

PRAYING with *Fire*

PRAYER POINTS



Crash Course in Jewish Blessings

Why do we bless God? Isn't He blessing us?

by [Daniella Levy](#)

“Blessings” are short statements that express gratitude for something. Why are they called “blessings” and not, say, “thankings”? And even stranger, why do they all start with the statement, “Blessed are You”? Isn't it we who are blessed by *Him*?

Well, first things first: what does the word “bless” mean, anyway? In Hebrew, the root that means “bless” is *b.r.kh*, and the Sages explain that it means “to increase” or “bring down Divine abundance.” When I “bless” you, I am asking God to increase your health, wealth, happiness or whatever it may be, to shine His light on you... in essence, to give you more of Himself. So, what could it possibly mean for me to “bless” God for creating the apple I'm about to eat?

The key to understanding this is to recognize the purpose of these blessings. It is not merely to show gratitude. The purpose of a blessing is awareness.

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When I hold an apple in my hand 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, has increased, through this fruit You created that I am about to enjoy.”

I’m declaring that 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 – is increasing God’s presence in the world, through my recognition of His role in creating or commanding it.

This is one of the main themes of Judaism: channeling the Divine into the mundane and revealing the spiritual through the physical. Through this worldly experience, I experience God; and when I declare that recognition, I make His presence in the world that much more known.

Simply put: in this apple, I see God.

There are three main types of blessings.

Blessings of Enjoyment

These are blessings we make over something we enjoy with our senses. The most common ones are blessings over food. We recite blessings both before and after eating. There are different blessings for different categories of food: bread (“... *who brings forth bread out of the ground*”); grain products that are not defined as bread (“... *who creates different kinds of sustenance*”); wine (“... *who creates the fruit of the vine*”); fruit (“... *who creates the fruit of the tree*”); vegetables (“... *who creates the fruit of the ground*”); and everything else (“... *from whose word all came into being*”). If that sounds complicated, wait until I tell you that bananas and pineapples are halakhically “vegetables” because they are non-perennial plants... or that food can switch categories according to how it is prepared or eaten (for instance, orange juice). And don’t even get me started on what defines a grain product as bread, or why we say “the fruit of the vine” for wine, but “the fruit of the tree” for grapes! The point is that to make the correct blessing, you have to have a basic awareness of how that food came to be on your plate. And making the blessing gives you an opportunity to reflect on this process. The apple came from a tree, which grew from the ground, thanks to sunlight and water and nutrients from the soil, and it’s God who made all this happen.

“After blessings” are also divided by category: the long *birkat hamazon* (“blessing for sustenance”/“Grace After Meals”) for after eating bread or a meal with bread, a shortened version called *me’en shalosh* for grain products that are not bread, or fruits that fall under the category of the Seven Species, wheat, barley, grapes, dates, figs, pomegranates, and olives. These are the seven species that the land of Israel is especially celebrated for in the Torah (Deut 8:8).

The last “after blessing” is *boreh nefashot*. It’s short and in my view, it’s one of the most beautiful and meaningful. It goes like this: “*Blessed are You... who creates numerous souls and their deficiencies; for all that You have created with which to maintain the life of every being. Blessed is He, the life of worlds.*”

Why would we be thanking God for creating a deficiency? Because the very reason we are thanking Him for giving us something to eat is that He created hunger. If we were not hungry, we would not enjoy the fulfillment of that lack. Take this idea beyond physical sustenance and you’ll have a lot to think about.

Enjoyment blessings are also made on smelling something pleasant. These are very specific too, ranging from pleasant scents from flowers and trees, to the scent of herbs, to the scent of fruit, to the most specific – balsam oil. This, too, is a moment to pause and reflect on where this pleasant experience comes from and use it to channel Godliness into the world.

Another blessing in this category is *shehechyanu*: “*Blessed are You, Lord, our God, King of the Universe, who has granted us life, sustained us, and enabled us to reach this occasion.*” This is the blessing we make over new experiences (such as wearing new clothing) or occasions that are rare enough that we especially enjoy them when they come around (such as holidays or eating the first fruit of a season).

Blessings for Commandments

Jews consider the Torah to be the greatest gift of all, and the act of performing a mitzvah is an act of channeling Divine energy into the mundane. This is a very appropriate time to declare God’s increased presence in the world through this act.

Blessings of Experience

They are called “blessings of sight” or “of hearing,” but I’d call them “blessings of awe.” These are the blessings we make when we see or hear something that reminds us of God’s presence in the world. For example, when I hear a roll of thunder, I recite: “*Blessed are You, Lord, our God, King of the Universe, whose strength and might fills the world.*” When I see a streak of lightening, or experience an earthquake, or see an especially mighty mountain or river, I recite: “... *who performs an act of creation.*” When I see the Mediterranean Sea for the first time in 30 days, I say: “... *who created the Great Sea.*”

There is a special blessing for seeing a rainbow, which refers to the story of Noah: “... *who remembers the covenant, and is faithful in His covenant, and keeps His promise.*” The promise and covenant are: “*And it shall come to pass, when I bring clouds over the earth, and the rainbow is seen in the cloud, that I will remember My covenant, which is between Me and you and every living*

creature of all flesh; and the waters shall no more become a flood to destroy all flesh.” (Genesis 9:14-15)

There is another special blessing that we make on flowering fruit trees, only during the month of Nisan (your birth month!): “... *who has made nothing lacking in His world and created within it good creations and good trees for the sons of Adam to enjoy.*”

Another blessing of note is *Birkat HaGomel*; a blessing we say when we have been saved from a potentially life-threatening situation, such as surviving a dangerous illness or childbirth. We are required to say this blessing in front of at least ten people, because when God performs a miracle, we have an obligation to spread knowledge of it as much as we can. (This concept – *pirsumei nisa*, “publicizing the miracle” in Aramaic – is familiar from the holiday of Hanukkah. We display our *chanukiyot* in a prominent window facing the street for this reason.) The person who was saved says: “*Blessed are You, Lord, Our God, King of the Universe, who bestows kindness upon the culpable, for He has bestowed kindness upon me.*” Those in attendance answer, “*Amen. May He who has bestowed kindness upon you, always bestow kindness upon you.*”

There are blessings for seeing an especially wise person; for seeing a king; for seeing a group of 600,000 Jews gathered in one place (which has to do with the number of Israelites gathered at Mt. Sinai); for seeing a place where a miracle happened for the Jewish people (such as the Red Sea, the walls of Jericho, or the Jordan river crossing); for seeing a place where a miracle happened to that individual or to his parents; for seeing especially beautiful people or creations, or for seeing especially unusual-looking people or creations... and for hearing good news, (“... *hatov v’hameytiv*,” “... *who is good and does good*”), or bad news (“... *dayan haemet*,” “... *the True Judge.*”)

There is even a blessing for going to the bathroom: (“... *who created man with wisdom and created within him many openings and many cavities. It is exposed and known before Your Throne of Glory, that if one of them were to be ruptured or one of them were to be blocked it would be impossible to survive and to stand before You for even one hour. Blessed are You, Lord, Healer of all flesh who acts wondrously.*”) As we are painfully reminded every time we have a stomach virus, properly functioning personal plumbing is definitely something to be grateful for!

Basically, as the rabbi in *Fiddler on the Roof* says, there truly is a blessing for everything.

Or should I say... *in* everything.

Because the whole purpose of making a blessing is to look deep into the world we live in, and find God in it.

Excerpted from *Letters to Josep: An Introduction to Judaism* a collection of letters from a religious Jew in Israel to a Christian friend in Barcelona describing life as an Orthodox Jew. Equal parts

lighthearted and insightful, it's a thorough and entertaining introduction to the basic concepts of Judaism.