

Bless You!

The Unique Blessings in Judaism

INTRO (read)

Message: Hi friends! I am so sorry that I could not be there tonight, but I hope that you have all enjoyed your evening so far. I am not going to lie, this is my first program as VP for the region and I'm a little nervous. But, I am also very excited about it! I hope to hear feedback from you afterwards. Have fun, take a nap tomorrow, and eat ice cream.
-Samara Strub.

By blessing the objects, people, and events around you, you can practice prayer at any time. Many people look upon the practice not as an obligation but as a joyful endeavor. They recite the blessings simply from the gratitude in their hearts

And blessings have another purpose, as well. In his essay "Feeding the Universe," Rabbi Pinchas Winston, basing his statements on the teachings of the Kabbalah, explains that the Hebrew word for blessing [*bracha*] starts with *bait* [*bet*], the letter *b*. This letter signifies the number two, which refers to increasing something. Therefore, when we bless God or something that He grants us, we ask Him to increase His Presence in our lives.

From

http://www.jewishgateway.com/community/prayer/articles/f_lib_article_hc_jewish.html

The Psalmist said: "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof" (Pg. 24:1). Taking this statement literally, and deeming it appropriate to acknowledge the fruits of the earth as a gift from the Lord, the rabbis instituted the practice of reciting a benediction when partaking of any of them.

Hence, **Judaism prescribes blessings** to be said before and after eating, as well as before enjoying fragrant aromas, or **upon seeing pleasing and awe-inspiring sights. In this way, the satisfaction of a physical craving is raised into the realm of the spirit.** Eating becomes a religious act (Hertz, *Daily Prayer Book*, p. 961).

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook elaborates this concept, explaining that physical enjoyment fulfills its purpose only if it serves at the same time as a vehicle for moral satisfaction, i.e., the acknowledgment of God in the world. A person who partakes of things without saying a blessing first, and uses them only for the satisfaction of physical needs, reduces the value of the thing enjoyed by not fulfilling its higher purpose in the world (Kook, *Olat Re'iyah*, 1:345).

He further stresses that holiness rests in man's seeking moral fulfillment even in physical pleasures. When man acknowledges God with a benediction, and thus recognizes God's creation in whatever he enjoys, he will experience a heightened appreciation of God's grace, lovingkindness, and wisdom which are present in all creation (ibid., p. 347)

From <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/blessintro.html>

Discussion

Does anyone know of any other religions that praise, specifically, the wonders of nature that are given to us?

Does anyone know of any other religions that praise food and meals?

Does anyone know of any other religions that praise a learned person, a head of state, or a politician?

Judaism recognizes the significance of everything with a prayer, augmenting the importance of everything on earth. This is shown through special blessings, like the ones we are going to discuss tonight.

So let's start...

IN SIM SHALOM...

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- o Upon smelling the fragrance of herbs or plants
- o Upon smelling fragrant fruit
 - o ***Why do you think we would have a specific blessing for the smell of something in nature? Is it not enough that we say blessings before and after eating food that we must also say a blessing upon smelling something wonderful?***
- o Upon seeing the ocean
 - o ***Personal Story:*** This past December, I traveled to California for IC 07 in California. There, I saw the Pacific Ocean down at Santa Monica pier. After IC, I traveled straight to Florida to visit my family. There, I saw the Atlantic Ocean. I had not known of this bracha beforehand, but the gratitude I felt from being lucky enough to see both oceans in one weekend was incredible. Only in Judaism would there be a bracha for such a feeling. ***Any other personal accounts? There are no restrictions on these brachot. Do you think that this bracha has less meaning to someone who lives in Florida and is in constant view of the ocean? When should we say this bracha?***

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- o Upon seeing a distinguished person in Torah Studies
- o Upon seeing someone who is distinguished in worldly learning (***not just a Jewish person...can you think of any examples?***)

- o Upon seeing a head of state
 - o *Discuss meaning of these blessings as before. Personal stories are best!*

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- o Tefilat Haderech

David Wallach, ECRUSY President 2008-2009 For Shavuot Tikkun Leyl 5768:

Mussar Discussion

Ethics- Living Life in the Way of the Torah

דעלך סני לחברך

לא תעביד היא

כל התורה כולה

ואירך פירושה הוא

זיל גמור

(מסכת שבת לא)

“That which is hateful to you,

do not do to your fellow

This is the entire torah

all the rest is commentary

Now go and learn it”

(Talmud Bavli- Masechet Shabbat 31a)

You shall not curse the deaf, and you shall not place a stumbling block before the blind
(Leviticus 19:14)

You shall not hate your brother in your heart (ibid. 19:17)

You shall not take revenge and you shall not bear a grudge against a member of your people, you shall love your fellow as yourself (ibid. 19:18)

The world is based on three things: on Torah, on Avodah (prayer), and Gemilut Chasadim (acts of loving-kindness) (Pirkei Avot: 1:2)

"Receive every human being with a cheerful and pleasant countenance" (Pirkei Avot 1:15 - Teaching of Shammai).

"Receive every human being with gladness" (Ibid 3:16 - Teaching of Rabbi Yishmael)

One Yom Kippur eve, Rabbi Salanter met a person on the way to synagogue for the Kol Nidrei prayers. Rabbi Salanter warmly greeted him, but this person was so absorbed with the solemnity and awesomeness of the Day of Atonement that he did not return the greeting. In fact, he had a gloomy expression on his face, as he contemplated the seriousness of the Divine judgement. Rabbi Salanter then remarked to his disciple, Rabbi Itzele of Petersburg, "Why must I need to suffer because of his preoccupation with the Divine judgement?"

Rabbi Yisrael Salanter is the founder of the Mussar movement, a movement based on ethics (mussar).

"The first question asked at the Last Judgment is whether one has dealt justly with his neighbor" (Talmud, tractate Shabbat 31a).

Leading a discussion on whether it is a mitzvah (commandment) to make aliyah?

First ask “what is a mitzvah?” Make sure to have the definitions of good deed and commandment. Explain that the root (tzadi, vav, hey) means command. Now ask “Is it a mitzvah to make aliyah?”



Responsa in a Moment

Is It A Mitzvah To Make Aliyah?

YD 157:1

Question:

*Is it a mitzvah to make aliyah?*¹

Responsum:

The word *mitzvah* can mean good deed, but, technically, it refers to one of the 613 *mitzvot* or commandments in the Torah. This number was originally stated by Rabbi Simlai in the third century (*Makkot* 23b);² since then dozens of rabbis have enumerated the 613 commandments.³

As I have explained elsewhere,⁴ *Eretz Yisrael* holds a unique place in Jewish tradition and history. As a result, we would expect our tradition to unanimously require *aliyah*. Yet, in fact, rabbinic literature contains at least five different approaches towards *aliyah*:

1. The early midrash of *Sifrei Devarim* (paragraph 80) relates that Rabbi Elazar ben Shamua and Rabbi Yohanan ha-Sandlar (ca. 150 c.e.) were on their way to study Torah outside of *Eretz Yisrael*. When they reached Sidon in Lebanon, they remembered *Eretz Yisrael*. They began to cry and they rent their garments and they recited the verse (Deuteronomy 11:31-32): "When you have occupied it and are settled in it, take care to observe all of the laws. . . ." Said they: 'Dwelling in *Eretz Yisrael* is equal to all of the other commandments in the Torah'. Whereupon they turned around and went back to *Eretz Yisrael*.

Nahmanides (1194-1270) followed their approach by ruling that it is a positive commandment to inherit the land and dwell therein.⁵ Furthermore, he practiced what he preached, arriving in Jerusalem from Spain in 1267 and settling in Acre.⁶ His opinion was accepted by a number of prominent medieval rabbis and is very popular among Israeli rabbis today.⁷

2. On the other hand, the above-mentioned Rabbi Simlai did not view *aliyah* as a *mitzvah* in and of itself but rather as a *makhshir mitzvah* or preparatory act which enables one to perform the *mitzvot* which can only be performed in Israel such as tithing and the Sabbatical and Jubilee years.⁸

Rabbi Simlai expounded: Why did Moses our teacher yearn to enter the land of Israel? Did he want to eat of its fruits or satisfy himself from its bounty? But thus said Moses: "Many mitzvot were commanded to Israel which can only be fulfilled in *Eretz Yisrael*. I wish to enter the land so that they may all be fulfilled by me" (*Sotah* 14a).

Rabbi Simlai's approach was also followed by a number of medieval rabbis.⁹

3. Other talmudic sages did not rule explicitly on whether *aliyah* is a *mitzvah*, but tried to encourage *aliyah* and discourage emigration via specific legislation:¹⁰ "Both husbands and wives may force their spouses to make *aliyah* (*Mishna Ketubot* 13:11). If a Jew wants to buy land in Israel, he may tell the non-Jewish owner to draw up the contract even on Shabbat (*Gittin* 8b and *Bava Kamma* 80b). "It is forbidden to leave *Eretz Yisrael* unless two *se'ah* (26.4 liters) of wheat sell for one *selah*. Rabbi Shimon said. . . if one can find any wheat at all, even if one *se'ah* costs a *selah*, he should not emigrate" (*Bava Batra* 91a).

Maimonides followed this approach. He codified the specific laws mentioned above,¹¹ yet he did not list *aliyah* as one of the 613 *mitzvot*. Indeed, Maimonides himself seems to have visited Israel in the year 1165, but did not remain.¹²

4. A number of medieval rabbis took a pragmatic approach. Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg (Germany ca. 1215-1293), for example, did not think that *aliyah* was one of the *mitzvot*, but he did think that whoever moves to Israel "for the sake of heaven and conducts himself in holiness and purity, there is no end to his reward, provided that he can support himself there".¹³

Rabbi Israel Isserlein (Austria, 1390-1460) ruled that it is certainly praiseworthy to live in Israel. However, since there is danger involved and since it is hard to earn a living there, "every person should judge his physical and monetary capabilities if he will be able to fear Heaven and observe *mitzvot* [in Israel]" (*Pesakim U'ketavim*, no. 88).

5. Lastly, there is the lone talmudic voice of the Babylonian sage Rabbi Judah who declared that whoever makes *aliyah* from Babylon to Israel actually *transgresses* a positive commandment (sic!).¹⁴

This negative approach to *aliyah* was followed by quite a few medieval rabbis.¹⁵ Rabbi Judah the Pious (Ashkenaz, thirteenth century) ruled, for example, that it is preferable *not* to make *aliyah*, because he who does so will not be able to find a

wife in Israel nor have time to study Torah due to the difficult economic conditions.¹⁶

In modern times, Rabbi Judah's approach has been adopted by the Satmar Hassidim who rabidly oppose mass *aliyah*, Zionism and the State of Israel due to their conviction that only God may redeem the Jewish people from Exile.¹⁷

Given these five approaches, it is difficult to state *the* halakhic approach to *aliyah*, since all five can be justified by talmudic and halakhic sources. Therefore, I would like to explain *my* halakhic approach to *aliyah*.

I made *aliyah* in 1972 because I believe that *aliyah* is both a *mitzvah* and a *makhshir mitzvah*. First of all, Nahmanides was right to list *aliyah* as a *mitzvah*. He remained in the minority only because all attempts to list the 613 *mitzvot* took place at a time when it was virtually impossible for most Jews to make *aliyah*. It seems that most rabbis saw no point in requiring something so dangerous and expensive that it was virtually unobtainable. By requiring *aliyah*, the rabbis would have turned almost the entire Jewish people into sinners.¹⁸ But the thrust of Numbers 33:53 as well as of the entire Bible and Talmud is *that all Jews are supposed to live in Eretz Yisrael*. That is what God repeatedly promised our ancestors, that is why God redeemed us from Egypt, and that is where a large percentage of the *mitzvot* need to be observed.

Furthermore, *aliyah* is a *mitzvah* in the sense of a preparatory act because it enables one to perform not only the *mitzvot* connected to the land (no. 2 above) but *all* of the *mitzvot*. In Israel, one can observe Shabbat and all of the Jewish holidays with ease because the entire country is on "Jewish time". Israel is conducive to Torah study both in terms of vast opportunities and in terms of enabling the Bible and the Talmud to come to life. Living in Israel allows one to master Hebrew and thereby connect to our heritage which is written in Hebrew. Israel ensures "Jewish continuity" because, religious or secular, your children will most likely marry other Jews. Finally, Israel is the actualization of the prayers we have recited for 2,000 years: "May our eyes behold Your return to Zion with mercy"; "Blessed are you God who gathers the dispersed of Your people Israel".

In conclusion, one should make *aliyah* because living in Israel is a *mitzvah* in and of itself as well as a preparatory act which enables one to observe all of the *mitzvot* and to live a full Jewish life by living in a Jewish state.

NOTES

1. I.e. to immigrate to Israel. There is a vast literature on this subject. In English, see J. K. Mikliszanski, *Judaism* 12/2 (Spring 1963), pp. 131-141; J. David Bleich, *Contemporary Halakhic Problems*, vol. 1, New York and Hoboken, 1977, pp. 3-13; Ephraim Kanarfogel, *Jewish Quarterly Review* 76/3 (January 1986), pp. 191-215; Hershel Schachter in Shubert Spero and Yitzchak Pessin, eds. *Religious Zionism*, Jerusalem, 1989, pp. 190-212.
2. See Nahman Danzig, *Sinai* 83 (5738), pp. 153-158 for the history of this number.
3. See *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 5, cols. 760-783.

4. See my responsum in *Moment* 18/6 (December 1993), pp. 34 = above, pp. 31- 32. For the centrality of *Eretz Yisrael* in Jewish tradition, see above, p. 35, note 2.
5. Nahmanides to Numbers 33:53 and in his addenda to *Sefer Hamitzvot* by Maimonides, no. 4.
6. Regarding Nahmanides' *aliyah*, see Rabbi Charles Chavel, *Ramban: His Life and Teachings*, New York, 1960, pp. 56-66.
7. *Responsa Ribash*, no. 101; *Responsa Tashbatz*, part 3, no. 288; Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef, *Torah Shebe'al Peh* 11 (5729), pp. 35-42; Rabbi Hayyim David Halevi, *Aseh Lekha Rav*, part I, Tel Aviv, 5736, nos. 17-18. This was also the approach of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook which has been adopted by most religious Zionists in Israel.
8. For a good summary of the *mitzvot* dependent on the land, see Dayan I. Grunfeld, *The Jewish Dietary Laws*, vol. 2, London, Jerusalem and New York, 1972.
9. Rashbam to *Bava Batra* 91a, s.v. ein yotzin and Rabbi Baruch of Worms, *Sefer Haterumah*, Warsaw, 1897, p. 122a.
10. This legislation was probably a reaction to the dire economic situation after the Bar Kokhba revolt. See Gedaliah Alon, *The Jews in their Land in the Talmudic Age*, Jerusalem, 1984, pp. 659-661.
11. *Ishut* 13:20; *Avadim* 8:9-10; *Shabbat* 6:11; *Melakhim* 5:9-12; *Responsa of Maimonides*, ed. Blau, no. 365.
12. See *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 11, cols. 755-756. Regarding Maimonides' attitude towards *Eretz Yisrael*, see I. Twersky in Joel Kraemer, ed., *Perspectives on Maimonides*, Oxford, 1991, pp. 257-292.
13. *Responsa of the Maharam of Rothenberg*, ed. Berlin. Nos. 14-15, but cf. *ibid.* no. 79 where he states that making *aliyah* is indeed a *mitzvah*.
14. *Ketubot* 110b-111a. Space does not allow me to explain the involved Talmudic passage regarding "the three oaths" which follows.
15. See the exhaustive treatment by Aviezer Ravitzky, *Messianism, Zionism and Jewish Religious Radicalism*, Chicago, 1996, pp. 211-234.
16. See Kanarfogel (above, note 1), pp. 205-206. 17. For the Satmar approach, see Ravitzky, chapter 2 and *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 15, cols. 909-910.
18. Cf. *Bava Kamma* 79b and parallels: "one does not impose a decree on the public unless the majority can abide by it".