

Parashat Ha'azinu, 5780, 2019:

The Power of Birkat HaTorah

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof and Pittsburgh, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Some *pasukim* (verses) of the Hebrew Bible are “luckier” than others. Their frequent repetition has enabled them to become active components in the *tefilah* (prayer) experience of our people. The beginning of our *parasha* (Torah portion) contains an example of such an oft-quoted verse: “*Ki shame Hashem ekra havu godel l'Elokeinu*” (“When I call out the name of the L-rd, ascribe greatness to our G-d;” *Sefer Devarim* 32:3, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*).

The *Talmud Yerushalmi*, *Berachot* 7:1, is an early source that suggests our verse serves as the proof text for *Birkat HaTorah* (the Torah Blessings):

We have examples in the Torah wherein a *bracha* is recited before a particular act, whereas a blessing is not found after the completion of the act. What is an example of a blessing found in the Torah that precedes a particular act [that is, in the instance of being called to the Torah – *aliyah*, and Torah study in general]? “*Ki shame Hashem ekra havu godel l'Elokeinu.*” (Translation my own)

This idea is elaborated upon in a more explicit manner in *Talmud Bavli*, *Berachot* 21a: Rav Yehudah said: “From where do we know that the *birkat haTorah* prior to Torah study is from the Torah itself? It is based upon the verse, ‘*Ki shame Hashem ekra havu godel l'Elokeinu.*’” (Translation my own)

These passages teach us that “*Ki shame Hashem ekra havu godel l’Elokeinu*” is the origin of the obligation to recite a *bracha* prior to individual Torah study. This naturally leads us to ask: “Why must Torah study and its public recitation be preceded by a blessing?” I believe we can find an answer to our question by briefly examining a passage found in *Talmud Bavli, Nedarim 81a*:

For Rab Judah said in Rab’s name: What is meant by, “Who is the wise man, that he may understand this?” [*Sefer Yirmiyahu* 9:11; that is, “Why were the Land of Israel and the first *Beit HaMikdash* destroyed in 586 B.C.E.?”] Now, this question was put to the Sages, Prophets, and Ministering Angels, but they could not answer it, until the Almighty Himself did so, as it is written, “And the L-rd said, Because they have forsaken my law which I set before them, and have not obeyed my voice, neither walked therein” (Ibid., 12): But is not “have not obeyed my voice” identical with, “neither walked therein?” — Rab Judah said in Rab’s name: “[It means] that they did not first recite a blessing over the Torah.” (Translation, *Soncino Talmud*, with my emendations)

The Ran (Rabbeinu Nissim of Gerona, 1320–1376), basing himself upon Rabbeinu Yonah (13th century), notes that beyond a doubt, the scholars at the time of the destruction of the first *Beit HaMikdash* were ever-occupied in dynamic and on-going Torah study. In addition, as far as the Sages, Prophets, and Ministering Angels were collectively concerned, this alone should have been sufficient protection for the Land of Israel and, therefore, it never should have been destroyed. Yet, Hashem knew the absolute truth — the story behind the story. Yes, the Sages of the Sixth Century B.C.E. engaged in vigorous Torah interpretation and analysis, and plumbed its very depths. Unfortunately, however, they did not recite a *bracha* prior to this act. Why was this such a critical omission? The Ran suggests the following penetrating insight:

The Torah was not important in their eyes to the extent that they believed it was deserving of having a blessing recited prior to its study. This was the case, since they did not study it for its own sake (*lishmah*) [but rather simply out of sheer self-serving intellectual pleasure.] Therefore, they acted in a dismissive manner regarding the recitation of the *bracha*. This

is what the verse means when it states, “neither walked therein.” This means that the Sages of the time lacked the proper intention in their Torah scholarship and failed to study it for its own sake [that is, as a service to Hashem]. (Translation and brackets my own)

In many ways, the Ran’s interpretation is a spiritual *tour de force*. He teaches us that even when a *mitzvah* is performed in the proper manner and in all its details, if it is not done for the purpose of serving Hashem, it amounts to nothing at all. Moreover, as we have seen, it can lead, G-d forbid, to dire consequences. Therefore, whether we are immersed in learning Torah or the fulfillment of another *mitzvah*, we must ever remember that we are performing that holy act to serve the Almighty, thereby demonstrating our love and loyalty to Him. With Hashem’s help and guidance and our heartfelt desire, may this be so. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org> using the search criteria Etengoff and the *parasha*’s name.

The email list, *b’chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik’s** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.