

Parsha Encounters 5766 – Tzav- Shabbos HaGadol

Birchas Hagomel

Rabbi Yisroel Langer

In this week's parsha the Torah discusses the laws of the Korban Todah. Chazal derive four categories of people that are required to bring a Korban Todah, from Tehillim, chapter 107. One who survived a sea voyage, a trip through the desert, a life threatening illness, or was released from prison have all survived a life threatening ordeal, and must therefore give special "thanks" to Hashem by bringing a Korban Todah. The Vilna Gaon (quoted in Seder Ha'aruch volume 2) points out that when Klal Yisroel came out of Mitzrayim they were saved from the above four dangers. Hashem took us out of Mitzrayim which is likened to a prison. We were then brought through the desert and across Yam Suf. And finally, upon arriving at Har Sinai, all of the sick people amongst Klal Yisrael were healed. This is why the number four plays a significant role on Pesach night. We ask the four questions, discuss four types of sons, and drink four cups of wine that correspond to the four expressions that the Torah uses to describe to the *Geula* (redemption). In truth we are thanking Hashem for the above mentioned four salvations.

Unfortunately, without the Bais Hamikdash, we cannot fulfill our obligation of thanking Hashem for saving us from the above dangers by bringing a Korban Todah. In its place, Chazal instituted the special beracha of Birchas Hagomel to recite. This beracha is recited as follows: "*Boruch atah... hagomel l'chayavim tovos shegmaloni kol tuv*" – Blessed are You Hashem King of the Universe, who bestows good things upon the guilty, who has bestowed every goodness upon me". The reason we mention "upon the guilty" in the beracha, is because we are alluding to the fact that Hashem bestows kindness upon us even though we are not worthy of it. The beracha should be recited in the presence of ten adults (including the one reciting the beracha). Preferably, there should be two Talmidei Chachamim in Attendance (O.C. 219:3). It is best to make the beracha while standing, however if one sat, he has still fulfilled his obligation b'dieved (M.B. 219 s.k. 4). The minhag is to recite the beracha at the time of Krias Hatorah since there is always a minyan in attendance then. Although not required, it's customary for the one for the one who will be reciting the Birchas Hagomel to get an aliyah (Chasam Sofer O.C. 51; Birchas Habayis – shaarei Binah 18). (Note: This does not take precedence to any other chiyuvim.) The Chasam Sofer explains that the aliyah is in place of the Korban Todah that one is obligated to bring in the times of the Beis Hamikdash. (The same concept applies to a *yoledes* a woman who just had a baby. On the first Shabbos that a new mother comes to shul, her husband is obligated to get an aliyah which is in place of the Korban Yoledes that she would have brought during the times of the Beis Hamikdash (Magen Avraham end of siman 282).) If one gets an aliyah, he should recite Birchas Hagomel at the end of the aliya after making the beracha on the Torah. If he gets the last aliyah, he should recite Birchas Hagomel prior to the Kaddish (Eshel Avraham). If one did not get an aliyah he should recite Birchas Hagomel after the Baal Korei recites the kaddish (Piskei Teshuvos note 73 quoting Ohelecha Bamitecha). After the beracha of hagomel is recited, the people in attendance respond "*Amein, mi shegamalcha kol tuv, who yigmalacha kol tuv selah*" – May He who has bestowed every goodness upon you, continue to bestow every goodness upon you forever."

The most preferred time to make a Birchas Hagomel is within three days after becoming obligated to do so. If one became obligated to make a beracha after Krias Hatorah on Monday, the Mishna Berura (219 s.k. 20) rules that it is better for one to organize his own minyan and recite Birchas Hagomel immediately rather than wait until Thursday's Krias Hatorah which would have resulted in a delay of more than three days. However the "minhag haolam" is to always wait for Krias Hatorah (Shaarei Efraim 4:27). *B'dieved*, if one waited longer than three days, he should still make the beracha (O.C. 219:6). According to simple reading of the Shulchan Aruch, it would seem that *b'dieved*, there is no time limit at all for reciting Birchas Hagomel. However, the Aruch Hashulchan (219:7) says, that one can only make the beracha if the salvation is still fresh in his mind.

Do Women and Children Recite Birchas Hagomel?

There is a dispute amongst the poskim as to whether a child who is a minor may recite a Birchas Hagomel (see Shaarei Teshuvah 219:1 and M.B. s.k. 3). The prevalent minhag is for them not to

do so. The reason being, that the beracha contains the words "*Hagomel l'chayavim tovos*" – Who bestows good things upon the **guilty**, and minors cannot be considered guilty. With regard to women, the prevalent minhag is for them not to make a Birchas Hagomel. This beracha is supposed to be made in public, and for a woman to make a beracha in public is considered immodest (M.B. 219 s.k. 3). The Mishna Berura mentions an opinion that women should recite Birchas Hagomel in front of ten people, even if nine of them are women, provided that there is at least one adult male present. However, Hagaon R' Shlomo Zalman Auerbach ZT"l (Halichos Shlomo 23:4) rules that one should not follow this opinion. (See Igros Moshe O.C. volume 5 siman 14.) The minhag in Yerushalayim is that a *Yoledes* (a woman who just had a baby) recites Birchas Hagomel in front of ten male adult family members who congregated in her house after the baby is born. This should be done a week after the birth, provided the new mother is not excessively weak (Salmas chaim 202). However, in America, where there is no minhag for a *yoledes* to make a Birchas Hagomel, one should not recite it (Halichos Shlomo ch. 23 note 12).

Car Accidents and Surgeries

Chazal instituted Birchas Hagomel to be said by the four categories of people who bring a Korban Todah as enumerated above. The Rishonim argue whether this beracha is limited exclusively to these four categories of people, or if anybody who was saved from a life-threatening situation should recite this beracha. The halacha follows the latter opinion. Therefore, if someone was "held up" by armed robbers, in which case his life was on the line, he should recite Birchas Hagomel. Likewise, if someone was involved in a life-threatening car accident, he should recite Birchas Hagomel. However, if one was **almost** in a life-threatening car accident, he does **not** recite Birchas Hagomel. HaGaon Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach zt"l (Hilchos Shlomo 23 note 2), *ybl"c* HaRav Shmuel Fuerst, shlita and HaRav Dovid Zucker, shlita define a "severe car accident" as an accident in which the passengers get knocked hard in a potentially life-threatening way. Even if the car was "totaled" but the passengers came out unscathed, their life was not threatened and therefore do not recite Birchas Hagomel. It is important to note that in the future, when one encounters the place where he was saved from a life-threatening situation i.e. the place of his "severe car accident", he should recite the beracha- "*Boruch Shasa Li Nes B'Makom Hazeh*" – Blessed (is the One) that performed a miracle for me in this place. However, one should not say the *sheim v'malchus* (name of Hashem) in the beracha, unless he was saved in a miraculous way (see O.C. 218:9). With regard to surgeries, the rule of thumb is as follows. If the surgery required a general anesthesia it is considered to be a life-threatening situation. Therefore, upon recovery, a Birchas Hagomel should be recited. If one undergoes surgery of a serious nature but it did not require general anesthesia, a rav should be consulted as to whether one should recite Birchas Hagomel or not.

Airplanes and Boats

HaGaon Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach zt"l (Halichos Shlomo, ch. 23) considers flying on an airplane a *sakana* (dangerous situation), and therefore one must always recite Birchas Hagomel after flying (even if the plane did not fly over an ocean or desert). However, most poskim disagree with this opinion, as statistics now show that it is more dangerous to drive in a car than fly on an airplane. Using this line of reasoning, some poskim rule that one should never recite Birchas Hagomel after a plane trip, even if the plane flew over an ocean or desert (HaRav Dovid Zucker, shlita, quoting HaGaon Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky zt"l). HaGaon Rav Moshe Feinstein zt"l (Igros Moshe O.C. Volume 2 Siman 59) agrees with HaRav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach that one should always recite Birchas Hagomel after any plane trip. However, his reasoning is different than HaRav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach's. R'Moshe explains that just as Chazal require one who travels by sea to recite Birchas Hagomel, regardless of whether his trip was a *sakana* or not, so too, any traveling that is not done on **secure**, dry land, requires a Birchas Hagomel upon completing the journey. Some poskim say that one should be *machmir* (strict), and taking all views into account, recite Birchas Hagomel without the *sheim v'malchus* (name of Hashem). However, the most prevalent minhag is to recite Birchas Hagomel with the *sheim v'malchus* upon flying over an ocean or desert. If one did not fly over an ocean or desert, no beracha is recited at all. (Minchas Yitzchak Volume 2 Siman 47, HaRav Dovid Zucker, shlita, HaRav Shmuel Fuerst, shlita). According to HaGaon Rav Moshe Feinstein zt"l, one only recites Birchas Hagomel at the end of the return trip. For example, if one travels from Eretz Yisroel to Chicago for a short visit (less than 30 days), he does not recite Birchas Hagomel until he arrives back in Eretz Yisroel (Rivivos Efraim Volume 1 Siman 155). The

only exception to this rule is if one travels from outside of Eretz Yisroel (ex. Chicago) to Eretz Yisroel. Then the hope is that Mashiach will come, and his trip will not be a temporary one. In this case, R'Moshe says that one should recite Birchas Hagomel in Eretz Yisroel, and then again upon arriving back in Chicago (HaRav Shmuel Fuerst, shlita).

If one travels by boat across the ocean or large sea, he should recite Birchas Hagomel at the end of his trip upon returning to dry land. However, if he travels through a river, no beracha is recited. (Note: This is according to Minhag Ashkenaz. With regard to Minhag Sefard, see Biur Halacha 219:1 "Yordei Hayam" and Piskei Teshuva). To become obligated in Birchas Hagomel, one must travel a considerable distance off shore. This can be relevant to people who go on cruises. Each cruise is different and a *shailoh* should be asked as to whether or not a Birchas Hagomel should be recited.

Being Released from Prison

One of the four categories of people who bring a Korban Todah and therefore recite Birchas Hagomel, is one who was freed from prison. The Magen Avraham is of the opinion, that this only holds true if his jail sentence could have resulted in an execution. If one is sentenced to jail due to monetary issues, in which case there is no execution, the poskim argue as to whether one should recite Birchas Hagomel upon being freed (see Biur Halacha 219:1 "*chavush*"). However, if one is sentenced to jail for a day or two, then everybody agrees that no Birchas Hagomel is recited *ibid*). If one escapes from prison and would be sent back if he were found, he does not recite Birchas Hagomel (Bircas Habayis shear 27:2).

Miscellaneous

If one's negligence (ex: drunken driving, didn't listen to his doctors) causes him to be in a situation of *sakana*, the poskim argue whether Birchas hagomel should be recited upon being saved. (See Halichos Shlomo 23 note 2 who holds no beracha is recited. See also Minchas Elazar Volume 4 Siman 47, Minchas Yitzchak Volume 2 Siman 47. The Lev Chaim (quoted in Sefer Piskei Teshuvos) disagrees and requires Bircas Hagomel to be recited).

If one has more than one reason to recite Birchas Hagomel (ex: He became healed from a serious illness and traveled the ocean safely) only one Birchas Hagomel is recited. (M.B. s.k.3).

If one is in doubt whether to recite Birchas Hagomel, the poskim say he should recite the beracha without saying the sheim malchus (Hashem's name). However Hagaon R' Shlomo Zalman Auerbach (Halichos Shlomo) holds that rather than saying a beracha without the *sheim v'malchus*, he should have kavana when saying the beracha "*Boruch... hagomel chasadim tovim lamo yisrael* (in Birchas Hashachar), that it is being said to "cover" his Birchas Hagomel. R' Shlomo Zalman would advise women and children who otherwise wouldn't be reciting Birchas Hagomel to do this as well. It's best if one could make the beracha within earshot of ten people.

As situations vary from one to another any sheilah should be asked to a competent rav. May we be zocheh to bring the Korban Todah along with all the other Korbonos, *Bimheira V'Ymeinu*.

Rabbi Langer learns full-time at the kollel.