

Dvar T'fillah: Blessings Before and After the Torah

Kol Shalom, Decemer 9, 2017 Marc Lieber

Shabbat Shalom. I'm giving a d'var t'fillah, a short talk about one of the t'fillot, one of the prayers in our prayerbook, our blue siddur. Go ahead and open up your blue siddurim and turn to p. 142. We'll read in a moment.

I want to share with you a recent headline.

NEARLY ONE QUARTER OF AMERICANS SAY THE FIRST AMENDMENT GOES TOO FAR IN THE FREEDOMS IT GUARANTEES

Every year the First Amendment Center of the Newseum Institute conducts a survey, which examines Americans' views on the first amendment.

Here is the question they ask every year.

The First Amendment became part of the U.S. Constitution more than 225 years ago. This is what it says: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, or abridging the freedom of speech or of the press, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances."

Based on your own feelings about the First Amendment, please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: The First Amendment goes too far in the rights it guarantees.

That was the question they asked. Do you agree or disagree that the First Amendment goes too far?

And 23% of Americans surveyed agreed with that statement, The First Amendment goes too far in the rights it guarantees.

Now I'm no constitution expert. But to me, the rights to freedom of religion, speech and press seem pretty darn important. It's a big part of what makes America America.

I suppose I can feel better that 69% disagreed. But I find it remarkable that 23% agreed that the first amendment goes too far. America is one of few countries in the world guaranteeing freedom of religion, of speech, of the press, of assembly, and to take on the government. Every once in awhile, especially these days, something comes up to remind us how important these rights are. I really have to wonder. These rights seems so fundamental to America. Yet nearly a quarter don't agree.

Maybe it's a matter of repetition. Maybe if we repeated to ourselves why freedom of the press is important, people would remember and hold these values dear. Today this is pretty topical, for example, when you have the press discovering abuses by government officials. If there wasn't freedom of the press, would we **know** about misdeeds?

My point is that maybe we need to go out of our way to remind ourselves of core values. Maybe repetition is good. Maybe we need to do a better job repeating our core values. Maybe we learn about what exactly are our core values by looking at what we repeat to ourselves. As Americans, what do we repeat to ourselves?

What other basic kinds of ideals, values, beliefs, do we assume that people would support, but maybe they don't? Wha? about our own Jewish tradition. What basic ideals, values, beliefs are we told that we are supposed to hold, and maybe we don't.

That's actually part of why I switched a few years ago from giving divrei Torah to giving divrei t'fillah.

I started thinking about frequency, about repetition. We read our Torah portion once a year, and with our triennial cycle, we actually read a Torah portion once every three years. So how can you tell if something is important? How often do we repeat core beliefs to ourselves? What core beliefs do you have that you repeat once a year, or once every three years?

So whatever meaning we get out of it, and with my increasing short term memory challenges, I literally could give the same dvar Torah every year or every three

years and it would seem like new to me. And some in the congregation might not even notice, it would be new to them. Torah groundhog day, right?

But the prayers in our siddur are a different story. Some of them we say, traditionally, multiple times a **day**. For our Shabbat morning service, we say them every week. So these prayers are a reflection of our world view as Jews, because we are repeating them to ourselves often. They are reminding us of values and beliefs that we are supposed to hold dear. So I'm thinking these prayers are worth studying. The prayers in our siddur say a lot about our tradition, and the thinking our sages wanted to **condition** us to think. We all learn through repetition. So, this interests me. I wanted to delve into what our prayers are teaching us, and what we might learn, and how our prayers might affect our thinking and feeling. So I switched a few years ago and have been giving divrei t'fillah ever since.

Today I'm discussing a prayer that everyone knows, in fact we just did it seven times just a few minutes ago. It's the blessings before and after the Torah reading, found on p. 142 of our blue siddur.

Blessing before reading Torah

Bar'khu et Adonai ham'vorakh.

Bless Adonai who is blessed. (Sim Shalom: Praise Adonai, the Exalted one.) (Lev Shalem: Praise Adonai, to whom all praise is directed)

Barukh Adonai ham'vorakh l'olam va-ed.

Blessed is Adonai who is blessed now and forever.

(Sim Shalom: Praised be Adonai, the Exalted one, throughout all time)

(Lev Shalem: Praise Adonai, to whom all praise is directed forever and ever)

So far this should be familiar, at least to those who show up early for services. This is the barkhu, the call to worship, right? We say this right at the start of our services, right after the preliminary psalms, as long as there's a minyan. Every service, weekday, Shabbat, morning, evening, as long as there's a minyan. So this is sort of an attention getting device. The siddur is saying: Now it's time to settle down, to pay attention.

Barukh atah, Adonai
Eloheinu, Melekh haolam,
asher baḥar banu mikol ha'amim,
v'natan lanu et Torato.

Barukh atah, Adonai, notein haTorah.

(Sim Shalom: Praised are You Adonai our God, who rules the universe, choosing us from among all peoples by giving us the Torah. Praised are You Adonai, who gives the Torah)

(Lev Shalem: Barukh atah Adonai, our God, sovereign of time and space, who has chosen us from among all peoples, giving us the Torah. Barukh atah Adonai, who gives the Torah.)

Blessing after reading Torah

Barukh atah, Adonai
Eloheinu, Melech haolam,
asher natan lanu Torat emet,
v'ḥayei olam nata b'tokheinu.

Barukh atah, Adonai, notein haTorah.

(Sim Shalom: Praised are You Adonai our God, who rules the universe, giving us [who has given us] the [a] Torah of truth, planting within us life eternal. Praised are You Adonai, who gives the Torah.)

(Lev Shalem: Barukh atah Adonai, our God, sovereign of time and space, who has given us a teaching of truth, planting eternal life in our midst. Barukh atah Adonai, who gives the Torah.)

So I'm betting this is pretty darn familiar, but my goodness, there is a lot to unpack.

God chose us from among all peoples.

God gave us the Torah.

God gives us the Torah.

God gave us a true teaching, a teaching of truth, a Torah of truth

This Torah implants eternal life within us, or eternal life in our midst.

Wow. That's a lot.

If we did a survey, and said "this blessing goes too far", do you agree or not?, who might agree with this statement?

Yet we say it. We said it seven times just a few minutes ago, nobody walked out in protest.

So let's dig in and learn more.

asher baḥar banu mikol ha'amim, v'natan lanu et Torato. God chose us? God gave us the Torah?

These two ideas go together. God chose Israel, chose us, baḥar banu, why? To give us the Torah. Natan lanu et Torato. God chose us so that He could give us the Torah.

Key concept. A covenant means a relationship. A relationship brings obligations. If I'm a father or a husband, there are certain behaviors and obligations I have to my children and my spouse. So too with God: Israel is the chosen people. Chosenness brings covenantal obligations.

This idea of being chosen from all peoples makes some Jews uncomfortable. Some modern Jews have considered the notion that Jews are a "chosen people" nothing short of scandalous. They say it's antidemocratic, that it makes us seem like we think Jews are **superior** to others.

I don't see why we have to make comparisons to others. This our heritage. Here's something we don't repeat to each other very often: Jews have an obligation to

spread the ethical teachings that come from the one God. It's our job to tell the world. It's our mission.

Some of you know that I grew up in the Reform movement. My family was very traditionally Reform. We went to Temple every Friday night when I grew up. I never **knew** that there were services on Saturday mornings. But when I attended my first Reform services on a Saturday, and read from the Union Prayer Book, the blessing before the Torah was asher baḥar banu, "Who has **called** us from among the peoples. Not chosen us, but **called** us, from among all peoples". In those days, Reform Jews wanted to blend in, or at least not be accused of being separate and superior.

And in the Reconstructionist movement, Mordechai Kaplan removed asher bahar banu completely. Instead he wrote "asher kervanu l'avodato" which he translated as "Who hast brought us nigh to Thy service". Interestingly the current Reconstructionist Kol Haneshamah prayer book keeps Kaplan's translation but has restored the original Hebrew blessing as an option; but it mutes "chosen us" by translating asher baḥar banu as "singled us out."

Clearly, a lot of committed Jews felt that this prayer goes too far.

So how would asher baḥar banu do today in a survey? How many of us would say this goes too far?

Now let's turn to the blessing after the Torah reading.

asher natan lanu Torat emet,

Baruch atah, Adonai, notein haTorah.

Noten haTorah who gives the Torah.

So God chose the Israelites to be His people. And **what's** the **main** way that God and Israel have a relationship? Through the Torah. Through the mitzvot, the commandments in the Torah. And studying Torah is the most important mitzvah. Our sages teach Talmud Torah k'neged kulam, studying Torah is as valuable as all the other mitzvot put together.

Note the tenses of the verbs in the two blessings surrounding the reading of the Torah. God baḥar banu “chose” us from all the nations and natan lanu “gave” the Torah – both are expressed in the past. But then at the end: the key point in any Jewish prayer, called the hatimah, the last line, or signature, of the blessing), God is described as noten hatorah, , “giver of the Torah,” or, “who gives the Torah.” The message is that, not only has God given us the Torah in the past; God gives it to us anew each and every time we read it. Speaking theologically, God’s revelation is not restricted to what happened at Mt. Sinai; it happens every time we read and interpret the Torah.

So that means that each time we hear the Torah, it is given to us anew and we experience a taste of the Revelation of Sinai. It was not a one-time event, but continues wherever and whenever the Torah is read and studied.

This past and present tense teach us that revelation is continuous. Revelation never ceases, and it continually arrives through Torah study.

Conclusion

I’ll admit that, at first glance, a statement that God gives us the Torah, that God chose us from all peoples, that God implants eternal life in us, I can see how some people might think this goes too far. Just like some people might think that freedom of the press goes too far. That is, until I experience it personally. When I see the press bring something important to light that makes the world change in a positive way, then maybe protecting freedom of the press is a good idea.

Similarly with Torah study. When it’s a spectator activity, it may not be that great. When I get the chance to dig into it, suddenly whole worlds open up.

I’ll conclude with something basic. The basic thought is: what does it mean to experience something spiritual? In the mystical tradition, they ask how can I experience God?

So let’s get even more basic. Why do we even bless the Torah? Why not just read it?

Why do we bless anything?

All of us know that in our Jewish tradition, we have blessings for lots of things: eating bread, drinking wine, seeing a king, experiencing lightning. When I hold an apple in my hand, ready to eat it, and say, "Blessed are You, Lord, our God, King of the Universe, who creates the fruit of the tree," what I'm really saying is a lot more than just "thanks for making this apple." I'm saying, "Your presence in this world has been made that much greater, Your presence in the world has increased, through this fruit You created that I am about to enjoy."

Whatever it is I'm making the blessing for – whether it's a food I'm enjoying, a roll of thunder I heard, or a mitzvah I'm about to perform such as reading from the Torah – the reason I bless something is to increase God's presence in the world, increase God's presence in **my** world, through my recognition of His role in creating this thing or commanding this action.

I know that Rabbi Maltzman is not a big fan of gematria, the mystical search for meaning in the numerical values of words. I'm not big on gematria either, but sometimes you can really learn from it.

Look at the root letters of the Hebrew word for blessing "Brakha" – bet, reish, khaf – whose numerical value are 2, 20 and 200. Bet two, khaf 20, reish 200. How cool is that? The number one signifies the minimal amount of anything. The number two means multiplicity. The word Brakha is made up of all the "two's 2-20-200," hinting to the power of a Brakha to multiply. By being aware of the good in something, each of us can multiply good into the world, can bring much more good into the world.

Judaism shows us how to channel the Divine into the mundane. I want to eat an apple, but when I bless it, it's not just an apple anymore. It's God's creation, it's a miracle. Judaism helps me to reveal the spiritual through the physical. I'm not just eating an apple, I am experiencing God's creation. I'm not just reading an amazing piece of literature, that we call the Torah, I am experiencing God's thinking and teaching. And once I am in that mental state, then it's a pretty straight line from there to remembering my mission as a Jew: to be a light unto the nations, to be part of a holy people, to act with love and kindness, to pursue justice, and to care for the stranger. Shabbat Shalom.