

Towards Meaningful Tefilla

by **Zemira Ozarowski**

Birchot HaShachar

After starting off our davening with thanking Hashem for our Neshamot (Modeh Ani, Elokai Neshama) and our bodies (Asher Yatzar) and then focusing ourselves properly for the day ahead (Birchot HaTorah), it is now time for Birchot HaShachar.

Birchot HaShachar is a series of 16 brachot in which we praise and thank Hashem for many of the basic workings of the world – for giving us clothing, sight, strength, freedom, and much more. The Mishna Berura explains that the reason why we say these brachot is because of the famous statement in Gemara Brachot 35a that one is not permitted to benefit from this world without first making a bracha. Just as this is true for every food we eat, it is also true for every pleasure we have in this world. We need to stop and appreciate what Hashem has given us on a daily basis.

The Gemara in Brachot tells us that as one prepares for the upcoming day, he should make a bracha every step along the way – when you open your eyes, make the bracha POKEI'ACH IVRIM (He opens the eyes of the blind), when you get dressed, make the bracha MALBISH ARUMIM

(He dresses the naked). This helps us to really visualize all of the blessing Hashem has put into our lives and to appreciate it. Nowadays, we say the whole list all at once as part of our set Tefilla but the idea is the same, to take note of all we are blessed with.

In this article, we will focus on the first three brachot.

... ASHER NATAN LASECHVI VINA L'HAVCHIN BEIT YOM UVEIN LAYLA.

We praise and thank Hashem for giving the SECHVI the ability to distinguish between day and night. SECHVI means both rooster and heart. As we listen to the “cockadoodledoo” of the rooster, announcing the new day to all, we are reminded that we too (like the rooster) were granted a special ability to distinguish. From a young age, we are able to differentiate between good and evil, safe and dangerous, hot and cold. This innate capability is something we all take for granted but it is vital in our daily functioning. The specific ability to differentiate between day and night and to be able to measure time, creates a life of meaning. When days begin to blur, and time is of no meaning (which some of us perhaps have experienced during this corona time period), life becomes less meaningful and consequential. We thank Hashem for giving us time,

allowing us to wake up each morning with new goals and ambitions, and to tune into the uniqueness of each day.

...SHELO ASANI GOY.

We thank Hashem for having created us as Jews. The Midrash relates that Moshe Rabbeinu was so overcome with emotion at Matan Torah, as he received the Torah and mitzvot, that he cried out with this bracha (Midrash Abachir). When we make this bracha, we need to take a moment to focus on how lucky we are to have been granted this amazing gift of belonging to Klal Yisrael, of recognizing and serving HaKadosh Baruch Hu, and of being able to learn His Torah and keep the mitzvot. Try picturing for a minute what our lives would be like if we did not have the Torah guiding it. If one really takes a moment to think about this, he will be so overcome with happiness that his heart will be on fire! (Y'SOD V'SHORESH HAAVODA)

... SHELO ASANI AVED.

We thank Hashem for having created us as free people. Rabbi Ephraim Oshry (who compiled Halachic shailot during the Holocaust in his book MIMAAMAKIM, was asked the following question - how can we continue to say the bracha of SHELO ASANI AVED when we are being enslaved in the most brutal of ways?!

He answers, based on the Avudraham, that the bracha must be recited even if one is in fact a slave. The bracha is referring not to physical freedom but to spiritual freedom. We may be physically enslaved, but we can still continue to serve Hashem, and even if that ability is taken away from us by our oppressors, we know that this status is only temporary. We are given the B'CHIRA CHOFSHIT, free choice, to continue to serve Him in our hearts. It is important for us to remember, that no matter what difficult circumstances we go through, we always have the inner freedom to choose how we react, how we behave, and how we feel.

... SHELO ASANI ISHA. (men)

... SHE-ASANI KIRTZONO. (women)

Men thank Hashem for having given them the ability to focus on their Avodat Hashem, to be able to spend hours studying Torah and to be devoted to all of the Mitzvot, without some of the “distractions” that were granted to women, and to be therefore fully obligated in all of the Mitzvot. This bracha should be a reminder every day to commit oneself to this special responsibility and privilege.

Women here proclaim that they were created as Hashem willed. Hashem

created man and woman together as one being and then separated them into two separate beings, with separate roles and entities. (Bnei Yissaschar). This was Hashem's will and we thank Him for giving us this special role, which charges us to balance raising a family with our Avodat Hashem.

Next week, we will continue with our analysis of Birchot HaShachar.