

# *PEKUDEI*

## BOUNTIFUL BLESSINGS

Blessings play a central role in Jewish life. Many Jews are willing to travel far distances to receive words of blessing from a holy person. Some arrive at a wedding eagerly anticipating receiving a blessing from the bride or groom. During prayer services in *Eretz Yisrael*, the *cobanim* regularly stand to bless the congregation. Unscripted blessings are woven into casual conversations: “*Parnasah tovah* – May Hashem give you blessing in your livelihood,” “You should be *zocheh* to grow in Torah,” “May you always have good health.”

In *parashas Pekudei*, Moshe Rabbeinu gives *Bnei Yisrael* a powerful *berachah*. They had just finished building the *Mishkan* and all of its vessels. “Moshe saw all the work and behold they had done it. As Hashem had commanded, so they had done. Moshe blessed them.”<sup>1</sup>

There are many opinions explaining the meaning of this *berachah*. Rashi elaborates<sup>2</sup> that Moshe said to *Bnei Yisrael*, “May

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<sup>1</sup> *Shemos* 39:43.

<sup>2</sup> *Commentary on Shemos* 39:43.

it be the Will [of G-d] that the *Shechinah* rest in the work of your hands.” According to this opinion, Moshe continued, “*Viyhi no’am Hashem Elokeinu aleinu, uma’aseh yadeinu konenah aleinu, uma’aseh yadeinu koneneihu* (may the pleasantness of Hashem our G-d be upon us, and establish the work of our hands for us, and the work of our hands – establish it).”<sup>3</sup> This last statement is a verse from the chapter of *Tebillim* entitled “A prayer of Moshe.”

Although this is a beautiful and important *berachah*, it seems superfluous. When Hashem gave *Bnei Yisrael* the instructions for building the *Mishkan*, the verse reads “*Ve’asu li mikdash veshachanti besocham* (they shall make for Me a sanctified place and I will dwell among them).”<sup>4</sup> Hashem told them that if they construct it, His *Shechinah* will rest among them. This promise implies that the blessing of G-d’s Presence in the *Mishkan* will be a natural result of its construction. Why then did Moshe *Rabbeinu* bless the people with that which G-d already promised would ultimately happen? As we explore the many reasons and meanings behind Moshe *Rabbeinu*’s *berachah*, we will come to understand the unparalleled power of this blessing and all blessings.

## Recognizing Reality

In order to appreciate the importance of *berachos*, we first need to remember our function in the world. Hashem established this world in way that necessitates our *hishtadlus*, our efforts and active participation. He wants us to be active

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<sup>3</sup> *Tebillim* 90:17.

<sup>4</sup> *Shemos* 25:8.

partners in bettering the world. When we invest our energy, time and talents into something, we naturally develop a personal affection for it. We even refer to our projects as our “babies”! This emotional attachment can be positive, since it motivates us to dedicate ourselves to a project’s completion and success. On the other hand, this sense of connection often gradually distorts into a sense of ownership. Ownership of a successful venture is problematic due to the inherent danger of *ga’avah* (pride). We give ourselves credit for our achievement because, after all, we invested in it! Hashem our Creator is well aware of this human tendency. When *Bnei Yisrael* were about to enter the bountiful land of *Eretz Yisrael*, Hashem warned them that they would be in danger of saying, “My strength and the power of my hand has made me this wealth.”<sup>5</sup>

To avoid this pitfall, a person is advised to get a *berachah* from a *tzaddik* when beginning any project, such as building a new building, a *shidduch*, or starting a business.<sup>6</sup> Seeking out a blessing reminds the individual that his future success is not dependent on his investment. The project will only be accomplished with help from Above. Even a holy enterprise like the building of the *Mishkan* needed the prerequisite blessing of Moshe *Rabbeinu*. The purpose of the *Mishkan* was to draw down a tangible presence of G-d to rest upon the Jewish nation. The leaders of the project were people of tremendous spiritual stature. Nevertheless, the *Mishkan* would only be successful if G-d made it so.

Receiving a *berachah* makes us more aware that the only cause of success is Hashem’s Will. Rabbi Yitzchak Aramah

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<sup>5</sup> *Devarim* 8:17.

<sup>6</sup> *Ne’os Deshe, Parashas Pekudei*, p. 174.

elaborates<sup>7</sup> that if the *berachah* recipient has this intention, it makes him a more worthy receptacle for Hashem's goodness, and thus the *berachah* actually contributes to his success. We often interject mini-*berachos* in written and spoken correspondence for the same purpose. When discussing our plans, no matter how mundane, we often add, "*Im yirtzeh Hashem* (if G-d wills it)", "*Be'ezras Hashem*" (with G-d's help) or "*Besiyata Dishmaya* (with Heavenly assistance)." We strive to recognize that all blessing comes from G-d and not from our own efforts.

In light of this idea, we can appreciate the purpose of the *birkos hanehenin* (blessings on pleasurable experiences) that were established by our Sages. Hashem certainly doesn't need us to bless Him. Reciting *brachos* allows us to internalize that He is the Source of all blessing. As a result of expressing our awareness, we become worthy of receiving His blessing. We can now also better understand *Birkas Cohanim* (the Priestly Blessing). The *cohanim* say, "May Hashem bless you... may Hashem light up... may Hashem lift..."<sup>8</sup> Each statement starts with Hashem's Name to remind the listeners that Hashem is the source of *berachah*. When they take that to heart, they can become vessels for Hashem's bounty. Indeed, after stating the words that the *cohanim* will say, the Torah continues, "They shall place **My Name** upon the Children of Israel, and I shall bless them."<sup>9</sup> When we say His Name, recognizing that He is the Source, He blesses us.

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<sup>7</sup> *Akeidas Yitzchak*, *Parashas Naso*, *shaar* 74.

<sup>8</sup> *Bamidbar* 6:24-26.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, 6:27.

## Open the Gates of Heaven

Let us now explore how a blessing has power as a prayer. The *Midrash* advises that “A person should never stop himself from going to an elder to bless him.”<sup>10</sup> One case in point is “Boaz [who] was eighty years old and had not sired a child [lit. had not been remembered]; and once that righteous woman prayed for him, immediately he conceived [lit. was remembered], as it says, ‘Naomi said, Blessed is he to Hashem’.”<sup>11</sup> Another example is “Ruth [who] was forty years old and had not conceived [lit. had not been remembered] as long as she was married to Machlon; and once that righteous man prayed for her, she conceived [lit. was remembered], as it says, ‘He [Boaz] said, “Blessed are you to Hashem, my daughter.”’”<sup>12</sup>

The *Midrash* begins by advising people to go to *tzaddikim* to get a blessing. In these two examples, the *tzaddik* prays for the person. In Boaz’s example, he wasn’t even present when Naomi said, “Blessed is he to Hashem.” In a sense, a *berachah* is actually a prayer to G-d to help the individual receive the blessing. Sometimes the person is actually present to hear the blessing, but he doesn’t have to be. The *berachah* is a request directed at Hashem.

If we view Moshe *Rabbeinu*’s blessing for *Am Yisrael* as a prayer, we can better understand why the *berachah* is articulated specifically here, after the construction of the *Mishkan*. According to the *Yalkut Re’uveni*,<sup>13</sup> Moshe was concerned that

<sup>10</sup> *Rus Rabbah* 6:2.

<sup>11</sup> *Rus* 2:20.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, 3:10.

<sup>13</sup> *Parashas Pekudei*.

maybe *Am Yisrael* had sinned since the time Hashem had commanded them to build the *Mishkan*. He also doubted whether he and Betzalel had maintained the proper *kavanos* (intentions) while building the *Mishkan*. Moshe *Rabbeinu* feared that perhaps, in some way, they were all unworthy of having Hashem's Presence dwell among them. So Moshe *Rabbeinu* prayed. He *davened* for the *Shechinah* would rest on the *Mishkan*, although they were all undeserving.

Understanding Moshe *Rabbeinu*'s *berachah* as this kind of prayer should profoundly impact how we approach our *tefillas* in general. If our greatest prophet felt undeserving of divine blessings and was inspired to plead for Hashem's kindness, shouldn't we feel the same way all the more so? The *mishnah* in *Pirkei Avos* says, "When you pray, do not make your prayer a routine matter, but rather a plea for mercy and favor before G-d, as it says,<sup>14</sup> 'For He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, extremely kind and reconsiders the evil [decrees]'.<sup>15</sup>" Rabbi Matisyahu Salomon explains<sup>16</sup> that prayer is not a coin that operates a vending machine – you put in payment and the item automatically pops out. If our *tefillah* is rote and routine, it simply won't be effective. That is why, according to Rabbi Shlomo Freifeld<sup>17</sup>, the word *tefillah* shares the same letters as the word *petil* (connection). When we sin, we disconnect ourselves from Hashem. *Tefillah* should be our sincere plea for mercy, a yearning to reconnect with G-d.

<sup>14</sup> *Yael* 2:13.

<sup>15</sup> *Avos* 2:13.

<sup>16</sup> *With Hearts Full of Faith*, p. 95.

<sup>17</sup> *In Search of Greatness*, p. 43.

Rabbi Salomon quotes Rabbeinu Yonah, who says in his commentary, “Every person has to plead for his life, because there is no person on earth who never sins...” If we really understood what sin was, we would understand that one sin, one disconnection from true reality, is enough to take away everything, *chas v’shalom* (G-d forbid). And there is no one on earth that never sins. Yet Hashem still blesses us. The *berachos* that we have are because Hashem is “gracious and merciful, slow to anger, extremely kind and reconsiders the evil [decrees].”<sup>18</sup>

We approach our prayer with this mindset. We don’t pray with our hands on our hips, like we are waiting for that which we deserve – because we don’t. Rather, we pray with our hands on our hearts: *Hashem, Your mercy is the only reason I have anything. Please – continue to have mercy!*

Rabbi Shimshon Dovid Pincus<sup>19</sup> offers a slightly different approach to understanding prayer. He explains that even if we deserved the *berachos*, nothing comes to fruition without prayer. Our Sages tell us<sup>20</sup> that although Hashem created all the grasses and trees on the third day, none of these creations were actually visible until Adam was created. “Grasses came out and stood just beneath the surface of the ground, until Adam *HaRishon* came and requested mercy upon them, and rain fell and they sprouted.” They were created in potential, but they were waiting for *tefillah* to bring them into the world.

That is one of the reasons, notes Rabbi Pincus, that prayer is such a critical *avodah* for our generation. This time period is

<sup>18</sup> *Yael* 2:13.

<sup>19</sup> *She’arim BeTefillah*, p. 8-10.

<sup>20</sup> *Chulin* 60b.

called the “*ikvesa deMeshicha*” (literally: the heels of the Messiah), the period when *Mashiach* is just around the corner. He is standing at our door, just waiting to enter. Our generation carries with it all the *zechuyos* (merits) from previous generations. We don’t lack merits, we lack heartfelt *tefillah*. Our Sages tell us<sup>21</sup> that one of the components of the final *ge’ulah* will be *tefillah*. Even if everything is in place for redemption, it will not come to fruition without prayer. We need prayer to open the gates of *berachah* and *ge’ulah*.

How does this concept apply to Moshe *Rabbeinu*’s prayer at the *Mishkan*? There was an unconditional promise that Hashem would dwell in the *Mishkan*. Nevertheless, a prayer was needed to actualize that promise. The word *berachah* has almost identical letters to the word *breichah* (pool). Blessings are like a Heavenly pool filled with water, waiting for us to pray so it can flow down to us. Even if *Bnei Yisrael* were worthy and even if the *Shechinah* was destined to reside in the *Mishkan*, Moshe *Rabbeinu*’s *berachah* was still necessary. It was the key to open the gate and draw down the Divine Presence.

## The Work of our Hands

Let us delve deeper into Rashi’s interpretation of Moshe’s *berachah*, “May it be the Will [of G-d] that the *Shechinah* rest in the work of your hands.” “The work of your hands,” on a simple level, is a reference to the *Mishkan* and its vessels. Rabbi Yosef Tzvi Dunner<sup>22</sup> understands the blessing to be more far-reaching than just relating to the *Mishkan*. “The work of your

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<sup>21</sup> *Midrash HaGadol*, Shemos 2:25.

<sup>22</sup> *Mikdash HaLevi*, p. 210.



hands” is referring to all mundane work: work in your field, work in your business, work in your home. Moshe *Rabbeinu* blessed *Am Yisrael* that their everyday mundane affairs should embody sanctity, honesty, and dedication to Hashem.

Our hands represent creative labor and our mastery over the physical world. They also symbolize human control. It is challenging to elevate the hands in a spiritual sense. So we try to use them for a higher purpose by **physically** elevating them, lifting them up to give blessings. Yosef blessed Menashe and Ephrayim with an intentional placement of his hands.<sup>23</sup> The *cobanim* raise their hands toward the congregation for *Birkas Cobanim*. Lifting the hands is also a symbol of relinquishing control. *Shabbos* is when we refrain from the creative labor of the physical world and surrender to Hashem our sense of control. On *Shabbos*, we use our hands to bless our children. In prayer, we lift our hands, remembering that Hashem controls our destiny.

Rabbi Dunner emphasizes the verse about building the *Mishkan* “They shall make for Me a sanctified place and I shall dwell within them.”<sup>24</sup> We would expect the verse to read, “and I shall dwell within **it**.” Instead the verse specifies, “and I shall dwell within **them**.” Hashem’s Presence is not limited to a sanctified place, but rather this Presence should be evident in the sanctified lives of the Jewish people. Moshe blessed *Am Yisrael* to imbue holiness into the mundane endeavors of their hands. He prayed that the people would create a sacred space in all aspects of their lives for Hashem’s *Shechinah* to dwell.

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<sup>23</sup> *Bereishis* 48:13.

<sup>24</sup> *Shemos* 25:8.

## To Dwell with the Divine

Practically speaking, it is often easier to express our connection and devotion to Hashem when we are doing “holy” things, like *davening* and learning Torah. What about when we’re working in a high-pressure financial corporation? What about when we’re washing dishes? What about when we run into that annoying acquaintance? What about when we’re buying groceries, or buying a home? Do we act with the deeds and the intentions that make us worthy of receiving the *Shechinah*? Living on a level where Hashem’s Presence pervades every aspect of our lives takes much effort. How do we accomplish this? Let’s discuss three ways in which we can bring Hashem into our daily lives.

Rabbi Avraham Schorr explains<sup>25</sup> that learning Torah properly shapes who we are. “Learning Torah properly” means learning with an open mind and an open heart. We need to study Torah with the intention of letting it affect us, change us, and completely alter our perspective on the world. When a person learns Torah this way, he is called a *ben Torah*, literally a son of the Torah, because the Torah gives birth to him and raises him. It continually shapes and changes him throughout his life. There is a famous story of a man who came to the Kotzker Rebbe saying that he had learned the entire *Talmud*. The Rebbe was unimpressed and responded, “And what did the *Talmud* teach you?”

Torah learning without personal transformation is the level of Eisav. The name Eisav is related to the word *asui*,

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<sup>25</sup> *HaLeKach VeHaLibuv*, 5762, p. 33.

meaning “done” or “completed.” Eisav viewed himself as a finished product with no room for spiritual improvement. The *Midrash* describes how Eisav’s head was detached from his body and buried in *Me’aras HaMachpeilah* (the cave of Machpeilah). His head was full of Torah knowledge and ideas, but he did not let them permeate his being. His hands were still entrenched in pursuing his physical desires: Torah learning had not changed his outlook. Torah is neither an intellectual study nor a textual justification for what we already think and believe. It is a guidebook for lifelong development of our G-dly soul. It must translate into change in the way we lead our lives.

Rabbi Shlomo Aharon Wertheimer offers<sup>26</sup> another suggestion for bringing the *Shechinah* into our everyday lives. The *mitzvos* of *terumah*, *ma’aser*, and *challah* (different kinds of tithes) teach us that giving a small portion of one’s physical bounty to the servants of Hashem will bestow blessing and abundance on the rest of our physical assets. Gleaning from this idea, Rabbi Wertheimer suggests that when we work for a livelihood, we should focus on the good, holy deeds that we can do with the money: the *tzedakah*, the supporting of Torah, or the Torah education of our children. When our mundane work is infused with this lofty spirit, the Divine Presence rests upon all of our actions and blesses us with abundance.

A third approach is offered by Rabbi Shmuel Pinchasi. He highlights<sup>27</sup> the frequent mention of the word “heart” throughout the verses recounting the building of the *Mishkan*:

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<sup>26</sup> *Lesbon Chassidim*, p. 302.

<sup>27</sup> *Imrei Shefer*, p. 162.

“All who were generous of heart,”<sup>28</sup> “from each man whose heart shall volunteer him,”<sup>29</sup> “and each woman who was wise of heart.”<sup>30</sup> Rabbi Pinchasi quotes the *Zohar*, which states, “Hashem wants our heart.” The value of an action is assessed primarily by the heart that went into it.

As mentioned earlier, when we invest wholeheartedly in something, we develop an emotional attachment to it. If we devote our energy to *avodas Hashem*, we will come to a greater love of Hashem. Furthermore, all of our mundane labors can be like building the *Mishkan* if we put our heart into it. The opportunities are endless. Did we say *Birkas HaMazon* (Grace after Meals) with thought and appreciation or were we on auto-pilot? Did we pay for our groceries with the joy that we are helping someone else earn a livelihood, or were we grumbling about how much the groceries cost? Whether we are building a *Mishkan* or going to the grocery store, putting intention and awareness of Hashem into every aspect of our lives can raise us up and make us vessels for Hashem’s Presence.

May we be *zocheh* to internalize the blessing of Moshe *Rabbeinu*, gaining awareness that Hashem is the only source of blessing and that we have no control or guarantee. Let us raise our hands in prayer to open up the gates of Heaven for Hashem’s blessing to flow down to us. Let us learn Torah and allow it transform us. We need to direct our mundane lives towards Hashem with intention and emotion. When we put heart, body, mind and soul into serving our Creator, the

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<sup>28</sup> *Shemos* 35:22.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, 25:2.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*, 35:25.

*Shechinah* will descend upon each of us, into our own personal *Mishkan*, and our lives will be graced with Hashem's bountiful blessings.