



THE MULTIGENERATIONAL QUEST FOR TORAH

The Talmud (*Berachot* 11b) mentions three blessings for the Torah, which we recite each morning.¹ The first, *la'asok be-divrei Torah* (“to engage with the words of Torah”), serves as the blessing on the mitzvah of Torah study. The last, *asher bachar banu*, underscores the chosenness of the Jewish people through receiving the Torah. But the theme of the middle berakhah, *ha'arev na*, is more obscure.

Let's begin with the word *ha'arev*. Some commentators interpret it as “sweeten” or “make pleasant.”² In their view, the berakhah is a request that Torah study be pleasant or sweet (*'arev*). And indeed, *ha'arev* connotes sweetness elsewhere in *tefillah* and Tanakh. In Tehillim (104:34, *Barekhi Nafshi*) we entreat “*ye'erav 'alav sichi*,” that our prayer should be *pleasing* to its divine addressee.³ And before *birkat kohanim* on Yom Tov, we daven “*ve-te'arev 'alekha 'atiratenu*,” that our petition should be

as *pleasing* as a korban.⁴

But glossing “*ha'arev*” as “sweet” would make this berakhah very unusual. Nowhere else do we request for a mitzvah performance to be sweet. We don't recite a blessing at the Seder asking for the matzah to be tasty. Some acharonim further object that requesting for Torah study to be enjoyable would violate the principle that mitzvot should be performed for their own sake (*lishmah*), rather than to gratify the performer.⁵

These difficulties motivate a different interpretation. *Ha'arev* also means “secure” or “guarantee.” In the Talmud a guarantor is an *'arev*, and the collateral used for a loan is an *'arevon*⁶ (ערבון). In Tanakh (*Bereshit* 43:9), Yehudah offers to guarantee (*'arevenu*) the safe return of Binyamin from Egypt.⁷ On this interpretation, *ha'arev na* petitions Hashem to *guarantee* and *secure* Torah

study among the Jewish people for future generations.

The Talmudic source for the blessing illuminates this second gloss on the word *ha'arev* and how it coheres with the berakhah's central theme. Although the Talmud introduces *ha'arev na* in *Berachot* 11b, commentators explain that its composition is based on *Bava Metzia* 85a:⁸

אמר רבי יוחנן כל שהוא תלמיד חכם, ובנו תלמיד חכם, ובן בנו תלמיד חכם, - שוב אין תורה פוסקת מזרעו לעולם, שנאמר ואני זאת בריתי וגו' לא ימוש מפיו ומפיך זרעך ומפי זרע זרעך אמר ה' מעתה ועד עולם. מאי אמר ה' - אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא: אני ערב לך בדבר זה. *R. Yochanan said: anyone who is a Torah scholar and his son is a Torah scholar, and his grandson is a Torah scholar, The Torah will never cease from his offspring forever ... The Holy One Blessed be He says: I am a guarantor for you on this matter.*

R. Yochanan teaches the significance of securing three lineal generations of Torah scholars. If a family achieves three generations of Torah learning, Hashem *guarantees* that Torah will forever remain with the family's future progeny.⁹ The Talmud expresses this guarantee with the word *'arev* — “*ani arev lekha be-davar zeh.*”

This explains two features of the berakhah. First, the berakhah enumerates three generations of Torah scholarship: *ve-nihyeh anachnu ve-tze'etza'enu ve-tze'etza'ei tze'etza'enu.* Some siddurim abbreviate the berakhah to mention only two generations. But *Bach* (*Orach Chaim* 47:1) rejects these abridgements, for securing the guarantee of *Bava Metzia* 85a requires three generations of scholars and no fewer.¹⁰

Second, the passage in *Bava Metzia* decisively resolves the meaning of the word “*ha'arev.*” R. Yochanan uses “*arev*” in *Bava Metzia* to convey Hashem's *guarantee* (*ani arev lekha be-davar zeh*). Surely its cognate denotes the same in the *birkat ha-Torah*.

This, then, is the theme of *ha'arev na*: Each morning we announce our intent to transmit the divine tradition of Torah learning to our children and grandchildren. And we petition Hashem to uphold His *guarantee* (*ha'arev na*) if we do our part: that if we achieve three generations of Torah learning, then Torah study will forever abide among our progeny. *Ha'arev na* is a berakhah that aspires to secure the transmission of Torah wisdom to future generations.

What is the significance of three generations? Maharal (*Bava Metzia* 85a) explains that a *kinyan ha-Torah* is not a personal endeavor, but a multigenerational quest. We do not achieve a *kinyan ha-Torah* when we study for ourselves. Nor do we achieve it when we teach our children. We

achieve a *kinyan ha-Torah* only when we study Torah, learn it with our children, and in such a manner that inspires them to convey it forward to their children.¹¹

For this reason, *la-'asok be-divrei Torah*, the *birkat ha-mitzvah* of Torah study, is complemented by *ha'arev na*. The mitzvah of *talmud Torah* would be incomplete if it didn't aim to transmit our divine tradition of learning to future generations. Without the perspective of *ha'arev na*, *talmud Torah* would be a barren pursuit that decays with the passage of time.¹² Thus, our *birkat ha-Torah* includes not only a blessing on the act of *talmud Torah* — *la-'asok be-divrei Torah* — but a supplication for the fulfillment of our *kinyan ha-torah*: the multigenerational quest, father to son, parent to child, onward through the generations.

The theme of *ha'arev na* is beautifully captured by our custom on Simchat Torah of *kol ha-ne'arim*, to call up young children to the Torah, often accompanied by their fathers and grandfathers, to recite the *birkat ha-Torah* together.¹³ Such is the multigenerational pursuit of Torah, and so may it continue.

Endnotes

1 Rambam (Tefillah 7:10) views the *birkhot ha-Torah* as three separate blessings. Other Rishonim conjoin *la-'asok* and *ha'arev na* into a single berakhah with two parts. See Rabbenu Yonah *Berachot* (Alfasi 5b).

2 See, e.g., Rabbenu Manoach (Tefillah 7:11), *Levush*, *Orach Chaim* 47, *Taz*, *Orach Chaim* 47:5, *Siddur Otzar Ha-Tefillot* p. 59.

The English translations of the siddur follow this interpretation. E.g., Koren translates: “Make the words of Your Torah sweet in the mouths of Your people.” Similar translations appear in Artscroll (“sweeten the words of Your Torah in our mouth”), the Samson Raphael Hirsch Siddur, and the RCA siddur (“make the teachings of the Torah pleasant on our lips”).

3 See also Malachi 3:4: *ve-'arvah la-Hashem minchat Yehudah* (the offerings of Judah... shall be pleasing to Hashem).

4 Also the last stanza in An'im Zemirot: *ye'erav na sichi alecha* (may my prayer be a sweet song). And Yedid Nefesh: *ye'erav lo yedidotekha mi-nofet tzuf* (your love is sweeter than honey from the comb).

5 See *Benei Yisaschar's* commentary on *Masechet Berachot*, *Maggid Ta'alumah*, *Berachot* 11b. The objection is even sharper in light of the berakhah's conclusion which emphasizes studying Torah for its own sake (*lishmah*). See *Taz*, *Orach Chaim* 47:5.

6 See, respectively, *Bava Batra* 173b and *Bava Metzia* 48b.

7 See also Isaiah 38:14 “in my oppression, be security to me (*'arveni*).” And Tehillim 119:122 “guarantee (*'arov*) your servant's well-being.”

8 *Sefer Ha-Manhig*, Tefillah p. 50; *Bach*, *Orach Chaim* 47:1. The *'Iyun Tefillah* (in *Siddur Otzar ha-Tefillot*) p. 59 emphasizes that R. Yochanan is recorded as the author of *ha'arev na* in *Berachot* 11b and observes that he must have composed the berakhah based on his teaching in *Bava Metzia* 85.

9 R. Yochanan's teaching is derived from Isaiah 59:21.

10 *Magen Avraham* (*Orach Chaim* 47) defends the abridgement on the ground that *tze'etza'enu* can denote multiple generations.

11 A consequence of this idea: even if the obligation to perform a mitzvah for a minor child (e.g., *milah*, *pidyon ha-ben*) falls on a father and not on a grandfather, a grandfather is nevertheless obligated to teach Torah to his grandchild. See *Teshuvot Ve-Hanhagot* 4:102 and *Devarim* 4:9.

12 See *Nedarim* 81a and Rashi there s.v. *she-ein mevarkhin*. The Talmud explains that *talmidei chachamim* who study Torah without reciting *ha'arev na* fail to produce grandchildren *talmidei chachamim*.

13 See *Shulchan Arukh*, *Orach Chaim* 669. For the issue of multiple people reciting the *birkat ha-Torah* together, see *Be'er Hetev*, *Orach Chaim* 669:2, *Elyah Rabbah*, *Orach Chaim* 669:12, and *Mishnah Berurah* 669:12.