

THE BLESSING OF HA-GOMEL PART 2

by Rabbi Doniel Neustadt

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

Sources:

42. See Ketzos ha-Shulchan 65:1.
43. See Beiur 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 Beiur 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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