

## **BLESSINGS & PRAISE – Activities for Kids** **From: Let the Earth Teach You Torah (Chapter 4)**

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Our busy lives, our need or desire to get ahead—all of our seemingly important obligations often pull us away from life's simple daily miracles. Staying aware of the purpose and meaning of things, remembering their interconnections, and knowing that all of our actions have consequences is not easy. Yet these may be our most important tasks in becoming *shomrei adamah*. If we do not remember who we are and what our place is, the human tendency to become masters and controllers of our universe can get the better of us.

It takes practice to learn to "see" and value all of life, just as it takes practice to become a great athlete, musician, artist, doctor, or student. Judaism provides us with a multitude of practices to help us remember our place in the divine web of nature. Our Rabbis understood the human condition and the tendency toward arrogance. They provided us with a wide range of practices to keep us on track, in harmony with God's creation. Reciting *brachot* (blessings) is one such practice. *Brachot* remind us that ultimately we humans are not the ones in charge. *Brachot* remind us to stop and pay attention to the world around us at times when we might otherwise take things for granted. In this way, *brachot* can train our eyes and our minds and enrich our lives.

### **OBJECTIVES**

- Participants will understand where *brachot* and giving thanks fit into the Jewish way of life, and how they are basic to an ecological perspective.
- Participants will have an opportunity to express their thanks for an aspect of creation.

### **MATERIALS & PREPARATION**

- A loaf of bread or *challah*.
- Copies of Readings & Worksheets
- Paper and fine-point markers.

## Blessings and Praise

### Opening

Invite participants to say the blessing over the bread with you. Break the bread and share it.

*Baruch atah Adonai Eloheynu Melech Ha-olam Ha-mo-tzi lehem min ha-aretz.*

Praise to You Adonai, our God and Universal Ruler, Who brings forth bread from the earth.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What is the purpose of *brachot*?

*Brachot are a Jewish way of saying slow down and pay attention—something special is happening that we don't want to miss. Brachot can help us to know our place in the universe and to know that God has given everything a purpose (whether or not we are aware of that purpose).*

*Brachot are a momentary pause between the awareness of an act and the act itself. From a naturalist perspective, this pause may be considered unnatural; animals do not contemplate their food before eating. In this way brachot remind us of our humanity, and the distinctions between humans and the animal world.*

Have a volunteer read the selection from *God in Search of Man* by Abraham Joshua Heschel (see Readings & Worksheets). Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was a modern theologian and important Jewish thinker who taught at the Jewish Theological Seminary. He wrote numerous books and was renowned for his work in the Civil Rights movement.

- Have you ever looked at *brachot* in the same way that Heschel does?
- Do you agree with Heschel? Could you imagine any change in your life if you looked differently at *brachot*?
- According to the Talmud (Brachot 35). "Man may not take pleasure in [or derive benefit from] any worldly thing until he has recited a blessing over it. Anyone who takes pleasure [or derives benefit] from this world without making a blessing is guilty of misappropriating sacred property [a sin punishable by death]: What does this mean?"

*Everything in nature is a gift from God; it does not belong to us. If we use something of nature without thanking God, we are, in effect, stealing. Giving thanks is our way of recognizing the Creator who gave us the gift.*

- Can you think of traditions similar to *brachot* in any other cultures or religions, in which giving back to the earth is considered of critical importance?

*Native American tradition: One always utters thanks when using anything from nature.*

- Many people may have had the wonderful and important experience of noticing how magnificent or beautiful a tree is. Is there a difference between saying, "Oh wow, nice tree," and "Praise to You, God, who has created the trees"?

*Both are personal expressions that praise and honor the life of the tree. One uses the Jewish vehicle for praise and appreciation, but both exclamations may stem from the same intentions.*

### **Text Study: The Brachot**

There is a whole set of *brachot* which are less familiar to many Jews. These *brachot* are recited when a person experiences various natural phenomena.

After the Bible was written, the early rabbis interpreted and expanded upon the biblical laws. Around 200 C.E., Rabbi Judah the Prince collected all the Rabbis' discussions and interpretations of the Bible's laws and wrote them down in a book called the *Mishnah*.

It is in the *Mishnah* that we will find the roots of the *brachot* we say today. It is traditional for Jews to study the *Mishnah* in pairs called *Hevrutot* (sing. *Hevrutah*). Participants will study a selection from the first *masechet* (division): *Brachot* (Blessings), of the first *seder* (order): *Zeraim* (Seeds) 9:2.

Divide the group into *Hevrutah* pairs and hand out copies of the text and questions (see Readings & Worksheets). Allow ten minutes to study the texts and answer the questions. Regroup and discuss the texts, using the questions as a guide.

### **POINTS TO EMPHASIZE**

By giving us these *brachot* to recite, the *Mishnah* is training us to appreciate the wonders of the daily world that have become commonplace to most of us.

Through the *brachot*, the *Mishnah* is teaching us of God's presence in nature—even in the frightening, powerful aspects of nature.

Many people feel closest to God outdoors; that is why we have a custom of putting windows in our synagogues. For some of us, praying indoors feels unnatural; we prefer the mountains for our temples.

Athletes, artists and musicians all exercise to improve their skills. *Brachot* are spiritual exercises that we can do to help us remember the source and the Eternal in everything. Reciting *brachot* can expand our appreciation and joy in life. With an expanded awareness of the inherent value of all life, can we still exploit the earth?

## Your Own *Brachot* and Praises

The Jewish people did not stop composing *brachot* after the *Mishnah* was compiled. Like Rabbi Judah, many sages believed that some natural phenomena were special enough to merit a new, unique *brachah* (sing. for *brachot*).

Examples of these post-*Mishnaic brachot* include:

- The blessing over a rainbow, the sign of God's covenant with Noah:

*Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheynu Melech ha-olam, zocher ha-brit v'neeman b'vreeto v'kayam b'mamaro.*

Praise to You Adonai, our God and Universal Ruler, Who remembers the covenant and keeps its promise faithfully with all creation.

- The blessing over fruit trees in bloom in Spring (this may be recited only once a year):

*Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheynu Melech Ha-olam, she'lo chiser ba'olamo davar, oobarah bo briyot tovot v'eelanot to vim, I'hanot bahem b'nai adarn.*

Praise to You Adonai, our God and Universal Ruler, Who created a universe lacking in nothing, and who has fashioned goodly creatures and trees that give people pleasure.

*Brachot* are one way in which the Rabbis taught us to honor nature and God. Can you think of others?

The following story is told of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav. He was raised in a city and never spent time in a natural setting until he was married (at age 14) and went to live with his wife in her village. Her village was in the midst of a beautiful countryside, and when he first got there, he couldn't believe how wonderful it felt to be in nature. He felt that outside, he could easily pray and talk to God. There was no one to bother him, and all the animals and plants helped his prayers reach heaven. He spent much time outdoors. When he became a rabbi, he told his congregants to spend one hour a day outdoors to commune with God. Have a volunteer recite Rabbi Nachman's prayer (see Readings & Worksheets).

Ask participants to also create their own *brachot* and prayers. Have them choose a part of nature for which they would like to compose a *brachah* or poem (for example: thunder, snowstorms, an eclipse, clouds, flowers, bird songs).

If it is to be a *brachah*, it should begin with the words "Praise to You *Adonai*, our God and Universal Ruler". Tell the class to think about how the part of nature they have chosen makes them think and feel about God. The *brachah* can be simple ("Praise to You, *Adonai* . . . Who makes grasshoppers") or more elaborate ("Praise to You, Eternal. . . Who creates flying insects that sing in the summer night"). The *brachot* should say something about God's presence in nature. Encourage participants to use a name for God that speaks to them, like "Eternal" or "Source of Life," and so on.

## Brachot Sheets

Hand out paper and fine-point markers. Have participants write their newly-created *brachot* and prayers along with some of the traditional *brachot* we have discussed. Encourage them to decorate their "*brachot* sheets" with drawings and designs.

[Note: According to some traditional Jewish legal teachings, it is no longer permissible to create our own *brachot*. If you take this stance, explore this and talk about the possible rationale for this position. Then, go ahead and have participants write on their sheets and illustrate them, using the traditional *brachot* only.]

## Bringing It Home

*Brachot* help us see God as part of everything in the world. When we view nature as connected with God we are less likely to mistreat or destroy it. Rabbi Meir said that "it is a *mitzvah* (commandment) to recite 100 blessings every day" (Babylonian *Talmud, Menahot* 43b). Could this help you in your life today? Is it appropriate to expect people to do this? Would it make a difference in the world if people did this? Try to notice the number of times a day you feel appreciation for anything. How do you feel when you are appreciative? What does it feel like on a day when you forget to appreciate things? It takes work to be conscious of your world and to be appreciative of it. Try over the next week to bless things in whatever way is comfortable to you. Compare notes next time and see if the work pays off.

## For Further Reading

Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man*.

## Blessings and Praise

### Opening: From Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God In Search of Man*, pp. 48-51. Reading

Three times a day we pray:

We Thank Thee. . .

For Thy miracles which are daily with us,

For thy continual marvels. . .

In the evening liturgy we recite the words of Job (9: 10):

Who does great things past finding out,

Marvelous things without number.

Every evening we recite: "He creates light and makes the dark." Twice a day we say: "He is One." What is the meaning of such repetition? A scientific theory, once it is announced and accepted, does not have to be repeated twice a day. The insights of wonder must be constantly kept alive. Since there is a need for daily wonder, there is a need for daily worship.

The sense for the "miracles which are daily with us," the sense for the "continual marvels," is the source of prayer. There is no worship, no music, no love, if we take for granted the blessings or defeats of living. No routine of the social, physical, or physiological order must dull our sense of surprise at the fact that there is a social, a

physical, or a physiological order. We are trained in maintaining our sense of wonder by uttering a prayer before the enjoyment of food. Each time we are about to drink a glass of water, we remind ourselves of the eternal mystery of creation, "Blessed be Thou. . . by Whose word all things come into being." A trivial act and a reference to the supreme miracle. Wishing to eat bread or fruit, to enjoy a pleasant fragrance or a cup of wine; on tasting fruit in season for the first time; on seeing a rainbow, or the ocean; on noticing trees when they blossom; on meeting a sage in Torah or in secular learning; on hearing good or bad tidings - we are taught to invoke His great name and our awareness of Him. Even on performing a physiological function we say "Blessed be Thou. . . who healest all flesh and doest wonders."

This is one of the goals of the Jewish way of living: to experience commonplace deeds as spiritual adventures, to feel the hidden love and wisdom in all things.

...The belief in "the hidden miracles is the basis for the entire Torah. A man has no share in the Torah, unless he believes that all things and all events in the life of the individual as well as in the life of society are miracles. There is no such thing as the natural course of events. . . ." (Nachmanides).

### **Blessings and Praise**

#### **Text Study: The *Brachot*: Mishnah *Brachot* 9:2**

#### **Reading**

A. Upon seeing shooting stars, earthquakes, lightning, thunder, and storms, one says:  
*Baruch ... she'kocho oog'voortoh maleh olam.*  
Praise to You... Whose strength and power fill the entire world.

B. Upon seeing mountains, valleys, oceans, rivers, and wilderness, one says:  
*Baruch... oseh breisheet.*  
Praise to You... making Creation work.

C. Rabbi Yehudah taught: One who sees the Great Sea (the Mediterranean) very rarely says:  
*Baruch... she'asah et ha-yam ha-gadol.*  
Praise to You...Who made the Great Sea.

D. Over rain and over good news, one says:  
*Baruch... ha-tov v'ha-mateev.*  
Praise to You... Who is Good and does Goodness.

### **Blessings and Praise**

#### **Text Study: The *Brachot*: Mishnah *Brachot* 9:2**

## Participant Worksheet

1. What do the items in section A have in common? What do the items in section B have in common? How do the items in section A differ from those in section B?
2. Are the blessings in sections A and B appropriate for the items over which they are said? What do the blessings make us think about in each case? Why do you think the Rabbis chose these blessings for these items?
3. What items could you add to the lists in sections A and B?
4. Even though we already have a blessing for oceans, in section C, Rabbi Judah assigns the Great Sea its own *brachah*. Why do you think he does this? Are there any events or parts of nature that you believe deserve their own special blessing? Why?
5. Why do you think the blessing for rain is the same as the one for good news, and not the one for storms and thunder? This blessing would make a great deal of sense in a time of drought; should we still recite it in a time of flood?
6. Why do you think the *Mishnah* instructs someone who sees these things every day not to recite the blessing each time?
7. If we observed this tradition and recited blessings on a regular basis, how might it change the way we looked at the world around us?
8. Based on these blessings, the Rabbis seem to feel that when we look closely enough, every part of nature tells us something about God (examples: God's power, God's creative force). How might looking at nature in this way change the way we treat the natural world?

## Blessings and Praise

### Text Study: The *Brachor: Mishnah Brachot 9:2*

#### Leader Worksheet

1. What do the items in section A have in common? What do the items in section B have in common? How do the items in section A differ from those in section B?  
*All the items in section A are powerful, even frightening or destructive events. They are not everyday occurrences. The items in section B are common but beautiful, natural features. These items are constant-so constant that we often take them for granted.*
2. Are the blessings in sections A and B appropriate for the items over which they are said? What do the blessings make us think about in each case? Why do you think the Rabbis chose these blessings for these items?  
*Yes. In the first case, the blessing speaks of God's power and in the second, the blessing speaks of evidence of God's amazing creativity. The first section's items are powerful and even frightening. They might seem to represent God's power. The second list of items might not seem special until we remember that God made them.*
3. What items could you add to the lists in sections A and B?  
*A: volcanic eruptions; tidal waves; an eclipse*  
*B: flowers; rocks; waterfalls*

4. Even though we already have a blessing for oceans, in section C, Rabbi Judah assigns the Great Sea its own *brachah*. Why do you think he does this? Are there any events or parts of nature that you believe deserve their own special blessing? Why? *The Mediterranean had a special importance and meaning in the life of the Jewish people; it is the largest body of water close to the land of Israel. In the ancient world, the Mediterranean helped to define the boundaries of the "known" world.*

5. Why do you think the blessing for rain is the same as the one for good news, and not the one for storms and thunder? This blessing would make a great deal of sense in a time of drought; should we still recite it in a time of flood? *As we all know (although we may not appreciate it all the time), rain is good news, providing sustenance for the crops, insuring that our tables will be full. What could be better than the knowledge that we will be able to eat another meal, and will be able to experience another day!! In the ancient Middle East, as well as in many parts of the world today, rain was unpredictable and often scarce. During a time of floods, we can pray for gentle, nourishing rains instead of destructive torrents.*

6. Why do you think the *Mishnah* instructs someone who sees these things every day not to recite the blessing each time? *If one recited the same blessing every day, it could become rote and meaningless. Someone who has never seen the mountains or ocean before will undoubtedly be impressed on first viewing them.*

7. If we observed this tradition and recited blessings on a regular basis, how might it change the way we looked at the world around us? *We may notice more, we may appreciate the beauties of nature more, we may be more careful about preserving the natural world, and we may feel closer to God more often.*

8. Based on these blessings, the Rabbis seem to feel that when we look closely enough, every part of nature tells us something about God (examples: God's power, God's creative force). How might looking at nature in this way change the way we treat the natural world? *We would see the world as holy (connected with God) and therefore treat it with more respect and concern.*

## **Blessings and Praise**

### **Your Own *Brachot* and Praises: Rabbi Nachman's Prayer Reading**

Master of the Universe, grant me the ability to be alone:  
May it be my custom to go outdoors each day, among the trees and grasses. among all growing things, there to be alone and enter into prayer.  
There may I express all that is in my heart, talking with You, to Whom I belong.  
And may all grasses, trees and plants awake at my coming.  
Send the power of their life into my prayer, making whole my heart and my speech through the life and spirit of growing things.

### **See also Ellen Bernstein's additional publications:**

Let the Earth Teach You Torah, Ecology & the Jewish Spirit, The Splendor of Creation. OR find out more at her website: [www.ellenbernstein.org](http://www.ellenbernstein.org)