks Hashem for giving us His Torah. According to the opinion that there are only two blessings, *vaha'arev na* is a continuation of the *birchas*

hamitzvah.

It is important to note that although the text of the three *brachos* are of Rabbinic origin, there is a *machlokes* (dispute) in the *poskim* whether the actual obligation to recite a *bracha* upon the study of Torah is a *diOrayso* (Torah-level) obligation or not. The *machlokes* is based on the Gemara (Yuma 37a) that derives the obligation of *birchas hatorah* from a verse (Devarim 32:3) which states, "When I call out the name of Hashem, ascribe greatness to our G-d." Moshe was about to begin telling Bnai Yisrael the Song of Ha'azinu, and the Gemara expounds that Moshe said that before beginning, he would first make a *bracha* - "When I call out in the Name of Hashem," - and that Bnai Yisrael should answer *amein* - "ascribe greatness to our G-d." The simple reading of the Gemara indicates that the blessing is, indeed, a *diOrayso* obligation. However, some opinions understand the verse as an *asmachta*, a hint in the Torah to the concept upon which Chazal built the Rabbinic obligation of *Birkas HaTorah*. The practical difference between these two opinions is in a case of doubt whether one must recite *Birkas HaTorah*. If the obligation is Rabbinic, the rule of *safeik brachos lihakeil*, that in a case of doubt regarding a *bracha*, we are lenient and don't say the *bracha* and, in fact, one may not say the *bracha* at all. If the obligation is *diOrayso*, one would be required to recite *Birkas HaTorah* in case of doubt, although one would only recite the third *bracha* to fulfill the *diOrayso* obligation (Mishna Berura 47:1). The consensus of most *poskim* (see Aruch Hashulchan 47:2, Mishna Berura 47:1) is that it is a *diOrayso* obligation.

There is an interesting responsom from Rav Asher Weiss (Minchas Asher Ha'azinu) who discusses whether the nature of the *diOrayso* obligation is to recite a *birchas hamitzvah* or a *birchas hoda'a*. There are several practical halachic examples which may be dependent upon this question, as will be discussed below.

When does the need to recite the *bracha* renew?: There is a dispute between the Rosh and Rabbeinu Tam regarding someone who slept during the day whether there is an obligation to recite another *birchas hatorah* upon arising. The Tur (Orach Chaim 47:11) cites his father the Rosh (Responsa 4:1) who rules that sleep is considered an interruption of the *bracha* recited in the morning, and so one is obligated to recite a new *bracha*. However, the Bais Yosef (ad. loc.) cites the Agur who says that his father would not make a new *bracha* after sleeping during the day. The Bais Yosef is puzzled by this ruling, and he concludes that this ruling is based upon the opinion of Rabbeinu Tam. Rabbeinu Tam (Tosafos Brachos 11b s.v. *shekvar*) says the obligation of *Birkas HaTorah* begins again every morning, and it doesn't matter if there was an interruption (such as sleep¹) or not - the *bracha* covers the entire day and the night that follows. According to Rabbeinu Tam, no new *bracha* is required if one slept during the day. The Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 47:11) cites both opinions and rules that another *bracha* is not required if one slept during the

¹ There is a question as to why any significant interruption to Torah study doesn't warrant the need for a new *bracha*. A full treatment of the issue is beyond the scope of this article; see Shulchan Aruch (ibid.:10), Magen Avraham (ad. loc.:9), Taz (ad. loc.:8) and Mishna Berura (ad. loc.:22).

day, but the Gra (ad. loc. s.v. *viyesh*) argues and, following the opinion of the Rosh, requires a new *bracha* if one slept during the day.

Regarding one who slept during the day, the Shulchan Aruch (47:25) cites both views and concludes that the custom is not to recite a *bracha*. However, the Mishna Berura (47:25) cites many *poskim* who argue that one should recite a *bracha*. It is important to note that this discussion is regarding one who slept for a significant period of time during the day, not one who merely napped briefly. Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach (Halichos Shlomo 6:1) writes that one must sleep in a bed or the like for a minimum of a half hour.

Conversely, if one did not sleep at all and a new day dawns, Rabbeinu Tam would rule that one must recite a new *Birkas HaTorah*, since the new day requires a new *Birkas HaTorah*. The Rosh, on the other hand, would rule that no new *bracha* is recited, since the obligation is only renewed by a major interruption such as sleep. The Magen Avraham (ad. loc.:12) infers from the language of the Shulchan Aruch (ibid.:12) that one would not recite a new *bracha*. The Mishna Berura (ibid.:28) cites both opinions and concludes that a new *bracha* is not recited².

Perhaps it can be suggested that the differing opinions of the Rosh and Rabbeinu Tam are based upon the deeper understanding of the nature of the basic *diOrayso* obligation to recite *Birkas HaTorah*. The Rosh understands that the *diOrayso* obligation is to recite a *birchas hamitzvah* upon the mitzvah of Torah study. Sleep is thus considered an interruption between the *bracha* and the performance of the mitzvah, and another *bracha* is required. Rabbeinu Tam, however, understood that the obligation is to recite a *birchas hoda'a*, a daily expression of thanks for the Torah. Once the *bracha* is recited, it covers the entire day, and an interruption such as sleep would be of no consequence.

Rabi Akiva Eiger (Orach Chaim 47 s.v. *vetzarich iyun*) writes that if one slept during the day and stayed up all night then one would be obligated to recite *birchas hatorah* according to all opinions. Since he slept during the day, a new *bracha* is required according to the Rosh. According to Rabbeinu Tam, the new day requires a new *bracha* regardless of whether one slept.

Women's obligation in *Birkas HaTorah*: The Bais Yosef (ibid.:14) cites the Agur (2) that women recite *Birkas HaTorah* because, although they are exempt from the mitzvah of Torah study, they must study the laws of the Torah which pertain to them; the Bais Yosef rules accordingly in Shulchan Aruch (ibid.) The Gra (ad. loc. s.v. *nashim*) argues that although they must study the Torah laws pertaining to them in order to properly perform those mitzvos, that is merely a means, but is no actual mitzvah for women to study Torah, and so they are not obligated to recite *Birkas HaTorah*. The Gra continues that although there is no obligation, they are allowed to recite the blessing, as they do when performing any mitzvah from which they are exempt, such as taking *dalet minim* (the Four Species) on Sukkos.

The Bi'ur Halacha (ibid.:14 s.v. *nashim*) says that according to the position of the Shulchan Aruch, a woman can recite *Birkas HaTorah* on a man's behalf since she herself is obligated to recite the *bracha*³, but according to the Gra, a woman cannot recite the *brachos* on a man's behalf, since she is not actually

² The Mishna Berura invokes the rule of *safeik brachos lihakeil*, which seems to contradict his position mentioned earlier that *Birkas haTorah* is *diOrayso* and would be recited in a case of doubt.

³ This is based on a he principal of *arvus* (guarantorship), which, among other things, says that one Jew is responsible for the mitzvah fulfillment of other Jews. Consequently, there are numerous mitzvos which one Jew may perform on behalf of another Jew. However, this is only true if the Jew performing the mitzvah is himself/herself obligated in the mitzvah, as the guarantorship is viewed as an extension of one's own obligation. A full discussion is well beyond the scope of this article.

obligated in *Birkas HaTorah*.

Here, too, it can be suggested that the dispute regarding a woman's obligation in *Birkas HaTorah* is dependent on whether the *diOrayso* obligation is to recite a *birchas hamitzvah* or a *birchas hoda'a*. The Gra clearly understood that the obligation is to recite a *birchas hamitzvah* upon the mitzvah of Torah study, and so he says that women are exempt from this *bracha*. The Bais Yosef, however, understood that the obligation is to recite a *birchas hoda'a*. Since women must study the laws of the Torah relevant to them, they must thank Hashem for the Torah they study even though, strictly speaking, they have no mitzvah to do so.

Thinking Torah thoughts or writing Torah before reciting *Birkas HaTorah*: The Shulchan Aruch (ibid.:4) rules that no *bracha* is required for merely thinking thoughts of Torah. The Gra (ad. loc. s.v. *vehu*) argues that one would be required to recite a *bracha*, as one fulfills the mitzvah of Torah study through thought.

The Gra's ruling is simple enough to understand; he clearly understood that the obligation is to recite a *birchas hamitzvah* upon the mitzvah of Torah study, and so a *bracha* must be recited upon on Torah thoughts, which fulfill that mitzvah.

However, if we were to again posit that the Shulchan Aruch views the obligation as a *birchas hoda'a*, why would Torah thoughts not be included, inasmuch as they are considered Torah study?

There is another approach to the nature of *Birkas HaTorah* which, while similar to the idea of a *birchas hoda'a*, differs. This approach is offered by the Brisker Rav (Chidushei Hagriz al haRambam Hilchos Brachos 11:16) in the name of his father, Rav Chaim (Brisker) Soloveitchik. Rav Chaim explained that *Birkas HaTorah* is a blessing on the *cheftza*, or essence, of Torah itself; there is a requirement to confer a blessing upon the actual Torah. The Shulchan Aruch's can then be explained; although thinking thoughts of Torah is a fulfillment of the mitzvah of Torah study, the primary expression of Torah is speech (see Brachos 20b), and so there is no requirement to recite a *bracha* on Torah thoughts.

The earlier rulings of the Shulchan Aruch discussed above – following Rabbeinu Tam's opinion that a new *bracha* is not recited if one slept during the day, and that women have an obligation to recite *Birkas HaTorah* – can also be understood according to Rav Chaim's approach. Accordingly, we can go back and suggest that the Shulchan Aruch's ruling that one who slept during the day is not required to recite a new *bracha* is also based on this concept. The obligation to recite *Birkas HaTorah* is not a daily *birchas hoda'a*, but a daily *bracha* on the *cheftza* of Torah, and sleeping during the day is of no consequence once one has fulfilled the daily requirement. By the same token, says the Brisker Rov, since women must study Torah to learn the laws relevant to them, they, too, must recite a blessing on the *cheftza* of Torah.

With this approach, a puzzling ruling of the Shulchan Aruch can be understood. The Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 47:3) rules that one is required to recite *Birkas HaTorah* before writing Torah. This seems to contradict his ruling that thoughts do not require a *bracha*, since writing is still not speech⁴. Based on Rav Chaim's idea that this is a blessing on the *cheftza* of Torah, it can be suggested that writing is different than thinking, as writing is considered a primary expression of Torah study.

In conclusion, *Birkas HaTorah* is a very important blessing with origins in the Torah itself. Awareness of its laws and details will help ensure its proper recitation.

⁴ See Mishna Berura 47:4 for two resolutions to this question.

Points to Ponder

May one who is unable to recite Birkas HaTorah study Torah anyway?

Is reading Torah without verbalizing the words considered thinking Torah thoughts?

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