



The Three Blessings on Talmud Torah

Why Three *Berachot*? The *mitzvah* of Talmud Torah is unique in that we recite **three** *berachot* before performing the *mitzvah* each morning. The Raavad explains that reciting all three does not constitute *berachot levatala* because each *bracha* relates to an independent, indispensable aspect of the *mitzvah*.

The First *Beracha*: The *Mitzvah* of Talmud Torah

We begin the *berachot* with the classic formulation we use for *berachot* on other *mitzvot*: אשר קדשנו במצותיו וצונו לעסוק בדברי תורה. Before relating to the unique aspects of Talmud Torah, we relate to it as a *mitzvah*. The first and basic reason we learn is because Hashem commanded us to do so. It is critical that our learning be *lishma* – done with the intention to fulfill Hashem's commandment.

The Third *Beracha*: The Gift of Torah

Reciting only the first *beracha* would be ignoring the added significance of Talmud Torah. The third *beracha* expresses our appreciation to Hashem for having chosen to give the Torah to us: אשר בחר בנו מכל העמים ונתן לנו את תורתו, ברוך אתה ה' נותן התורה. Torah enriches the lives of those who learn it. By giving us the Torah, Hashem gives our lives meaning and direction.

Like the rest of creation, human beings are created for the glory of G-d. Most people struggle to identify and realize their destiny. Hashem separated us from those 'wandering' by giving us the Torah, which offers us eternal life by teaching us the truth about the world and our place within it.

By giving us the Torah, Hashem expressed His love for us. We show

our appreciation of this love and how Torah enriches our lives and we commit ourselves to taking full advantage of the opportunity to learn it by reciting the *beracha* before *Kriyat Shema* (during *Ma'ariv*):

אהבת עולם בית ישראל עמך אהבת- תורה ומצות חוקים ומשפטים אותנו למדת.
על כן ה' אלקינו בשכבנו ובקומנו נשיח בחוקיך ונשמח בדברי תורתך ובמצותיך לעולם ועד.
כי הם חיינו וארך ימינו ובהם נהגה יומם ולילה.

Before we recite *Kriyat Shema*, which mentions the *mitzvah* for **us** to love **Hashem**, we emphasize how much **Hashem** loves **us**, as evidenced by His having given us His Torah and *mitzvot*. They are a gift which makes our lives meaningful and our days 'long' because they give us the ability to use our time in a meaningful way. One who spends his time learning Torah can look back on his days and years and feel like they were truly valuable as time he used to accumulate meaningful knowledge and to grow as a person.

The Second/*Segue Beracha*: Praying For Torah Growth

Not everyone has had the opportunity to learn Torah on a meaningful enough level to appreciate its beauty and significance. This is why we have the second/middle *beracha* which asks Hashem to help us appreciate the Torah's sweetness:

והערב נא ה' אלוקינו את דברי תורתך בפינו ובפיות עמך בית ישראל
ונהיה אנחנו וצאצאינו וצאצאי עמך בית ישראל כולנו יודעי שמך ולומדי תורתך לשמה.
ברוך אתה ה' המלמד תורה לעמו ישראל.

Our view extends beyond that of our own lives to those of our children and future generations. We realize that for them to 'know Hashem' through His Torah, the Torah needs to be sweet for us

so we can relay that sweetness to them. We ask Hashem as the eternal teacher (not just the giver) of Torah to teach us that sweetness.

The Flow of the Three

Our relationship with Torah begins with our recognition of the *mitzvah* to learn. Our personal commitment to Torah learning precedes and leads to a greater appreciation of it and gives us the right to ask Hashem to help us get there.

We see this idea in the *beracha* of *Ahava Rabba* before *Kriyat Shema* in *Shacharit* (which, like that of *Ma'ariv*, presents Hashem's giving us the Torah as an expression of His love for us):

אהבה רבה אהבתנו ה' אלוקינו,
חמלה גדולה ויתרה חמלת עלינו.
אבינו מלכנו בעבור אבותינו שבטחו בך ותלמדם חקי חיים, כן תחנונו ותלמדנו.
אבינו האב הרחמן המרחם רחם עלינו ותן לבלבנו להבין ולהשכיל לשמוע ללמוד וללמד לשמור ולעשות ולקיים את כל דברי תלמוד תורתך באהבה והאר עיינינו בתורתך ודבק לבנו במצוותיך ויחד לבבנו לאהבה וליראה את שמך ולא נבוש לעולם ועד.

Because of our ancestors' faith in Hashem and his Torah, they merited Hashem teaching them Torah. May our *birchot HaTorah* do the same!

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Rabbanit Shani Taragin

Yerushalayim of Gold: The Crown of Torah Continuity and Commitment

Rabbi Akiva consistently saw the beauty of Yerushalayim, even in the direst of circumstances. While his peers responded to the site of the destroyed Temple and jackals emerging from the *Kodesh Kodashim* with cries, Rabbi Akiva laughed; he saw a different Yerushalayim – one that would be rebuilt (Makkot 24b).

Rabbi Akiva's unshakable faith and vision were rooted, as Rav Kook explains (Alumah 1936), "in a profound love of G-d. This love so filled his pure heart that the future was a certain reality, leaving no room to mourn over the disasters of the present." This love enabled him to look and learn beyond the present, beyond the letters before his eyes, and instead, see crowns of glory waiting to be interpreted.

The Gemara (Menachot 29b) records that when Moshe Rabbenu ascended to receive the Torah, he found G-d sitting and attaching crowns to the letters. When Moshe inquired as to the purpose of these crowns, G-d replied, "There is one man, Akiva the son of Yosef, who will in the future expound many laws from every crown." These crowns are not just the literal crowns found on seven letters in the Torah, but rather the golden crown on the "curly locks, black as a raven" described in Shir haShirim, referring to every stroke of the black letters of the Torah (Eruvin 21b). Rabbi Akiva examined every crown, every nuance and inflection of every letter and verse of the Torah and extrapolated numerous *mid-rashei halacha*.

Rabbi Akiva saw beyond the simple reality of "locks of the hair" and appreciated the golden crowns of letters above and between the lines. These crowns

represent Divine depth and beauty beneath the surface, yet were evident to Rabbi Akiva as clear as day. For Rabbi Akiva, the crowns of the Torah linked him to the Torah of Moshe Rabbenu and inspired his commitment for the future of Torah continuity in every aspect of his life.

That's why when Rabbi Akiva and his beloved wife Rachel were married and were so poor that they would sleep in a storehouse of straw, Rabbi Akiva would gather strands of straw from her hair and say, "If I had the means I would place on your head a Jerusalem of Gold (a golden crown with an engraving of the city of Yerushalayim)."¹

Where others saw yellow straws of poverty, Rabbi Akiva saw the golden crown of Jerusalem, the commitment to Torah his wife had displayed by marrying him, leaving a life of opulence and sending him off to study Torah. Rabbi Akiva already saw her in the full glory of the future, with her golden crown yet to be adorned.

Chazal refer to this "Jerusalem of Gold" adornment as a diadem that may or may not be worn as one goes out to the public domain on Shabbat (Shabbat 59a-b):

Rabbi Meir holds that it is considered a burden and not an ornament, and one who carries a burden into the public domain is liable to bring a sin-offering.

The Rabbis hold that it is an ornament. Why, then, did they prohibit going out into the public domain wearing it? They are concerned lest she remove it, and show it to another, and come to carry it in the public domain.

Rabbi Eliezer holds: Whose manner

is it to go out with a City of Gold ornament? Only an important woman, and in that case there is no concern, as an important woman does not remove ornaments and show them to others.

I learned from my esteemed and beloved mentor, Rabbanit Malka Bina (*Yikirat Yerushalayim* 5781), that each Tanna is expressing a different view regarding one's commitment to Yerushalayim/Torah. Some see the crown of Yerushalayim/Torah as a burden to remove when convenient. Others see affiliation with Yerushalayim/Torah as an ornament to display and "show off" one to the other. Rabbi Eliezer's explanation, as taught to Rabbi Akiva, is that an "important woman" recognizes that the crown of Yerushalayim/Torah shall never be removed from one's head, from one's consciousness; it is not a burden, but a badge of honor!

For Rabbi Akiva, the crown of Yerushalayim is a crown of commitment to Torah. When he sees Yerushalayim in bleak desolation, and his wife's hair with golden straw, he sees the black letters of the Torah with crowns of light. He reminds us that we shall never remove these crowns from our heads and hearts for they will bring us from the past to the future, from jackals to Jerusalem of gold, from cries of pain to glory and laughter.

¹ Nedarim 50a.

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