

THE BLESSING OF HA-GOMEL

by Rabbi Doniel Neustadt

In the time of the Beis ha-Mikdash, a person who survived a potentially life-threatening situation brought a Korban Todah, a Thanksgiving Offering, to express his gratitude to Hashem.(1) The Talmud (2) defines crossing a desert or a sea, imprisonment and serious illness as potentially life-threatening situations.

Nowadays, when the Beis ha-Mikdash no longer stands and offerings cannot be brought on the Altar, we substitute a public proclamation of gratitude to Hashem for an offering.(3) A survivor of any of the perils mentioned above publicly recites Birkas ha-gomel, thanking Hashem for saving him from danger.

The text of the blessing is as follows: Baruch Atah... shegemalani kol (4) tov. After answering Amen(5) the congregation responds: Mi shegemalcha....(6)

Birkas ha-gomel, just like the Korban Todah,(7) is an optional mitzvah; it is not a pure obligation and one who fails to recite it does not commit a sin.(8) The poskim, however, strongly suggest that one be careful to fulfill this mitzvah, just as he would have seen to it to bring a Korban Todah if he had the opportunity to do so.(9)

In addition to reciting the ha-gomel blessing in lieu of the Korban Todah, Chayei Adam(10) writes that one should give a charitable donation equal to the value of the animal that he would have brought as a sacrifice. When giving the money, he should expressly state that he is donating the money instead of bringing a Korban Todah. He further instructs one to recite certain verses in the Torah which deal with Korban Todah(11) along with an additional text that he authored when he himself was saved from an explosion in the year 1804.

QUESTION: When and where is ha-gomel said?

DISCUSSION: As birkas ha-gomel is a public expression of gratitude, it cannot be recited in private. Indeed, the basic halachah follows the opinion that the blessing is said only in the presence of at least ten men. For this reason it became customary that ha-gomel is recited right after the public reading of the Torah. But like any other mitzvah, there are l'chatchilah and b'diavad methods of performing it. In addition, there are some recommendations which fall under the category of hiddur mitzvah. Let us elaborate:

BIRKAS HA-GOMEL - L'CHATCHILAH:

- * Birkas Ha-gomel should not be delayed more than three days after surviving a danger.(12) The custom is to recite ha-gomel at the soonest Kerias ha-Torah possible.(13)
- * At least ten men, including two Torah scholars and the one reciting ha- gomel, should be present.(14)
- * Birkas ha-gomel is recited immediately after the Kaddish which follows Kerias ha-Torah.
- * Birkas ha-gomel is recited while standing.(15)
- * Birkas ha-gomel should be recited during daytime hours only.(16)
- * If a number of people in shul are obligated to recite ha-gomel, each individual should recite his own (and not discharge his obligation by listening to another person's ha-gomel blessing).(17) If, however, they are expressing gratitude for an incident which they experienced together, one person recites the blessing on behalf of everyone. The others respond: Mi shegemalanu kol tuv Hu yigmaleinu kol tov sela.(18)

BIRKAS HA-GOMEL - B'DIAVAD / EXTENUATING CIRCUMSTANCES:

- * If three days elapsed, the blessing should be said within five days.(19) If five days passed, the blessing should be recited within thirty days. (20) If thirty days passed, the blessing may still be recited as long as the feelings of joy and gratitude are still alive in the mind of the survivor.(21)
- * If two Torah scholars are not available, the blessing is recited in front of any ten men, at any time.(22) [A minority view holds that under extenuating circumstances, ha-gomel is recited even with fewer than ten men present.(23) It is not customary; however, to do so.(24)]
- * Birkas ha-gomel may be recited even at night.
- * Birkas ha-gomel is valid if one was sitting when it was recited.(25)
- * One can fulfill his obligation of birkas ha-gomel by hearing the blessing recited by another person who is obligated to recite ha-gomel.(26)

BIRKAS HA-GOMEL - HIDDUR MITZVAH:

- * At least ten men, plus two Torah scholars, plus the one reciting the blessing (altogether thirteen men) should be present.(27) The more people present, the greater hiddur mitzvah there is.(28)
- * The one reciting birkas ha-gomel receives an aliyah to the Torah,(29) and after he recites the final blessing on the Torah, ha-gomel is recited. If he received the last aliyah, ha-gomel is recited before the Kaddish which follows Kerias ha-Torah.(30)
- * Although the one reciting birkas ha-gomel should be standing, those who are listening to the blessing should be seated.(31)

QUESTION: Do women recite the ha-gomel blessing?

DISCUSSION: Expressing gratitude to Hashem for His kindness to us is certainly incumbent upon women as well as men. Indeed, when the Beis ha- Mikdash was standing, women, too, brought a Korban Todah.(32) But traditionally among the Ashkenazim, women did not recite ha-gomel even though it was instituted as a substitute for the Korban Todah. This tradition developed because, as stated earlier, ha-gomel is recited in the presence of at least ten men, and it was considered immodest for a woman to make a public recitation. While many poskim questioned and criticized this tradition and suggested ways where women, too, might fulfill this mitzvah,(33) others maintained that the tradition be upheld and that women not recite birkas ha-gomel.(34)

Still, there are a number of options which a woman can choose in order to express her gratitude to Hashem:

* While remaining in the women's section, she should recite birkas ha- gomel loudly enough for it to be heard by ten men. The men then respond with Mi shegemalach ...(35) This can also take place in the woman's home when ten men are present.(36)

* She should answer Baruch Hashem ha-mevorach le'olam va'ed and Amen to her husband's aliyah to the Torah with the specific intent of fulfilling her obligation to thank Hashem for His grace to her.(37) Traditionally, this was the method used by women who wished to fulfill their obligation of expressing gratitude to Hashem after giving birth.(38)

* Harav M. Feinstein is quoted as ruling that a woman may recite birkas ha- gomel in anyone's presence, man or woman. If she is married, she should preferably do so in her husband's presence.(39)

* Harav S.Z. Auerbach suggested that upon reciting the morning blessing of ha-gomel chasadim tovim l'amo Yisrael, a woman should have in mind to fulfill this mitzvah as well.(40)

Although there are various opinions, the accepted custom today is that minors do not recite ha-gomel, nor does their father recite the blessing on their behalf.(41)

QUESTION: Which situations call for the recitation of birkas ha- gomel?

DISCUSSION: We mentioned above four categories of people who are supposed to recite ha-gomel. We will briefly discuss those categories and their modern counterparts:

CROSSING A DESERT

Nowadays, a trip on a paved road through a desert is no more dangerous than a trip on an interstate highway; thus birkas ha-gomel is not recited. Still, were it to happen that one lost his way in a desert and survived, ha-gomel would be recited.(42)

IMPRISONMENT

The poskim debate if this refers only to imprisonment in which one's life was endangered or threatened, such as being a prisoner of war, or even jail imprisonment for criminal activity, where one's life is not necessarily in danger. In practice, the individual case should be presented to a rav for a ruling, as many modern prisons can be quite dangerous.(43)

SERIOUS ILLNESS

This includes recovery from any illness or medical situation which is or could be life-threatening,(44) or any surgery which required general anesthesia.(45) Many poskim maintain that if a patient is so weak that he remains bedridden for three consecutive days, ha-gomel is recited even if according to the doctors the patient's life was not in danger.(46)

Diagnosed mental illness which required that the patient be restrained or hospitalized is considered life-threatening, and birkas ha- gomel is recited upon recovery.(47)

Birkas ha-gomel should be recited upon complete recovery from the illness or condition, even if the patient needs to continue taking medication for his condition. If, according to the doctors, the patient will never completely regain his former strength, then ha-gomel is recited as soon as he is well enough to walk.

SEA VOYAGE

This refers only to voyages far into the ocean that last several days.(48) However, it also includes shorter trips where harsh weather conditions threatened the safety of the passengers.

Whether or not to recite birkas ha-gomel after an airplane trip is a subject of much debate. There are three opinions:

1. It is doubtful whether ha-gomel may be recited,(49) unless a potentially dangerous situation developed during the flight.
2. Ha-gomel is recited only if the airplane crossed over an ocean or a desert.(50)
3. Ha-gomel is recited after every airplane trip.(51)

While there is no clear ruling on this issue, the custom today generally follows the poskim who require the recitation of ha-gomel only when an ocean (or a desert) is crossed. [Once the destination has been reached, ha-gomel is recited; the return leg of the trip necessitates its own ha-gomel.(52)]

QUESTION: Is birkas ha-gomel recited in cases other than the four categories mentioned?

DISCUSSION:In addition to the four categories of danger mentioned above, our custom is to recite ha-gomel whenever one finds himself in a life- threatening situation and was saved by the grace of Hashem. As long as one came face to face with actual danger and survived, whether he was saved miraculously or by what appears to be "natural" means, ha-gomel is recited. (53) For example,(54) a survivor of

- * an attack by wild animals who normally kill their prey
- * a car accident which according to bystanders should have been fatal
- * a bus which was blown up by a suicide bomber
- * a shooting attack
- * an armed robbery
- * a collapsed building
- * a soldier who saw combat in war

In the cases mentioned earlier, the person found himself in actual danger and was nevertheless saved. Sometimes, however, a person is merely close to the danger, but was not actually involved in the danger itself. In those cases, birkas ha-gomel is not recited.⁽⁵⁵⁾ Some examples are:

- * a sighting of a wild animal, but the animal did not attack
- * a killer aiming a weapon in one's general direction, but was overpowered
- * a car that went out of control but came to a last minute stop
- * a low-impact head-on car crash
- * a bomb that exploded seconds before people entered that area
- * a gun that discharged by accident and missed the person by inches

GENERAL NOTE:

If one remains in doubt as to whether or not he is obligated to recite birkas ha-gomel (e.g., it is difficult to determine if he was in "actual" danger; an unresolved dispute among the poskim; a minyan is not available; a father for a minor, a woman who is embarrassed to recite the blessing in the presence of men, etc.), he has two options whereby he can fulfill his obligation:

- * He can recite the blessing without pronouncing Hashem's name. The text would then be: Baruch atah ha-gomel . . .
- * He can have specific intent to fulfill this mitzvah when reciting the morning blessing of ha-gomel chasadim tovim l'amo Yisrael. Preferably, he should do so out loud in front of ten men, including two Torah scholars. If he wishes, he can add at the end of the text the words "shegemalani (kol) tov."⁽⁵⁶⁾

FOOTNOTES:

1 Vayikra 7:12 and Rashi and Rashbam.

2 Berachos 54a, based on Tehillim 107. See also Rashi, Zevachim 7a (s.v. lo) and Menachos 79b (s.v.

l'achar).

3 Rosh, Berachos 9:3, as explained by Chasam Sofer, O.C. 51 and Avnei Nezer, O.C. 39.

4 Some original texts omit the word kol, an omission approved by Harav S.Z. Auerbach (Halichos Shelomo 1:23-7).

5 Sha'arei Efrayim 4:30; Aruch ha-Shulchan 219:5.

6 O.C. 219:2. B'diavad, if the congregation did not respond, one fulfills the mitzvah regardless; Mishnah Berurah 219:5.

7 See Maharam Shick, O.C. 88 and Sdei Chemed, Asifas Dinim, Berachos, 2:10. See Shiras David, Vayikra 7:12 for a possible explanation.

8 Based on Magen Avraham, O.C. 219:1.

9 See Pri Megadim 219:1; Chasam Sofer, O.C. 51 and Minchas Yitzchak 4:11-9.

10 Seder Amiras Korban Todah, published in Chayei Adam following Klal 69 and quoted in part by Mishnah Berurah 218:32.

11 See similar instructions in Shulchan Aruch ha-Rav, O.C. 1:9.

12 O.C. 219:6 and Mishnah Berurah 20.

13 Sha'arei Efrayim 4:27.

14 O.C. 219:3 and Mishnah Berurah 6 and Sha'ar ha-Tziyun 7. See Tzitz Eliezer 13:18.

15 Mishnah Berurah 219:4.

16 Chasam Sofer, O.C. 51; Kaf ha-Chayim 219:14. Women who recite birkas ha-gomel after childbirth may do so at night l'chatchilah; Tzitz Eliezer 13:17.

17 Based on Mishnah Berurah 8:13, 213:12. See also Rav Akiva Eiger on O.C. 219:5.

18 Chasam Sofer (Sefer ha-Zikaron, pg. 25), quoted in Piskei Teshuvos 219:17.

19 Be'er Heitev 219:9.

20 Mishnah Berurah 219:8.

21 Based on Aruch ha-Shulchan 219:7.

22 O.C. 219:3 and Beir Halachah (s.v. lo).

23 See Mishnah Berurah 219:8

24 See Kaf ha-Chayim 219:3 and 26. See also Beir Halachah 219:3 (s.v. v'yeish omrim).

25 Mishnah Berurah 219:4.

26 O.C. 219:5.

27 Sha'arei Efrayim 4:27 (at least thirteen people); Chayei Adam 65:6 and Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 61:2 (at least eleven people).

28 Shulchan ha-Tahor 219:2, who therefore recommends waiting until Shabbos, since more people and Torah scholars will be present.

29 Sha'arei Efrayim 4:27 and Chasam Sofer, O.C. 51. See also Igros Moshe, O.C. 5:14. But since this is only a hiddur mitzvah, he does not have priority over other chiyuvim; Sha'arei Efrayim 2:11 and Beur Halachah 136:1 (s.v. b'Shabbos). See note 51.

30 Eishel Avraham Tanyana 219.

31 Birkei Yosef 219:6, quoting an oral ruling of the Rambam; Sha'arei Efrayim 4:27; Kaf ha-Chayim 219:15; Tzitz Eliezer 13:19-3.

32 See, however, Tzafnas Pa'aneiach, Berachos 10:8.

33 An authority as early as the Magen Avraham (219:4) already suggested that a husband recite birkas ha-gomel on behalf of his wife. But besides the fact that this would not solve the problem for girls and unmarried women, Beur Halachah (219:4, s.v. v'ain) rejects this option from a halachic point of view, and Aruch ha-Shulchan (219:9) testifies that it never gained acceptance. Mishnah Berurah suggests that a woman recite birkas ha-gomel in front of [ten] women plus one man, but subsequent poskim rejected this solution; see Aruch ha-Shulchan 219:6; Kaf ha-Chayim 219:3; Igros Moshe, O.C. 5:14; Harav S.Z. Auerbach (Halichos Shelomo 1:23- 4).

Harav Y.S. Elyashiv was asked the following question: Mishnah Berurah suggests that a woman who needs to recite birkas ha-gomel should do so in the presence of [nine or] ten women plus one man. While we can understand how ten women can satisfy the requirement that ha-gomel be recited in front of ten people, it is not clearly understood why the Mishnah Berurah recommends that one man be present.

Harav Elyashiv answered that quite possibly, Mishnah Berurah is referring to the halachah quoted in Shulchan Aruch that ha-gomel be recited in the presence of at least two scholars. In several areas of halachah we find the concept that a group of women is considered like one man (see Yevamos 88b and 15a). Thus one additional man will complete the requirement of having two scholars present.

34 Sha'arei Efrayim 4:28; Aruch ha-Shulchan 219:6; Orchos Rabbeinu, vol. 1, pg. 91, quoting Chazon Ish and Harav Y.Y. Kanievsky; Harav S.Z. Auerbach (Halichos Shelomo 1:23-4); B'tzeil ha-Chochmah 6:78; Teshuvos v'Hanahgos 1:195.

35 Be'er Heitev 219:1, quoting Knesses ha-Gedolah; Birkei Yosef 219:2; Chayei Adam 65:6; Ben Ish

Chai (Eikev 5); Yechaveh Da'as 4:15.

36 Minchas Shelomo 2:4-31.

37 Eliyahu Rabba 219:5, quoted by Sha'arei Efrayim 4:28 and Minchas Yitzchak 4:11-9.

38 This is the source of the widespread custom that as soon as a yoledes recovers, she goes to shul to hear and to respond to Barechu es Hashem ha- mevorach. In this case, her husband's aliyah has priority over almost any other chiyuv; Be'ur Halachah 136:1 (s.v. b'Shabbos.)

39 Oral ruling quoted in Igros Moshe, O.C. 5:14.

40 Halichos Shelomo 1:23-8, and note 10.

41 Sha'arei Teshuvah 219:1 and 3 and Mishnah Berurah 219:3. See Har Tzvi, O.C. 113.

42 See Ketzos ha-Shulchan 65:1.

43 See Be'ur Halachah 219:1 (s.v. chavush), Aruch ha-Shulchan 219:5 and Kaf ha-Chayim 219:11.

44 Rama 219:8.

45 See Avnei Nezer, Y.D. 321; Orchos Rabbeinu, vol. 1, pg. 91; Halichos Shelomo 1:23-2; Tzitz Eliezer 12:18.

46 See Be'ur Halachah 219:8 (s.v. kegon); Ketzos ha-Shulchan 65:3.

47 Tzitz Eliezer 12:18.

48 Minchas Yitzchak 4:11. Thus, ha-gomel is not recited when taking the ferry from Britain to France.

49 Chelkas Yaakov 2:9, quoting the Belzer Rebbe. This was also the view of the Brisker Rav and Tchebiner Rav, quoted in Teshuvos v'Hanahagos 1:81 and 3:191. See also b'Tzeil ha-Chochmah 2:20. According to this opinion, birkas ha-gomel can be said only without pronouncing Hashem's Name.

50 Chazon Ish and Harav Y. Y. Kanievsky (quoted in Orchos Rabbeinu, vol. 1, pg. 91); Minchas Yitzchak 2:47; Tzitz Eliezer 11:14.

51 Igros Moshe, O.C. 2:59; Ketzos ha-Shulchan 65:1; Harav S.Z. Auerbach (Halichos Shelomo 1:23-5); Be'er Moshe 7:69; Yechaveh Da'as 2:26 (for a trip longer than seventy-two minutes).

52 Halichos Shelomo 1:23-4. Others hold that if the duration of the trip is less than three days, then ha-gomel should be recited only upon return; Kaf ha-Chayim 219:5.

53 Mishnah Berurah 219:32. This is the Ashkenazi custom; Sefaradim, however, recite ha-gomel only in situations that fall under one of the four categories mentioned; Kaf ha-Chayim 219:52.

54 The following lists are to be used only as a guide. In actual practice, the case with all of its various details must be presented to a rav for a final ruling.

55 See Maharal (Nesivos Olam, Nesiv ha-Avodah 13), quoted in Shevet ha- Levi 9:45. See also Halichos Shelomo 1:23-1; Chut Shani, Shabbos vol. 2, pg. 302, quoting Harav N. Karelitz; Knei Bosesem 1:12.

56 Harav S.Z. Auerbach (Halichos Shelomo 1:23-8). According to Harav Auerbach, this second method is preferable to the first.

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