

A BLESSING FOR HEALTH

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As a student of biology, my days are filled with the study of the human body. Biology is a fascinating subject, while at the same time quite a complex one. The number of tissues and organs we must identify is intimidating. The task of memorizing the mechanisms and pathways the body uses in its daily activities is daunting.

In the context of a college course, the intricacies of the human body are overwhelming. However, without the pressure of exams, the wondrousness of the human body is astounding and mind-boggling. Each organ system, with all its complexities, is only a small piece of the overall workings of the body. *Yad Hashem* is so clearly evident. It is no wonder that the *Rambam*, in discussing the commandments to love and fear G-d, says that the way to attain these emotions is through the contemplation of nature (*Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah* 2:2).

We have the opportunity to stop and focus on these miracles of nature multiple times each day, when we recite the blessing of *asher yatzar*. *Chazal* instituted this special *bracha* to be said after a person relieves himself. At first, we may tend to overlook or even belittle this “bathroom *bracha*.” However, with proper concentration, this blessing can be a tool to elevate our relationship with G-d, as the *Rambam* described. Every time we use the restroom, we acknowledge the miracle of our health, and thank G-d for this gift. The fact that our bodies work properly, despite the complexities of their functioning, truly is a wonder.

The text of the *asher yatzar* blessing is noted in the Talmud *Berachos* (60b). The blessing begins, “*Baruch...asher yatzar es ha’adam b’chachma*,” “Blessed are You, G-d...who fashioned man with wisdom.” Immediately in the first line of the blessing, we acknowledge G-d’s wisdom in creating the human body. It then continues, “He created within him many openings and cavities. It is obvious and known before Your Throne of Glory that if one of them should rupture or one of them should be blocked, it would be impossible to exist and to stand before You.” The openings of the body are those that have contact with an outside environment, such as the nose and mouth. The cavities are the internal organs, such as the heart and intestines. If any of these were to stop working properly, our bodies would not be able to function

(*Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 6:1).

The most common case of a cavity being blocked is heart disease, which is the leading cause of human death in the United States. The most prevalent heart disease is coronary heart disease (CHD), which often leads to heart attack [1]. In a healthy person, the arteries provide a path for blood to travel throughout the body, delivering oxygen and other nutrients to the cells. In CHD, plaque builds up in the coronary arteries, which are responsible for supplying the heart with oxygen. Over time, the plaque can rupture, causing blood clots to form. If the clots are large enough, they can completely block blood flow to the heart. Myocardial infarction, commonly known as a heart attack, occurs when heart cells are deprived of oxygen because of the obstructed blood flow, and heart muscle begins to die. With the heart not working properly, consequences can be fatal [2]. This is only one example of a cavity whose proper function is vital to our survival.

The fact that the body exists as a combination of both a physical and a spiritual entity, the two of which cannot naturally exist together, is also a wonder.

Asher yatzar ends by blessing G-d who is “*Rofei chol basar u’maflee la’asos*,” “Who heals all flesh, and acts wondrously.” There are many explanations for what this ending means. The *Shulchan Aruch* noted that our bodies getting rid of waste is in itself a form of healing. If the waste were to remain in the body, it would build up and become very dangerous. According to Rav Shimon Schwab, the phrase, “Who heals all flesh,” praises G-d for maintaining our health. The greatest healing, he said, is the prevention of disease [3]. We are constantly exposed to microbes and viruses, yet most of the time our bodies fight them off without us even noticing.

The words “*umaflee la’asos*” come from *Tehillim* 139:14, “*od’cha al kei noraos nifleisi, nifla'im ma’asecha*,” “I thank You because I am awesomely fashioned; wondrous are Your works” [3]. If an in-

flated balloon has the tiniest hole, all the air will escape. The human body, on the other hand, has so many openings, yet the soul miraculously remains inside (*Shulchan Aruch*). The fact that the body exists as a combination of both a physical and a spiritual entity, the two of which cannot naturally exist together, is also a wonder (*Rema*). The *nesbama*, which is called “*chelek Eloka mima’al*,” a piece of G-d Himself, exists in harmony with the sub-standard physical body, which produces and expels waste, and will one day decay itself. This blessing specifies the creation of man, in particular, as being “*b’bachma*,” with wisdom, because he lives this paradox [3].

“*Kol atzmosai tomarna, Hashem mi kamocha?*” “All my limbs proclaim, ‘G-d, who is like You!’” (Psalms 35:10). In this familiar passage, quoted in the *Nishmas* prayer on *Shabbos* and *Yom Tor*, *David HaMelech* praised G-d by means of his physical body. The verse continues, “*matzil ani me’chazak mimenu v’ani v’evyon mi’gozlo*,” “Who saves the poor from one mightier than he, and the poor and the destitute from the one who robs him.” Rav Schwab shed light on the connection between the two halves of this verse. He explained that the “poor and destitute” refer to the smaller organs, while the “one who robs” refers to the larger organs. G-d ensures that all organs are provided with the nutrients they need to function. The more demanding needs of the larger organs do not prevent nutrients from reaching the smaller organs [3]. Our digestive systems are such that they distribute nutrients to each part of the body in exactly the amounts necessary for proper function. The teeth physically crush the food. The food then travels down the esophagus, into the stomach, and then the small intestine, while digestive juices produced by the body chemically break it down. Once in the small intestine, the nutrients are ready to be absorbed into the bloodstream. The lining of the small intestine contains many folds with projections called villi. The villi, in turn, contain fingerlike projections called microvilli. These formations allow for increased surface area for efficient absorption. The nutrients are then passed into the bloodstream. The blood transports these nutrients to the exact places where the body needs them. Carbo-

hydrates are taken to the liver, where they are either used for energy or stored for future use. Proteins are brought to where they are needed to build the structural elements of the cells. Fats and fat-soluble vitamins are brought to storage areas throughout the body. When needed, these nutrients are sent to the appropriate organs through the bloodstream [4].

Unfortunately, it is only at the times when things go wrong that we fully appreciate the gift of health. It is in this vein that R’ Yerucham Levovitz, *mashgiach* of the *Mir Yeshiva* from 1910-1936, used to humorously tell his students that they ought to write home every time they used the restroom to let their parents know that, thank G-d, they are healthy. He recognized the miracles that are constantly taking place in the maintenance of our health [3].

The *bracha* of *asher yatzar* makes us stop and recognize these daily miracles. Dr. Kenneth M. Prager of Columbia University Medical Center described how he came to realize the meaning of this special blessing. He wrote, “It was not until my second year of medical school that I first began to understand the appropriateness of this short prayer. Pathophysiology brought home to me the terrible consequences of even minor aberrations in the structure and function of the human body. At the very least, I began to no longer take for granted the normalcy of my trips to the bathroom. Instead, I started to realize how many things had to operate just right for these minor interruptions of my daily routine to run smoothly. I thought of *Abaye* and his blessing. I recalled my days at *yeshiva* and remembered how silly that sign outside the bathroom had seemed. But after seeing patients whose lives revolved around their dialysis machines, and others with colostomies and urinary catheters, I realized how wise the rabbi had been.” [5]

Many *rabbonim* have said that taking the time to say *asher yatzar* slowly and clearly and focusing on its meaning is a *segulah* for good health [6]. We must recognize G-d as the source of our health and thank Him for the miracles He performs on our behalf daily. With proper thought and *kavanah*, saying *asher yatzar* can be a transformative experience. ■

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