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 #04: *Ha-ma’avir sheina***

The last blessing in the series of *birkot ha-shachar* is “*ha-ma’avir sheina mei-einai u-tenuma mei-afapai*,” Blessed are You who has removed sleep from my eyes and slumber from my eyelids. As we noted last week, in the order of *berakhot* recorded in the *Gemara*, the first blessing recited upon awakening is *Elokai Neshama*, and we explained that the first thing that one **experiences** on awakening is the feeling of the life and potentiality of the soul. Awakening itself is not an experience; it is what we meet on awakening that is the experience. In fact, even the experience of seeing with one's eyes has already been granted its own preceding blessing – when one opens one's eyes one recites “*poke’ach ivrim*.” Hence, we must understand *ha-ma’avir sheina* not as a blessing on the experience of awakening – and thus not the first blessing recited – but as relating to something else.

**“WHO GRANTS GREAT FAVORS”**

The event cited in the *Gemara* as triggering this blessing is “when he washes his face.” What is the personal experience that constitutes the significance of washing one's face? Let us first consider a halakhic-liturgical problem concerning this blessing. Immediately after this blessing comes what appears to be another blessing, beginning with the words “*vi-hi ratzon mi-lefanekha*” and concluding “*barukh ha-gomel chasadim tovim le-amo Yisrael*.”As we saw last week, a *berakha* is supposed to begin with the word *barukh*. Why does this blessing begin with an entirely different phrase?

One of the answers given is that *vi-hi ratzon* is not an independent blessing at all, but the continuation of *ha-ma’avir*, together constituting one long blessing beginning with *barukh* and ending with *barukh* (Rabbeinu Tam, in *Tosafot Berakhot* 46a). This answer is supported by the fact that we recite “***vi-****hi ratzon*” and not simply “*yehi* *ratzon*,” indicating a continuation rather than the beginning of a new blessing. The halakhic ramification of this contention is that one should not answer “*amen*” after the words “*tenuma mei-afapai*,” as it is not the end of the blessing. In rebuttal, many commentators have pointed out that the theme of the *vi-hi ratzon* has nothing to do with the removal of sleep (or washing one's face), but relates to Divine assistance in avoiding sin and performing *mitzvot*. The *chatima* (conclusion) of *vi-hi ratzon* is “*Barukh*… who grants great favors to His people Israel.” How, then, can they be one blessing?

Rabbeinu Tam answers the question about the connection of the *chatima* to the beginning of the blessing (in his opinion, to *ha-ma’avir sheina*) by claiming that the “great favor” granted by God is, in fact, the removal of sleep and slumber from one's eyes. He adds, apparently in order to explain why specifically this favor is singled out as the “great favor,” that “God removes sleep from man and restores his strength, as is written in the *midrash*, “‘New every morning, great is Your faithfulness’ (*Eikha* 3:24) for He returns the soul to the body whole and peaceful, as it was originally, even though it was exhausted.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Waking up is not merely returning to the state that preceded sleep; it is a restoration and renewal of spirit. The metaphor is actually even stronger – the soul is deposited with God the Creator for the night and renewed in the morning. R. Yehuda b. R. Yakar adds, “For sleep is one sixtieth of death (*Berakhot* 57a), and [waking] is somewhat similar to resurrection” (*Peirush Ha-tefillot Ve-haberakhot*, vol. 2, 13).

One very strong indication that this is one long blessing is the comparison of this blessing to “*ha-mapil*,” the blessing recited before going to sleep. Consider the two texts side by side:

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| “***Ha-mapil chevlei sheina al einai***”*Barukh ata*… who casts the bands of **sleep on my eyes and slumber on my eyelids**.**May it be Your will, Hashem, my God and the God of my fathers**, to lay me down in peace and raise me in peace, and that my thoughts not trouble me, nor bad dreams, nor bad fancies, but my couch be perfect before You. And enlighten my eyes lest I sleep in death.For it is You who gives light to the pupil of the eye.*Barukh ata Hashem*, who gives light to the whole world in His glory. | “***Ha-ma’avir sheina mei-einai***”*Baruch ata*… who removes **sleep from my eyes and slumber from my eyelids**.**May it be Your will, Hashem, our God and the God of our fathers**, that You make us familiar with Your Torah, and make us cleave to Your commandments, and bring us not to the hands of sin, nor to transgression or iniquity, nor to temptation, nor to scorn. And let not the evil inclination rule over us, and keep us far from a bad man and a bad companion, and cleave us unto the good inclination and good actions. And compel our inclination to submit to You, and let us obtain this day and every day, grace, favor and mercy in Your eyes and in the eyes of all who see us.And grant us great favors.*Barukh ata Hashem*,who grants great favors to His people Israel. |

Both blessings begin in nearly identical, complementary language, followed by a *yehi ratzon* about the coming hours, followed by the *chatima*, which in neither case is explicitly about sleep. It seems quite clear that the two blessings are parallel, framing sleep. In addition, neither suffices with praise but includes a request as well. The request, however, makes it clear that the second blessing, *ha-ma’avir sheina*, is not about sleep, but about the coming day. In other words, our blessing is not a conclusion to sleep, but an introduction to wakefulness, in the same way that *ha-mapil* is an introduction to sleep. We are asking God to help us live the day in the proper manner, in a way that allows us to serve God to the utmost.

Reading this request section gives rise to a serious theological problem. The request appears to be asking God to eliminate our free will. A similar problem arises in regard to the request in the *Amida* to have God “return us to Your Torah,” but our blessing is, in fact, much more extreme. We explicitly ask that God “compel our inclination to submit to You.” This astonishing formulation is unique in the liturgy, and appears to completely negate the value of free will, which is surely one of the foundations of the service of God. The usual answer to this question – and I think that it is undoubtedly correct – is that we are asking for Divine assistance in our efforts to bend our own will from evil to the service of God. The language of the blessing appears to be far more extreme, but nonetheless it should be interpreted to mean that we are asking God to help us fulfill what we ourselves choose to do, acknowledging that even free will requires Divine assistance. I am aware of no other explanation for this request of God, though I admit it does not seem to be quite satisfactory in this case. We will leave this question aside for a moment, and return to the interpretation of the blessing.

**PREPARING FOR A DAY IN THE SERVICE OF GOD**

We can now attempt to offer an understanding of *ha-ma’avir sheina* and its place within *birkot ha-shachar*. This blessing is not recited at the first stirrings of life after sleep – that was the blessing of *Elokai Neshama*, which, as we have seen, was designated as the first blessing of the day. *Ha-ma’avir sheina* is the **last** blessing of the series of *birkot ha-shachar*, recited after awakening, opening one's eyes, rising, getting dressed and, finally, washing one's face. In fact, in the order found in the *Gemara*, one has already put on the *tallit* and *tefillin* as well before reciting *ha-ma’avir sheina*. The blessing is similar to *Tefillat Ha-derekh* – it is a request for Divine assistance in living, in our journey of life. Because we are awake and are about to set out on the journey of life, we naturally ask for God's blessing.

All of the previous blessings were in response to the immediate past, to an experience. *Ha-ma’avir sheina*, like *ha-mapil* **before** sleep, is in anticipation of the future, a preparation for the step we are about to take. That step is living, as a servant of God, fulfilling the purpose of one’s life.

What is the connection between such a prayer and the act of awakening from sleep? Waking up is coming in contact with life, which has been restored after a sort of death, as we saw above. The first stirrings of that potentiality were expressed in the blessing of *Elokai Neshama*, as we saw last week. When one has completed dressing, preparing to go out into the world and really live, do things and act out that potentiality, we reach *ha-ma’avir sheina*. Washing the face is an act of preparing to go out, not of removing dirt. It is a dedication ceremony, a final preparation for facing the world. God, who has removed sleep from my eyes and slumber from my eyelids, has also charged us with a task in the world. The reason we have been given restored life after sleep is so that we may be God's servants in the world. Living means serving God. This is why the two parts of the blessing are one blessing. You have restored me to life for the purpose of sending me out into the world, to fulfill the task You assigned to me. Please help me fulfill that task, to be engaged in Your Torah and fulfill Your commandments, and, especially, **not** to fail the task by succumbing to the evil inclination. We aren’t **thanking** God for life restored; we are accepting the mission implied by life restored, and immediately asking for assistance in fulfilling that difficult mission.

This is not really the place to be asking God for the necessities of life. That is what we do during the *Amida*. Here we are preparing for living, for serving God – the *yehi ratzon* is added because the situation requires it. Setting out to serve God fills me with trepidation because the almost inevitable possibility of failure would render my life meaningless. I think this explains the extreme formulation of the request. We do not really wish for God to annul our free will; we only wish for Him to help us serve Him. But the emotion behind this blessing is the total rejection of the possibility that we will not fulfill our Divinely mandated destiny, and we therefore ask God to prevent that possibility: Please, my God and the God of my fathers, ensure that I am true to Torah, engaged in *mitzvot*, free from the evil inclination, and totally committed to Your service. The language may be theologically untenable, but it is totally appropriate to the commitment of one who is setting out into the world in the service of God.

There is another anomaly to this compound blessing, as it is presently formulated in the *siddur*. The first part, “*ha-ma’avir*,” is written in the singular – “who has removed sleep from **my** eyes and slumber from **my** eyelids” – whereas the second part is in the plural – “May it be Your will, Hashem **our** God and the God of **our** fathers, that You make **us** familiar with Your Torah.” This, one might argue, is a clear indication that *ha-ma’avir sheina* and *vi-hi ratzon* are **two** blessings after all. However, this is actually a bit of an illusion. In the text of the *Gemara*, as well as in the *siddurim* of all the *Rishonim*, the *yehi ratzon* is written in the singular. It is only in the last several hundred years that the text was changed to the plural, in keeping with the Talmudic dictum that one should always pray for oneself as part of the community. However, this rule obviously has some exceptions; the most noticeable of these for us is *birkat ha-mapil*, where one asks God to protect him when he sleeps, formulated in the singular. The reason for the use of the singular here is clearly because the request is highly personal – my sleep, my sins, my fear of death. For exactly the same reason, it would make sense that our blessing should also be in the singular, since it is based on one’s personal perception of his task in life, one’s mission from God.

The *Gemara* assumes that you have already donned *tallit* and *tefillin* before reciting *ha-ma’avir sheina*. *Tallit* and *tefillin* are part of the dress of a Jew, or perhaps in a better formulation, the uniform of the servants of God. Just like *ha-ma’avir sheina*,getting dressed is part of one's preparations to act, to anticipate a day spent in the service of God.

This blessing concludes *birkot ha-shachar* by directing us to the ultimate purpose of waking up – *avodat Hashem*.

1. See *Midrash Tehillim* 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)