



Halakhic Questions

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Blessing over *Besamim* (Spices) for Coronavirus Patients

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QUESTION

One of the most common symptoms of coronavirus is the loss of the sense of smell. Is someone who cannot smell able to make the blessing over spices for *havdala*?

RESPONSE

From the Mishna in *Berakhot* (51b), we see the obligation to make a blessing over spices during *havdala*. We can understand the reason for it based on the Gemara (*Beitza* 16a):

For Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish said, "God places an additional soul in man on *Erev Shabbat*, and on *Motzaei Shabbat*, it is removed from him, as it says, '*shavat vayinafash*' – once he has concluded Shabbat, woe, the (additional) soul is gone."

On Shabbat, man is given an additional soul, and on *Motzaei Shabbat*, it is removed from him. Tosafot (*Beitza* 33b) explain this is the reason for the blessing over spices. We smell the spices on *Motzaei Shabbat* to settle our minds and comfort ourselves over the additional soul taken from us. So writes the Rambam (*Hilkhos Shabbat* 29:29):

Why do we make the blessing over spices on *Motzaei Shabbat*? Because the soul is sorrowful over the departure of Shabbat, we make it happy and calm it with a good smell.

Are we obligated to make the blessing over spices?

Because smelling spices on *Motzaei Shabbat* is intended for a person's benefit, one may ask if a person is obligated to do so, or perhaps he has the right to say he doesn't want this consolation.

The Gemara (*Berakhot* 53b) states that one who has no candle for the blessing of *Borei Meorei HaEsh* is not obligated to go looking for one. The *Rishonim* differ about someone with no spices – must he trouble himself to obtain them? According to the Raavad (noted in the Rashba, *ibid.*) and the Rosh (*Berakhot* 8:3), if there is no obligation to search for a candle, how much more so would there be no obligation to pursue spices, the sole purpose of which is to give a person pleasure by reviving his soul.

However, the Meiri (*ibid.*) brings this opinion and rejects it:

Nevertheless, it appears that for spices we do pursue them, since they were enacted for the honor of Shabbat, to make known the additional soul.

If so, according to the Raavad and the Rosh, smelling the spices are mainly to benefit the person; to comfort him when Shabbat departs. Therefore, if he has no spices, he may forgo this *berakha* and not exert himself to obtain them. But according to the Meiri, even though this action certainly benefits the person, it also relates to the honor of Shabbat. When a person shows that he needs consolation when Shabbat departs, he is informing himself and those around him about the additional soul that exists on Shabbat and is thus teaching about the greatness of Shabbat. Therefore, the Meiri's opinion is that in order to honor the Shabbat properly, one needs to make the effort to obtain spices.

The *Shulhan Arukh* (297:1) rules, in accordance with the view of the Raavad and Rosh, that there is no obligation to pursue spices:

He blesses on the spices if he has them, and if not, he does not need to pursue them.

Thus, it appears from his words that one who has spices must make the blessing over them, and only one who does not have spices is not responsible for obtaining them. So says the Ritva (*Hilkhos Berakhot*, 8:17), "One is rabbinically obligated to bless on the flame and on the spices on *Motzaei Shabbat* if they are available to him, but if they are not available, one is not obligated to pursue them, but should bless over the cup and this is sufficient.

May one who cannot smell make the blessing over spices?

Clearly, one who cannot smell cannot make the blessing on spices (whether for *havdala* or on other occasions) since he is not deriving benefit from them (*Tur* 297 in the name of *Rabbeinu Efrayim*, *Shulhan Arukh*, 297:5). Therefore, **a coronavirus patient who has no sense of smell and is alone at the time of *havdala* should not make the blessing over spices.**

But what would the law be when there are others with the patient during *havdala*? May he make the blessing over the spices and help them discharge their obligation?

In principle, one cannot help another person discharge their obligation of *Birkot HaNehenin* if the person making the blessing is not experiencing that pleasure himself. If the blessing is obligatory and not dependent on the person's wish to derive pleasure (e.g. *Borei Pri HaGafen* for *kiddush* or *Borei Pri HaAdama* over *karpas* on Seder Night), he can make the blessing and exempt someone else even if he himself is not deriving pleasure, since the other person is obligated in this *berakha* (since *kiddush* requires drinking wine and this drinking creates the obligation for the *berakha*), and thus the one making the blessing is considered obligated in it too, since "All Jews are guarantors for one another" (based on *Rosh Hashana* 29a, and see *Mishna Berura* 167:92).

What is the law regarding the blessing over the spices? It is reasonable that it depends on the question we dealt with above, whether there is an obligation to make the blessing over spices in the first place. If there is no obligation to go out of our way to search for spices, it would seem that the blessing itself is optional.

So says *Rabbeinu Efrayim* (ibid.), and thus his opinion is that a person who cannot smell may not make the blessing on behalf of another person:

If one who cannot smell makes the blessing over spices, it is a blessing in vain. He may not even help his family members fulfill their obligation. This is different from *kiddush* and *havdala* and the *HaMotzi* blessing for a *mitzva*, which are obligatory. In contrast, this (blessing over spices) is just a custom.

However, the *Tur* (ibid.) disagrees and holds that even one who cannot smell may make the blessing for someone else, and the *Bet Yosef* explains (ibid.) that smelling the spices is not considered a custom, but rather has the status of a *mitzva*. Therefore, one can define the person (himself) as being obligated in it (see *Bet Yosef*, ibid. So says the *Meiri*, *Rosh Hashana* 29b, in accordance with his opinion above). Also, according to the *Ritva* and the *Shulḥan Arukh's* ruling – that when one lacks spices there is no obligation to pursue them, but when one has spices one is obligated to make the blessing over them – it is reasonable that when he has spices, he may help others fulfill their obligation even if he himself cannot smell.

Halakhic Ruling

As for the *halakha*, the *Shulḥan Arukh* (297:5) does indeed decide that one who cannot smell may make the blessing over spices to help others fulfill their obligation.

However, the *Radvaz* (*Responsa Radvaz* 8:2321) and most *Aḥaronim* (*Taz* paragraph 8, *Magen Avraham* paragraph 5, *Mishna Berura* paragraph 13, *Yalkut Yosef* 297:10) disagree. They rule that a person may not help others discharge their obligation for the blessing over spices (because, in their opinion, this is an optional blessing, or because this obligation in its essence was enacted in order that the person benefit from the spices, and therefore even if it is obligatory, one who does not benefit may not make the blessing on it).

Therefore, someone with coronavirus who cannot smell should have someone else make the blessing over spices. If he is alone, he should skip the blessing over spices, and will fulfill his *havdala* obligation in spite of not saying the blessing over spices at all. That said, even a patient who has no sense of taste should make the *Borei Pri HaGafen* blessing over the wine, since even if he has no benefit from the taste of the wine, he does have the benefit from the wine's nourishment, and must therefore make the blessing.

Soul Benefits

Recent studies conducted on millions of people have shown that losing the sense of smell and sense of taste are very reliable signs that a person has coronavirus. The *Gemara* (*Berakhot* 43b) cites the verse, "Every soul shall praise God, Halleluya," and asks "What is it that only the soul can enjoy? Aroma."

Aroma has something special about it: on one hand, almost nothing tangible enters the body (as opposed to eating). On the other hand, aroma causes an inner pleasure which sometimes affects many other things. For example, food with a pleasant aroma causes much greater pleasure than food without an aroma or with an unpleasant odor. A house with a pleasant smell creates a much more pleasant sensation than does a house without.

The loss of our sense of smell doesn't prevent us from living. We can still eat, walk, and work. But it does remove an important inner essence, a soulful essence.

After so many people have become ill and have lost their sense of smell, we can understand from them just how substantial the sense of smell is in our lives. The coronavirus has caused many difficulties, but from it

we have learned to appreciate all the good that Hashem has given us, even things we could have managed without.

Hashem wants us to live with joy. He has given us pleasant aromas, so the soul can draw from these aromas, and for us to live in a pleasant manner. *B'ezrat Hashem*, may we merit to smell sweet aromas, and to see good in everything around us, in the incredible world that Hashem has given to us.