

**תנא דבי אליהו, כל השונה הלכות בכל יום מובטח לו שהוא בן העולם הבא**

**IT WAS TAUGHT IN THE ACADEMY OF ELIYAHU, WHOEVER STUDIES TORAH LAWS  
EVERY DAY IS ASSURED THAT HE WILL BE PRESENT IN THE 'WORLD TO COME'**

### *Chapter 2, Question 8*

#### *The beracha of אשר יצר 'Asher Yatzar'*

The human body, with all its vast complexities, never fails to fascinate the greatest of minds. The mere physiological structure and function of just a single red blood cell would be enough to humble the most advanced technological invention of our era, and to send the most brilliant of biologists into a life-time of research and study. Not to mention how much more wisdom would be required to grasp the make-up and processes of our larger organs! Only an Infinite Being... the Divine, could have conjured such genius and it is this basic understanding which is depicted by the prophet Iyov<sup>1</sup> in the famous verse:

**וּמִבְּשָׂרִי אֶחְזֶה אֱלֹ-הִים**

*And from my flesh, I will perceive the Almighty!*

Yet despite the ability of the human body to persist for so many years and to resiliently withstand the various climates and environmental extremes of our planet, it is nevertheless a very fragile system which cannot be confidently relied upon. Just a miniscule puncture in any major organ could be fatal, and if a certain vital facet of our bodies stopped functioning for simply a moment... one could cease to exist. Therefore, it should not come as a wonder why there is an obligation to thank Hashem for constantly sustaining our bodies and for enabling all the biological systems therein to function with such incredible efficiency. This acknowledgement and appreciation is achieved through the recital one of the most powerful and commonly recited berachot established in the Talmudic period by *Anshei Knesset HaGedolah* (The Men of the Great Assembly). It is the beracha of **אשר יצר Asher Yatzar**, which is said after one uses the restroom:

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1. איוב יט:כו

ברוך אתה ה' א-להינו מלך העולם אשר יצר את האדם בחכמה וברא בו נקבים נקבים  
 חלולים חלולים גלוי וידוע לפני כסא כבודך שאם יסתם אחד מהם או אם יפתח אחד  
 מהם אי אפשר להתקיים אפילו שעה אחת. ברוך אתה ה' רופא כל בשר ומפליא לעשות.

*Blessed are You Hashem, our G-d, King of the universe, Who formed man with wisdom  
 and created within him various openings and various cavities.*

*It is revealed and known before Your Thrown of Glory  
 that should one of them close, or should one of them open,  
 it would be impossible to remain alive for even one moment.*

*Blessed are You Hashem, Who heals all flesh and performs wonders.<sup>2</sup>*

Let us form the structure of our discussion by asking several questions regarding the beautiful *nusah* (constitution) of this beracha; Firstly, what aspect of Hashem's חכמה 'Wisdom' are we referring to here? Secondly, what do we mean by the words חלולים *Halulim* and נקבים *Nekavim*, and why are these words repeated? What would also be interesting to investigate is why there is a reference to the כסא הכבוד *Kiseh HaKavod* in this beracha? Finally, a beracha of this nature could have certainly been written in a more concise form, or alternatively, in far more detail. So why was this exact *nusah* chosen by Anshei Knesset HaGedolah?

The **Beit Yosef**, HaRav Yosef Caro's<sup>3</sup> commentary on the Tur, gives two explanations for the reference to Hashem's חכמה in this beracha. The first explanation is the opinion of **Rashi** who says that the 'wisdom' we are referring to is the miracle of life itself!

The ability of the body to contain a רוח 'Spirit' is truly an intelligence beyond human comprehension, and we ought to acknowledge this every time we perceive our bodies functioning in the proper manner and thus keeping us living and breathing.

The **Darchei Moshe** seems to echo Rashi's opinion. He explains that the 'wisdom' here relates to the wonder of two extremely opposite entities, being the physical human body and the spiritual soul, coming together in unison. That is remarkable in itself.

2. The full *nusah* of this beracha is found, with vowels, in the beginning of our siddurim.

3. סימן ר'

The Beit Yosef's second explanation is quoted from a **medrash**<sup>4</sup> cited by Tosefot.<sup>5</sup> The medrash says that the 'Wisdom' of Hashem we refer to is evident in the order He chose to create the world. When Hashem created the world He made man's food and sustenance first (the plant and animal life) and then only afterwards created man himself. In this way man came to a world that was already **fully prepared** for his usage and indulgence. Man was therefore able to immediately begin his journey of life, in the service of Hashem, with none of the worries associated with general mundane day to day living. This is what the medrash understands as Hashem's unique חכמה and it is fitting to recall it when we perceive our bodies to be functioning properly.

However, this explanation may be difficult to initially understand. What wisdom is there really in Hashem's creation of man only after his food was created? Surely Hashem could have created man and immediately within seconds created his food thereafter? There are two explanations for this question.

The **Bach** understands the medrash in a completely different way. When the medrash refers to Hashem's Wisdom inherent in the fact that He "created man after his sustenance", this means that Hashem literally created the **human form** on the blueprint of the food that he was actually destined to eat! Therefore the human physiology, i.e. the cavities in the body, the digestive system, etc. were all dictated to take shape through the nature of all the pre-existing environmental elements of the world and the types of foods that were already available for consumption. This is the Wisdom of Hashem that we should acknowledge and it does happen to tie in beautifully with modern scientific theory.

There is another beautiful explanation. When Adam was created and saw a world ready solely for his use and with all his needs perfectly taken care of, this made a big impression on him. It made him realise how special man is to Hashem and how important his role is in the creation. This acknowledgement helped Adam form a **close bond** with his Creator, which became the foundation of thousands of years to come of various dynamic interpersonal interactions between man and G-d.<sup>6</sup>

4. הגם שהתוס' הביא דברים אלה מהתנחומא, לא נמצא שם ובמד"ר בראשית ח', ו' מובא דרוש כעין דברי התוס'.

5. בברכות ס', ד"ה אשר.

6. כך שמעתי בשם הרב אהרון בצוץ שליט"א. אמנם בראותי המדרש הנ"ל במקורו מבואר הטעם שנברא בסוף הוא כדי לענות תשובה נצחת לטענת המלאכים ע"ש ואפשר דבפני התוס' מדרש אחר ולכן הביא הא דסנהדרין לח, ודו"ק.

The answer to our second question (what do we mean by the words חלולים *Halulim* and נקבים *Nekavim*, and why are these words repeated?) is found in the holy words of the **Ben Ish Hai**. In order to emphasize the major significance of the beracha of אשר יצר, the Ben Ish Hai digresses from his generally brief style of writing and gives us an unusually long and detailed explanation of this beracha in his *sefer* Od Yosef Hai<sup>7</sup>. The Ben Ish Hai first highlights how important it is for every man and woman to understand the **simple explanation** of this beracha, which can be summarized as follows; We have an obligation to bless and thank Hashem for creating us, and for placing within us the ability to sustain ourselves and survive through the process of eating and drinking.

[One could logically assume that the reason why we should be grateful for being created to survive in this manner, in a deeper sense, is because being dependant on food causes us to have to work and toil (parnasa) and this sets into motion our dependency on natural forces in the world. This necessity to toil and work not only keeps us away from sin, but also makes us dependant on Hashem and thus enables us to recognise His Divine Governance of the world. Inevitably we end up turning to Hashem for help and guidance in every situation and in this way we ultimately build a close relationship with Him.]

The Ben Ish Hai continues by conveying how the structure of the human body is truly an act of genius. With His infinite חכמה Wisdom, Hashem created us with many holes (נקבים נקבים), like the opening of the mouth, the end of the intestinal tract, the nostrils and ears, etc. All of these holes are essential either for our survival or for the proper functioning of our bodies and thus require constant care and sustenance. Similarly we acknowledge the various types of cavities (חלולים חלולים) within our bodies that Hashem has so perfectly fashioned, like the stomach, intestines, the lungs, etc. and we are thankful that they all function with tremendous efficiency every second of the day. According to the **Beit Yosef**<sup>8</sup> the reason why these two words are repeated is simply to emphasise the wonder in that there are **so many** of them, yet they all continue to function in unflinching unison.

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7. פרשת ויצא, אות ג

8. שם

In order to appreciate the miraculous physiology of the human body, the Ben Ish Hai quotes a book called **Sefer HaBrit**<sup>9</sup> by Rabbi Pinchas Eliyahu of Vilna (early 19th Century) which categorises the process of digestion into **five forces** or energies.

The **first** stage is called **כח המושך Ko'ah HaMoshech** (The Force of Ingestion). This is our ability to simply swallow and eat our food, which is a phenomenon that should not be taken for granted. It may be hard to believe but there are many life-forms on this planet that cannot ingest food as such. For example, green plants rely solely on the light of the sun to produce their food (glucose) through a process called photosynthesis. So in essence they cannot simply eat food, i.e. if one poured a cup of glucose syrup into the root structure of a plant, the plant would not be able to ingest it. This is the reason why deciduous plants shed their leaves, stop growing and go into a state of semi-hibernation during the late autumn and winter months - when the hours of daylight are much less. Imagine if parts of our bodies would fall off or stop functioning every time we approached autumn/winter? Therefore, it is fitting that we acknowledge and show gratitude to Hashem for having given us the ability to simply eat whenever we want to without relying on any external factors.

The **second stage** of digestion is called **כח המחזיק Ko'ah HaMahazik** (The Force of Containment) which depicts the stomach's ability to contain large quantities of food in preparation for digestion without expelling it immediately as it enters the stomach. We should certainly appreciate having this ability as there are certain creatures in the world who literally cannot consume or contain large food items. One would have thought that one of the largest of creatures on this planet, the humpback whale, would be able to easily swallow the largest foods out of all species of animal life? Yet it is indeed surprising to learn that a large bird could probably swallow a piece of food larger than a humpback could! This is because whales like the humpback feed solely on minute organisms called krill, plankton and small fish. The waters of the world's oceans are full of billions and billions of these tiny creatures, some of which cannot be easily seen by the naked eye. How is such an immense 40 tonne creature able to feed and survive on such tiny organisms? It is quite simple, yet fascinating!

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9. מאמר טז, פרק ב. 9.

The whale's large mouth is filled with a sieve-like structure instead of teeth. These whales spend most of their lives simply sieving or filtering the ocean and ingesting immense quantities of the plankton, etc. But if a whale accidentally swallowed a very large fish, like a tuna, its stomach would not be able to handle it and the whale would spit it out. We should therefore be thankful for our ability to chew, eat and contain foods of all sizes ranging from a mustard seed... to an awesome ox!

The **third stage** is called **כח המעכל** *Ko'ah HaMa'akel* (The Force of Digestion), which is the stomach's ability to secrete 'hot' powerful acids which break down food matter. Unlike ruminants, e.g. kosher mammals, camels, etc. Hashem has created within mankind the ability to fully breakdown our food without the assistance of a second stomach or the need to regurgitate our food for a second stage of 'chewing'. Imagine every time one ate a salad or a piece of steak one would have to regurgitate it back into their mouth for a second chewing? The thought is enough to make us sick to our stomachs (excuse the pun). But Hashem, with His immense kindness, has blessed us with a powerful digestive system that does not require a second stage of digestion. Similarly, reptiles are known as ectotherms, which means they do not produce their own body heat and primarily rely on the sun to heat up their bodies. Their metabolism and digestion is thus dependant on an external heat source. Imagine every time you ate breakfast you would have to sit in the hot sun or in a sauna room in order warm your body and digest your food? Baruch Hashem we do not need an external heat source to digest our food because humans are endotherms, which means we can produce our own metabolism and body heat in order stay warm and break down our food. How fascinating is that?

The **fourth stage**, **כח המברר** *Ko'ah HaM'varer* (The Force of Absorption), is the process of the stomach's and intestine's ability to absorb the required nutrients from the broken down food matter. This is truly a wonder! The body's ability to absorb the 'good' from the 'bad' is nothing short of an open miracle. The **fifth** and last **stage** is known as **כח הדוחה** *Ko'ah HaDoheh* (The Force of Expulsion) which is the bodies ability to expel or excrete unwanted matter. If one was not able to do this efficiently one could eventually poison himself.

Now, coming to our third question...

Why in this beracha do we refer to the spiritual dimension of Hashem's **כסא הכבוד** Thrown of Glory? Surely we could simply refer to Hashem himself? The Abudarham<sup>10</sup> (Rabbi David ben Yosef, 14th century - Spain) explains this as follows. The main theme of this beracha is thanking Hashem for keeping us alive by allowing our fragile bodies to function properly. Since we are dealing with the notion of life and death, it is fitting to recall Hashem's **כסא הכבוד** because the '**World of Souls**' is found specifically in that dimension.

Another novelty could be that rather than make reference to one of Hashem's Holy Names in connection to such a mundane matter (of going to the restroom), the Sages found it more fitting to refer to His Throne of Glory instead.

Whilst attempting to address the final question of this essay, we found ourselves accidentally touching upon a topic that is, for want of a better phrase, **truly profound!** Our last question focuses on why this particular *nusah* was chosen for this beracha? Is there a deeper significance behind the specific choice of these words by the Sages? Indeed we discovered this to be a very deep topic and we will attempt to answer it fully in the next series b'e'H...

### **Rabbi Yosef Haim David**

This document contains divrei Torah. Please treat it with the necessary respect.

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דף לח (הוצאת קרויזר). 10.