YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Structure of and Meaning of the Daily Prayer**

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**Shiur #03: *Elokai Neshama***

In most modern *siddurim*, the *berakha* of *Asher Yatzar* is followed by the *berakha* that begins with the words “*Elokai neshama*.” This *berakha* will be the focus of today's *shiur*.

***Elokai Neshama* as a *Berakha Ha-semukha Le-chaverta***

Before we examine the text, let us pose a seemingly technical question. Unlike most blessings, this *berakha* does not begin with the word “***barukh***.” In fact, there is a Talmudic rule that states that all blessings should begin with the word “*barukh*” – followed by a list of exceptions (Berakhot 46a). Tosafot asks why *Elokai Neshama* does not begin with “*barukh*.” One of the answers given to this question, cited by the Rosh in the name of the Ra’avad, is that *Elokai Neshama* is a *berakha ha-semukha le-chaverta*, a blessing that is connected to the previous blessing. (A classic example of this principle would be the blessings of the *Amida*, where only the first opens with *barukh*, and all the others have the status of *berakha ha-semukha le-chaverta*.) This possibility had already been considered by Tosafot, who rejected it because there is no connection between *Elokai Neshama* and *Asher Yatzar*, since (according to Tosafot) *Asher Yatzar* is recited only if one has relieved himself, and therefore there will be occasions when *Elokai Neshama* is recited without *Asher Yatzar*. The Ra’avad, however, argues that *Elokai Neshama* is connected not to *Asher Yatzar* but to a different blessing, though one would never have imagined this upon examining the *siddur*. In the text of the *Gemara* (Berakhot 60b) where all the *birkot ha-shachar* are listed, *Elokai Neshama* is introduced with the words “when one wakes up, one says…” This directly follows and parallels the first blessing listed there – “One who goes to sleep says *shema*… *barukh ha-mapil…* who enlightens the entire world with His glory.” The Ra’avad is arguing that these two blessings are “*semukhim*,” and therefore the second does not need to begin with “*barukh*.”

A word of clarification is necessary. You might have imagined that in order to be considered a *berakha ha-semukha le-chaverta*, a blessing needs to be **adjacent** to the first blessing, which obviously is not true here. This, however, is incorrect. In a case where two *berakhot* form the “bookends” of some activity (usually a recitation), one opening the activity and the other concluding it, they are considered *semukhim* even though they are not juxtaposed. An example of this is *Hallel*, where the concluding blessing (*Yehalelukha*, which does not open with “*barukh*”) is considered *samukh* to the opening blessing (*likro et ha-hallel*). What the Ra’avad is arguing is that the two blessings, *ha-mapil* and *Elokai Neshama*, are blessings on the act of sleeping, one before sleep and one after, exactly like the two blessings on the recitation of *Hallel*. They are therefore intimately related, despite the intervening activity (which in this case is quite long) and therefore the second blessing does not need to begin with the formal opening of “*barukh*.”

If this is correct, it gives us the locus for understanding this blessing as relating to the process of awakening, of passing from sleep to wakefulness. In fact, even if the Ra’avad is wrong, it is still undeniable that the *Gemara* relates this blessing to the moment of awakening. In the context of the long list of events and blessings described in that *Gemara*, *Elokai Neshama* is clearly meant to be the very first blessing in the morning, even before “when he opens his eyes.” The Rambam, who, as we have seen, retains the *Gemara*’s notion that each blessing should be recited after its corresponding event in the morning routine, lists this blessing immediately after *ha-mapil*, and even adds to the description of the event – “when one wakes **at the end of one's sleep**, one recites **while still in bed** thus: ‘*Elokai neshama*...’”

The custom today is not to recite *Elokai Neshama* as the first blessing of the morning. Nearly all contemporary *siddurim* place it immediately after *Asher Yatzar*, which reflects the opinion of the Rama, who claimed (in contrast to Tosafot) that it is *semukha* to *Asher Yatzar*. The Rama suggested that the meaning of the words “*mafli la’asot*,” which conclude *Asher Yatzar*, is that God performs the marvel of combining soul and body, two entities which naturally should have been mutually opposed. This explains why these two blessings are adjacent, since the first is about the health of the body and the second about the health of the soul (*neshama*). Nevertheless, in analyzing the **meaning** of the blessing, it appears that we should see it as a reaction to waking up, to the passage from a state of sleep to a state of wakefulness, and that provides us with the key to understanding the blessing.

*Asher Yatzar* is about health. The *berakha* clearly states that were it not for God's providence, we could not survive. *Elokai Neshama* also states that our lives depend on God's providence. “You preserve my soul within me, and You will take it in the future.” Although it is common to say that the first blessing is about the body and the second about the soul (which is surely correct technically, as we see in the language of the two blessings), it is not clear what the real difference is. In either case, we are speaking about survival and death.

**“The Soul You Have Given Me Is Pure”**

The key to understanding the difference between the two blessings is in the first line of *Elokai Neshama.* “My God, the soul You have given me is **pure**.” What is purity of the soul? It is worthwhile to compare *tahara* (purity)with the concept of *kedusha* (sanctity). The two are obviously related – the first is a halakhic requirement for the second, but, despite their being used interchangeably in common speech, they are clearly different concepts with different halakhic ramifications. Perhaps the most important key to the difference can be seen in the formal status of each. Purity is a natural state, whereas impurity is a state that is caused by some special event. The created natural world is *tahor*, until something disturbs that state. Sanctity, on the other hand, is a non-natural state. The natural world is mundane, until an action of sanctification takes place and causes a state of sanctity.

A well-known explanation for the concept of impurity is that it involves contact with the experience of death. We cannot examine this idea fully now, but it is clear that there is a connection between death and much of the laws of *tum'a* (impurity).[[1]](#footnote-1) Why does death cause *tum'a*? Or, to ask the better question, what is it about the state of *tahara* that is defiled by death?

The answer, in my opinion, is clear. Life is a state that allows for change and growth. Death, the state of the inert, is the cessation of that potential for growth. A human being, created in the image of God, has the potential to transcend himself, to create new value, to come closer to God. That is what distinguishes Man from the natural world – a man is potentially more than himself. Death means no growth is possible, and that contact with the elimination of transcendence is the state of *tum'a*. Conversely, the **potential** for transcendence is *tahara*. It is not an objective value in itself, only the potential to achieve. *Kedusha*, on the other hand, relates to the actual and not the potential. When someone transcends himself, actively climbing the ladder unto God, that action reflects a state of *kedusha*. Accordingly, *tum'a* prevents one from entering the domains of *kedusha*, for it impugns the potential to transcend.

*Elokai Neshama* opens with a statement: “My God, the soul You have given me is *tahor*.” This is not a declaration of faith, but, like all *birkot ha-shachar*, a reaction to the experience of beginning the day. As we have seen, *Elokai Neshama* is defined by the *Gemara* as the **first** reaction to awakening. One recites this blessing before he has done anything, before he has even opened his eyes to perceive the outside world. It is one's reaction to the perception of the inner world, to one's unique self. The very first experience of life is the sensitivity to the infinite potential of man, the image of God. Nothing yet has happened, and nothing has been accomplished – it is simply the sensation of pure potentiality. One does not experience the first stirrings of life in one's soul as *kedusha*, for nothing has yet been done; but even then – perhaps especially then – one can experience it as *tahara*.

In *Asher Yatzar*, life is the balance of God's power of creation. Life in *Elokai Neshama* is not a state at all, but a potentiality. It is not part of this natural world. Hence: “You have created it/ You have formed it/ You **have breathed it into me**/ And You preserve it in me.” The Torah describes the last stage of the creation of Man with the words, “He breathed in his nostrils the soul of life” (*Bereishit* 2:7). The Ramban pithily comments, “he who breathes from within himself breathes.” The metaphor of breathing life into man implies that the “soul of life” is being **transferred**, **not created**. The blessing is based on the perception that man has limitless potential, and in this line the blessing is hinting at the source of that infinite potentiality – it is not a gift created by God, which would then be part of the natural world, but in some sense a participation in the life of God Himself. The soul is “*nishmat eloka mi-ma'al*.” In other words – and this is the crux of this blessing – what we experience when we sense the potentiality of life in our first breath each morning is the presence of the living God in our midst, at the base of our soul – not as an actuality but as the source of limitless potentiality: “My God, the soul you have given me is *tahor*.”

**Appreciating the First Stirrings of Life**

*Elokai Neshama* is about the meaning of life and human existence. Death lurks around the corner, an inevitable eventuality, as we see in the blessing’s continuation: “And You will take it from me in the future.” However, this depressing notion is immediately followed by “and return it to me in the coming future.” Life is totally dependent on the grace of God, not in the sense that it is dependent on God's **power**, as are all created things, but in a deeper sense – that it is dependent on God's **presence**. This is not only an objective fact, but is part and parcel of the experience of life itself. The potentiality we experience is a sense of the infinite that lies behind it. Therefore, we immediately declare, “For as long as the soul is in my midst, I confess before you, *Hashem* my God and the God of my fathers, Sovereign of all the worlds, Master of all the souls.” Sovereign of the worlds and Master of the souls are two separate categories. Having a soul in one’s midst leads a person to recognize and affirm his relationship with the Master of the souls, which is fundamentally different from his relationship with the Sovereign of the worlds.

The conclusion of the blessing reads, “*Barukh ata Hashem*, who restores souls to dead bodies.” Since the *chatima* of a blessing encapsulates the main point of the blessing, this makes it clear that we are talking about the very basic state of being alive, of returning to life from a state the Sages view as equivalent to death. The blessing does not refer to any particular quality of life, but merely to the basic fact of being alive. Before you have done anything – as the Rambam stated, when you are still in bed – you can feel the presence of infinity in your living soul, a presence of potentiality.

The idea that sleep is death, clearly referenced in the conclusion of the blessing, is also found in the *Modeh Ani* prayer. I think we can now understand its basis. Obviously a sleeping person is alive biologically. But if life is defined as the potential to grow, to self-transcend, then sleeping is death, for while asleep you are incapable of doing anything. A religious poet might posit that death is merely sleep.[[2]](#footnote-2) This *berakha* is saying the opposite, that sleep is death. The phrase for “dead bodies” – *pegarim meitim* – makes this clear. The word *pegarim* never has a pleasant or peaceful connotation. It is always used in *Tanakh* to refer to bodies strewn in a field after a battle, discarded, arousing loathing and fear. The best translation would be “who restores souls to dead **carcasses**.” The language is not meant to give us a picture of one peacefully sleeping in blessed repose, but of a decaying relic, a remnant of a life torn away, leaving only a wrecked ruin behind. The passage from sleep to wakefulness is therefore radical and revolutionary, a passage from cold, hopeless death to creative life, even before one has done anything or created anything.

This explains another anomaly of this blessing. Most prayers are formulated in the plural, following the Talmudic dictum, “one should always include oneself together with the public” (*Berakhot* 30a). *Elokai Neshama* is one of the few exceptions, and it is intensely personal, beginning with the first word, and reemphasized in every line. The reason for this is that the blessing is a response to an experience that is intensely personal, the inner sensing of one's infinite potential. We may know that all men are created in the image of God, but we experience it in the recesses of our personal connection with ourselves. Hence, we are relating to our inner personal relationship with God – with “*elokai*” – my God. I am sure it takes place elsewhere as well, but what I am reacting to is not the universal phenomenon but the soul “preserved in my midst.”

Although the modern custom, which does not require that the morning blessings immediately follow the events that trigger them, places this blessing after *Asher Yatzar*, this should not obscure the primal nature of the *berakha*. It is the reaction to the first stirrings of life. Logically and experientially, it precedes all other religious expression.

1. *Tum'a* is engendered by contact with a human corpse or an animal carcass. It can be shown that the other categories of *tum'a* are also related in one way or another to death; see for example Rav Avraham Walfish’s analysis of *Parashat Tazria*, here: <http://www.vbm-torah.org/parsha/27tazria.htm> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. "One short sleep past, we wake eternally, And death shall be no more" (John Donne, "Death Be Not Proud"). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)