

Se'udat Hodayah Schreiber – Jerusalem – Part 1

Purim Katan 5774

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(Notes taken during class, not reviewed nor edited by Harav Ginsburgh)

Introduction

On the three festivals (שלשה רגלים) we say the *Hallel* (הלל), which is translated as “Praise.” On Chanukah we say both the *Hallel* and we give thanks to *Hashem* with the *Al Hanisim* (על הנסים); thus, on Channukah we both praise and give thanks (הודיה). But, Purim—and today is Purim Katan—is all about thanksgiving (הודיה). The Talmud gives a number of reasons for why we don’t say *Hallel* on Purim, but apparently one reason is that we don’t say *Hallel* in order to stress the feelings of thanksgiving. Both praise and thanksgiving emanate from the super-consciousness. But, specifically, praise comes from the nearer surrounding light, the light of the *chayah*, the Living One, while thanksgiving emanates from the even higher part of the soul’s superconsciousness, the *yechidah*, the singular one. It follows then that Purim as a whole, a time of thanksgiving, stems from the *yechidah*, which is also the source of self-sacrifice—the self sacrifice exhibited by the entire Jewish people, then and today. Purim Katan, the minor Purim, is always blessed with growing to become a holiday in its own right—“this small one will grow big” (זה הקטן גדול יהיה). We too have gathered here to give thanks for the miracle that occurred to a small person—a young girl. May she too grow be great.

1. Birkat Hagomel for a child

A few days ago on the 11th of Adar was the *yahrzeit* of the Avnei Nezer, a great giant of both the revealed and concealed dimensions of the Torah. The 11th of Adar is already connected with Purim and in fact Purim begins on the 11th of the month. How so? The beginning of the Tractate *Megilah* states that the time frame for reading the *Megilah* of Esther, the Scroll of Esther, begins on the 11th day of Adar and ends with the 16th day of Adar. This is also true about the 1st Adar, when we can begin to get into the Purim-atmosphere from the 11th day of the first month of Adar.

The Avnei Nezer was a halachic authority and in his collected responsa, there is a question pertaining to a young child who was sick and got well.¹ The question was raised whether this young child should be taught to say *Hagomel*—the blessing of thanksgiving—even though he is not required halachically to do so, if only for the sake of his chinuch, that he be taught to give thanks properly. The Avnei Nezer answer in the end is that he should not be brought to shul to say the blessing.

But, we should strive to understand his reasoning. He begins with the *Rosh* (Rabbeinu Asher) who rules that those walking through dangerous roads do not need to

¹ *Shut Avnei Nezer, Orach Chaim, 39.*

say *Hagomel* either. Only a person who in the time of the Temple would have been required to bring a sacrifice of thanksgiving (קרבן תודה), is required to say *Hagomel*. There four such people are enumerated in the 107th chapter of Psalms. They are someone who was very ill and recovered, a person who has traveled through a desert, one who was imprisoned and has been freed, and a seafarer—a person traveling over-seas. In any case, there is a difference between traveling through the desert and traveling on roads, even to great distances. The deserts are really dangerous, but going from here to Eilat for instance does not warrant saying *Hagomel* (unless to get there you pass through the desert). Thus, the Rosh (Rabbeinu Asher) rules that regular travelers do not say *Hagomel*, because they would also not be required to have brought a thanksgiving offering (קרבן תודה) in the time of the Temple.

The Maharm Mintz's opinion

Next the Avnei Nezer brings a responsa on the topic from Rabbi Moshe Mintz (d. c. 1480),² the Maharm Mintz who dwells on the particular language chosen by the sages for this blessing. The linguistic phrase coined by the sages is, "Blessed are You God... Who bestows goodness upon the culpable, for He has bestowed goodness to me" (ברוך אתה... ה'... הגומל לחייבים טובים, שגמלני טוב). From the words, "bestows goodness upon the culpable," we learn that we were guilty of some iniquity. When we come to give thanks to God for saving us, we should feel that we are not worthy of this goodness. Since there is no suffering without sin, when a person was sick and he recovered, he has to give out of the filling that he has received undeserved goodness from God. In effect, God has performed a miracle and healed him.

From here he comes to the young child. He says being culpable for punishment is not relevant for a child. Even if the child has done bad things, he is not accountable for his transgressions in Heaven. Therefore, if the young child says the Blessing of Thanksgiving, even if it is for the sake of *chinuch* (since he is under-aged, and not halachically required to say it), he will be casting the guilt on his parents. The Maharam Mintz says it is certainly not proper to teach a child to do so. Therefore, his conclusion, that a young child should not say *Hagomel*.

The Avnei Nezer agrees with the answer, but not with the reasoning. He says something similar, but slightly different. First of all let's return to the fact that the sages phrased the *Birkat Hagomel's* language in a way that forces us to acknowledge that we are culpable, thus instilling in us the sense that we are giving thanks out of a feeling of lowliness and submission. It's as if we say that God does miracles only for those who are full of transgressions, because such a person knows how to appreciate the kindness he has been given. But, transgressions as the source of suffering, says the Avnei Nezer, is only relevant to those who were sick and recovered and to someone who was imprisoned and released. Certainly the person did not make himself sick (it was decreed in Heaven), nor did he put himself in jail. Truly, in these cases, it is evident that your suffering is because of a judgment upon you in the Heavens. But, what about the one

² *Shut Maharam Mintz*, 14.

who is wandering through a desert or a seafarer? They put themselves willingly into these situations, so where is the transgression and guilt in their case?

The Avnei Nezer answers that it's either one way or another: either, there was no great need for the person to travel through a place of great danger like the desert or the ocean, but this person likes adventure, or the person had to take this risk in order to do something important (for their livelihood, etc.). Placing yourself at risk just for adventure's sake, that in itself is a sin. Because it was you who placed yourself in danger that discounts a miracle to help you get out of the danger. So now that you did experience a miracle, and you emerged alive, you should give thanks. But, if you really had no choice, you had to travel (and today someone who flies by plane over the ocean considered a seafarer, by many rulings), the tremendous need that you had to take this risk is itself regarded like a sickness brought on, in its essence, by your transgressions. So, in all four cases, there was a sliver at least of sin behind the suffering. Returning to the Rosh (Rabbeinu Asher) that he mentioned earlier, when someone goes on a voyage that is not over the sea or through a desert, be that voyage as long as it might be, there is no sin in the background. Therefore, he doesn't have to bring a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and he doesn't have to say *Hagomel* once he returns. Instead, a person setting out on a regular voyage, instead He says the Prayer for a Safe Trip (תפלת הדרך) when he travels (and our custom is to say it every day the excursion lasts).

A Jew is a mover and has to move

From this we have some cause to surmise that if someone never takes a trip, that too is a sin, because a Jew has to move. A Jew is a mover among those who stand (the angels). If his goal in traveling is to reach the Rebbe or he goes to give a talk somewhere to bring Jews closer to Yiddishkeit, he is not a sinner, but we have to think why he was forced to travel.

The nature of a Jew is to travel. The Ba'al Shem Tov traveled, his whole life was full of travels. The Magid of Mezritch didn't travel because of his feet. But, someone who doesn't have this problem, he should be able to travel and he doesn't have to say Birkat *Hagomel* (if he didn't pass over a sea or through a desert).

Still, the Avnei Nezer is troubled by another option. If the word "to the culpable" (לחייבים) is problematic regarding someone who traveled but not through a desert or overseas, why not just omit it from the blessing. Normally, we cannot change the language chosen by the sages for a blessing, but the Avnei Nezer learns a story related in the Talmud that it is possible to perform one's duty of saying thanks, with language that is different from that of the blessing's. The story is that Rav Yehudah was sick and got well. The sages, led by Rav Chanan came to visit him and said, "Blessed is God who has given you back to us and did not give you to the earth." Rav Yehudah answered "Amen." And said that by saying this he had performed his duty to say the Blessing of *Hagomel*. From this the Avnei Nezer learns that the language can be different. Why then could the traveler not simply change the language from "who gives kindness to the culpable," to simply "who gives kindness?"

The unleaven and leaven bread in the thanksgiving offering

To explain why the Rosh (Rabbeinu Asher) did not include land-travelers in his list of those required to say *Hagomel*, the Avnei Nezer brings a source from the Torah's concealed dimension, something he doesn't normally do. The thanksgiving offering was composed of both leaven and unleaven loaves of bread (the unleaven were like *matzah*). Both were required and you couldn't bring the offering with just one kind or the other. Rabbi Yosef Gekatilia in his book *Tzafnat Pa'ane'ach* explains that the unleaven loaves represent the thanksgiving for the miracle experienced, while the leaven (*chametz*) loaves represents being culpable for one's iniquities and not worthy of a miracle. Thus, the leaven loaves correspond to the word "to the culpable" (לחייבים), while the unleaven loaves correspond to the word, "kindness" (טיבות). And, you can't have one without the other. Likewise, then, if a traveler cannot for certain admit culpability, he would not have been able to bring the thanksgiving offering and likewise, he cannot say the *Hagomel*.

In spite of this last retort, the Avnei Nezer's opinion seems to be that from the story about Rav Yehudah, we learn that the language of the blessing can be different. Therefore, he writes that he disagrees with the Maharam Mintz that the child cannot say the blessing because he is not "culpable" of sin, but he does agree with his final ruling, but for a different reason. He takes his reasoning from the mitzvah of the Four Species, the *Lulav*. It says that a child who is old enough to shake the *Lulav* is required to perform the mitzvah for *chinuch*—educational reasons—to teach him how to act when he becomes an adult. But, if he doesn't know how to shake the *Lulav*, he is not required. Now, shaking the *Lulav* is not an inseparable part of the mitzvah; it is a custom, a *hidur* (a beautification) and *takanah* (a decree). If someone takes the Four Species but does not shake them, he has still performed the mitzvah. Likewise, since the young child can't say "the culpable," he is missing the main feeling of the mitzvah of the blessing, to feel that I am unworthy of a miracle, but a miracle was performed for me. Just as shaking the *Lulav* is the life-force [all that moves is alive, life equals movement, according to the sages] of the mitzvah of the Four Species, so the feeling of being unworthy of the miracle is the life-force in saying *Hagomel*.

2. The foundation of chinuch

Chinuch is about the hidur of the mitzvah

From all of this we can learn a number of important things regarding *chinuch*. The child's father is a *mechanech*, a teacher, and there are many other *mechanchim* here in the room. We have learnt an important foundation here in *chinuch*. That first of all *chinuch* begins with the *hidur*, with the beautification of the *mitzvah*. If a certain *hidur* is not relevant to you as a child, then you are also free of receiving *chinuch* in that *mitzvah*. Only when you become an adult and become obligated does that mitzvah become relevant for you. So the beginning of *chinuch* is related to the inner aspect, to the *hidur*. *Chinuch* begins with the soul, that's how a child should be taught.

Before we leave the Avnei Nezer's response, let's note that all this is the Torah's revealed dimension which is all very sweet, especially when the one writing it is a great Rebbe, like the Avnei Nezer. In any case, moving to the more concealed dimensions, to be "culpable" (חייב) can be interpreted in many ways.

Culpability as necessity

The literal meaning is that one is guilty before Heaven. Yaakov rebuked Shimon and Levi over their actions in Shechem. The Rebbe has a *sichah* that says, that we understand that you Yaakov are angry at us for what we did, but we had to do this—this is what our *yechidah* forced us to do. We had to do it. Nothing can be done about it. There is such a thing. Not every sin can be explained this way, but this was the reality by Shimon and Levi.

Culpability as a need to give thanks

Another possibility, which is very simple and not related to sin at all. Pesach is arriving soon and at the end of the Haggadah we say, "For this reason we must give thanks" (על כן אנו חייבים להודות). Here the interpretation is simply that we feel that we must. We must give thanks to God. The first thing a person must is he must give thanks. When a person wakes up in the morning, the first word he utters—the first word is necessary, the rest is optional—is "I give thanks." A Jew is called a Yehudi because acknowledgment and thanksgiving are essential to our being. One who feels that with every breath he must thank God, such a person will experience a miracle. Each of us should look at ourselves and realize how much we need to give thanks.

Miracles as a state of nature in the child's mind

Before we move on from the Avnei Nezer, let's derive a few more points from what we learnt from him.

According to the Avnei Nezer, a young child does not say Hagomel for a miracle that occurred to them. The inner message of this ruling is that a Jewish child who is not yet culpable (before Heaven) lives in a constant miracle. This is his natural consciousness. Even if the child knows that he was in a dangerous situation and a miracle happened to him, he still feels that it was simple, it can be taken for granted.

The child's state of mind is such that for instance when a child enters *cheider* for the first time, he sits with the teacher and we throw candy at him. He is told that the candy was thrown to him by the angel Michael, and that this is the reward given to children who learn. The child's mindset is such that he believes this. The adults think otherwise, they know otherwise, but in this case, it is the adults who should pick up on the child's mindset and figure out how to enter the same mindspace. Once a person is an adult, he no longer believes in miracles happening so easily. He feels culpable and therefore, if a miracle did happen to him, it was without his merit, therefore he runs to say *Hagomel*. Actually, as an adult, you need to be both a child and an adult. Each side of your personality should contribute to the other. Sometimes adults think that they need to reveal to the child their adult way of thinking about reality. But, in effect doing this ruins

the child's sincerity. Even to teach a child to give thanks in the form of Birkat Hagomel can be wrong, can ruin their sincerity. These are very deep ideas and this response from the Avnei Nezer has a lot of far-reaching consequences.

It's not that the child doesn't know that a miracle happened, it's that he thinks that this is how the world simply is—God performs miracles, this is the world's nature. The child thinks that God is simply required to perform miracles. God is like my father. In the same manner that I don't say a blessing every time my father does something for me, likewise, I don't have to say a blessing every time a miracle happens. It's only natural for God to perform miracles. In fact, in the language of the blessing, "the culpable" appears in a plural form (לחייבים), suggesting that there are at least two parties obligated. I, the child am obligated, and You God, are obligated. Our reality is obligatory, it is necessitated. By giving thanks, as Rebbe Nachman of Breslov says, a person's existence becomes obligatory (מתחייב בנפשו). So our first conclusion is that everything is a miracle in the child's frame of mind.

Novelty in education and chinuch

The second conclusion we can come to from this regarding education is that the foundation of *chinuch* is the *life* in the mitzvah. If the child doesn't know how to shake the *Lulav*, he is not required to perform that mitzvah.

Now, that which gives life to us in what we do changes from generation to generation. In every generation, there are different things that give life. So a true educator, a true *mechanech* has to be very attuned to the new things that give life. The feeling of life is given by the *hidur*.

Chassidim love to be *mehader* (while mitnagdim like to be *machmir*). In every generation there are new *hidurim*.

Secular studies based on Torah – Chullin al taharat hakodesh

Let's present an example of a *hidur* in education. This particular *hidur* is very dear to us. Our generation has been given the chance, the novel ability to elevate the secular subjects taught in school and teach them from the Torah. This gives tremendous life and fun to the children in learning. For instance, learning Torah with its mathematics, the triangles and squares in the Torah, that gives tremendous life and fun to the Torah, that is a *hidur* that becomes central. Like a *hidur* (shaking the *Lulav*, for instance) not knowing the Torah's math doesn't detract from the mitzvah of learning Torah. The child could make do with just learning the Mishnah and Talmud. If in a particular cheider or yeshivah the Torah's math is not learnt, they don't have to do strange things in order to introduce it, but it's certainly too bad, because the *hidur*, this way of learning, is what gives a lot of life to the learning. If you don't learn this way, your missing something that could give your learning a lot of life. The *hidur* gives novelty.

The novelties follow the holy manner of innovation in Torah learning. Holiness is always increasing and elevating. Just as there exists a concept of the descent of the generations, something that we are all very familiar with (e.g., If the early sages were like angels, then we are like humans, etc.), so too, there is an ascent of the generations

that has to do with the increasing knowledge of Torah from generation to generation. So again, from this we learn that it is necessary to shake the lulav in each generation, and whomever doesn't know how to shake it is not obligated to be taught to do so before they are halachically obligated. Indeed, every Jew should seek to shake himself, like the verse from Isaiah, "Shake yourself from the dust and get up" (התנערי מעפר קומי).

The Avnei Nezer's connection with the land of Israel

We've learnt some time ago,³ that the Avnei Nezer was very connected to the land of Israel, far more than most *tzadikim* of his generation. He sent his son and his son in law to buy land in the land of Israel, but for various reasons it didn't happen.

He said that a Jew, even if he lives in *Chutz la'aretz* but has a plot of land that gives him an income, is performing the *mitzvah* of living in the land of Israel. The *mitzvah* of dwelling in the land of Israel requires that a person make a living from the land of Israel. This was his *psak*, his ruling.

Preemptive war is not considered a time of calamity

Let's look at a *halachah* that we didn't learn back when we discussed this. There is a question regarding sounding the trumpets. In what situations are we required to sound the trumpets? When going out to what type of campaigns are we required to sound the trumpets? There is an opinion that in every war, we should sound the trumpets, because the trumpets are meant to awaken Heavenly mercy and beseech the Almighty to help us. But, the Avnei Nezer⁴ rules that it is done only when it is our enemies that come and attack us and we are in danger. But, if we are the one's preemptively going out to war, be it a voluntary war (מלחמת רשות) and all the more so if it is a necessary war (מלחמת מצוה), war, there is no *mitzvah* to sound the trumpets.

Why? He says that the *mitzvah* of sounding the trumpets applies only when we are faced with calamity (עת צרה). But, when Jews decide to go to war, that is not a time of danger. If the people decide to preemptively go to war, it is done upon the decision of the Sanhedrin. [When there is a High Priest, the decision must be based on the *Urim and Tumim*.] All the more so, if we make war to conquer our holy land, and there is a *mitzvah* to do this from the Torah, then there is no state of calamity. We embark on our campaign with joy, with complete confidence that we will succeed. Sounding the trumpets is required only when there is a sense of dire straits. And this is the opposite situation.

This is part of the natural consciousness of a Jew that when we need to, we need to embark on a war, and everything will be fine.

³ Farbrengen from 17 Cheshvan 5772, and in the subsequent farbrengens.

⁴ *Shut Avnei Nezer, Orach Chaim, 425.*