



Blessing God: A Deepening of Relationship

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Parashat Toldot 5783

A major theme of Parashat Toldot is “ברכה - blessing.”¹ This root appears 32 times in this *parashah*, more than in any other in the Torah. God blesses Yitzḥak in the beginning of the *parashah*, and much of the *parashah* focuses on Yitzḥak blessing Ya’akov and Esav. In prayer, we use the Hebrew root ב.ר.כ as the main verb of our blessing formula. What does it mean to say, “ברוך אתה ה’ - *barukh attah Adonai*,” usually translated as, “Blessed are You, God”?

Although this *parashah* includes blessings from God to people and from people to other people, humans blessing God also has deep biblical roots.² Noah blessed God, the first use of the word by a person in the Torah (Genesis 9:26). In contrast to surrounding Ancient Near Eastern cultures, the Torah was the first to innovate the use of the term ב.ר.כ with God as the **object** of a blessing, and people as its **subject**.³ So we have to ask: what could it mean for a person to “bless” God?

¹ Moshe Greenberg, *Biblical Prose Prayer as a Window to the Popular Religion of Ancient Israel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p. 32, defined *berakhah* as: “blessing, increase, success.” See also Bradley Shavit Artson, “Barukh ha-Shem: God is Bountiful,” *Conservative Judaism* 46/2 (1994), pp. 32-43.

² The versatility of the verb לברך (God to people, people to people, and people to God) distinguishes it from other praise words like להלל and להודות, which are not used from God to people. See Christopher Wright Mitchell, *The Meaning of BRK “To Bless” in the Old Testament* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1983), pp. 15-16

³ Mitchell, p. 15.



On its face, this seems absurd. How can a person bless the Almighty? This act seems to imply God is missing something that humans, through the blessing, can offer! In the words of one medieval Jew, who asked the following question of the Rashba:⁴

Shu”t HaRashba 5:51, ed. Dimitrovsky, #23, p. 69

You asked: “What is the meaning of blessings, since the blessing is an addition of goodness. But what can a servant add to his master?”

שו"ת הרשב"א חלק ה סימן נא

שאלת מהו ענין הברכות? שהברכה
תוספת טובה - ומה יוסיף עבד
לאדוניו!...!

Indeed, the Talmud (Bava Metzia 114a) advances the position that God does not need our blessings. A number of medieval authorities already stridently rejected any possibility that our blessing could be used to add anything to God, who is already infinitely “blessed.”⁵

What is the grammatical solution for those who don’t believe God to be the object of *barukh*? The word *barukh* must not be a passive verb (implying God being acted on by a human subject), but rather an adjective (God is blessed).⁶ The Rashba responds to his questioner: “God, by granting blessing to others, is known to be filled with blessing (and not that God receives bounty from something else larger than God).”⁷ Rashi similarly (Berakhot 11b) rephrases “ברוך אתה ה’” as “השם שאתה ברוך - God, that you are (in a state of being) blessed...” Seen as an adjective, the word *barukh* is similar to other descriptions of God, such as “*rahum ve-hanun* - merciful and gracious” (Exodus 34:6).⁸ In other words, God is already “blessed”; we do not bless God. By saying *barukh attah*, we simply acknowledge through prayer that God is blessed, and we use *barukh* not to mean that people offer something

⁴ R. Solomon ben Aderet (1235-1310).

⁵ See, for example, Sefer HaHinukh #428 (ed. Chavel, p. 547).

⁶ Ibn Ezra to Exodus 18:10: “והנה מלת ברוך תואר” - The word *barukh* is an adjective.”

⁷ Ed. Dimitrovsky, #23, p. 68.

⁸ This comparison is offered by R. Yosef Albo in Sefer Ha-Ikkarim, Part 2, chapter 26.



tangible to God in an active way, but to **describe** God's existence and nature. It functions as a praise of God, who is the source of blessings in our own lives.

But what if the idea of blessing God actively—in which *barukh* would be a passive verb, not an adjective—was not as big a problem as these medieval, and some modern, authorities assume? We noted above that the Talmud (Bava Metzia 114a) objects that God does not need blessings. However, the Talmud goes on to undo its proposed objection: God does need our blessings! What is the proof? The Talmud responds: God commanded us to bless God after we eat and are satisfied (Deuteronomy 8:10).⁹ This is a line we know well from Birkat HaMazon:

Deuteronomy 8:10

דברים ח:

You shall eat and be satisfied and bless YHVH your God.

וְאָכַלְתָּ וְשָׂבַעְתָּ וּבֵרַכְתָּ אֶת־יְיָ אֱלֹהֶיךָ

In other words, there is a strong Rabbinic understanding that preserves the action aspect of the word *barukh*, without reducing it entirely to an adjective. That brings us back to our question: what could it mean to think of blessing God as an action, not a description?

This understanding is explored by Rabbeinu Behaye.¹⁰ At first, R. Behaye condemns the idea that something could be added to God through our blessings, and states that blessings are only intended to make humans understand that all blessedness in our lives comes from God, who needs no addition.

⁹ This is a striking response since וברכת could simply mean “praise” (see Joel 2:26). But the Talmud reads it as a more unusual action than offering praise to God.

¹⁰ R. Behaye ben Asher, 1255-1340.



But then, R. Behaye writes provocatively, perhaps this isn't the whole story about the word *barukh* as it relates to God.

“Shulhan shel Arba,” *Kitvei Rabbenu Behaye* (ed. Chavel), pp. 488-489.

However...blessings are not needed only by regular people.

Even the most Lofty Being needs blessings, as it is written: “You shall eat and be satisfied, and bless YHVH your God.”

שולחן של ארבע, כתבי רבינו בחיי

אמנם ... הברכות אינם צורך הדיוט

בלבד ויש בהם צורך גבוה כמו שאמר

הכתוב ואכלת ושבעת וברכת את ה

אלקיך

R. Behaye provides a few other examples of God needing a *berakhah*, and then abruptly cuts the discussion short by stating: “This is one of the mysteries of the Torah, and the whole issue of intention (*kavanah*) in prayer stems from it. But it is not appropriate to explain or expand on this idea in writing.”¹¹

What kind of blessing could God actually need? One of the examples cited by R. Behaye to illustrate his point is a story from the Talmud:

Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 7a

It is taught: R. Yishmael son of Elisha said: One time I entered to the Utmost Inner Space to offer the incense offering (on Yom Kippur). I saw Akatriel Yah Adonai of Hosts sitting on a Lofty throne.

He said to me: “Yishmael my son: bless me!”

I said to Him: “May it be Your will that Your mercy will conquer Your anger,

and may Your mercies override Your (negative) attributes,

תלמוד בבלי ברכות דף ז.

תניא, אמר רבי ישמעאל בן אלישע:

פעם אחת נכנסתי להקטיר קטורת לפני ולפנים,

וראיתי אכטריאל יה' ה' צבאות שהוא יושב

על כסא רם ונשא

ואמר לי: ישמעאל בני, ברכני! -

אמרתי לו: יהי רצון מלפניך שיכבשו רחמיך

את כעסך

¹¹ “Shulhan shel Arba,” *Kitvei Rabbeinu Behaye* (ed. Chavel), pp. 488-489.



and may You behave with Your children through the
attribute of mercy,

and go above the letter of the law with them.”

[God] nodded [God’s] head to me.

We learn from this: Do not let the blessing of a regular
person be light in your eyes.¹²

ויגלו רחמיק על מדותיך

ותתנהג עם בניך במדת הרחמים

ותכנס להם לפניך משורת הדין,

ונענע לי בראשו.

וקמשמע לך שלא תהא ברכת הדיוט קלה
בעיניך.

This story is quite astounding on a number of levels, including the vision that R. Yishmael had of God Godself. But the most important take-away for our purposes is the deep relational nature of the encounter. In the most intimate of settings, the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur, God calls R. Yishmael “my son,” and immediately asks for a *berakhah*. The content of that blessing is one in which R. Yishmael pleads for God to deepen the merciful aspect of God’s relationship with God’s children.

Ruth Calderon comments on the relational aspect of this story, and its daring understanding of the concept of blessing God:

“This story changes the direction in which blessing flows. Man no longer requests blessing from a silent God who hides His face from humanity; rather, God requests blessing from one of His creatures in a face-to-face encounter. This conversation allows for an intimate encounter between the divine and the human... When God asks for a blessing from man and man responds, the dialogue is one of two souls.”¹³

And this is the point: *barukh* is **not always** a description or acknowledgement of the abundance that comes from God; it is **also** a word of drawing close, one meant to connect the

¹² Compare to Yevamot 64a, in which the *tefillin* of righteous people turn the *middah* of God’s anger to the *middah* of God’s mercy.

¹³ Ruth Calderon, *A Bride for One Night*, trans. Ilana Kurshan (University of Nebraska Press, 2014), p. 143.





subject and the object in a deeper way to each other. Indeed, if we could only praise God—if we could never give anything back to God or wish anything for God—we would have a hard time maintaining a relationship with God. All relationships are based on reciprocal actions and expressions of emotions.

In Parashat Toldot, God offers a blessing to Yitzhak, drawing them closer. Yitzhak offers a blessing to both of his children, another moment of drawing close. Perhaps when we say, “*barukh attah Adonai*,” we might also draw close to God, and draw God closer to us.

