BIRKAT HAGOMEL: Understanding the “blessings”

A “Berakha” is a statement, a formula by which we bless God. First, we need to clarify what does it mean to “bless God” ? Usually, it is the one with a higher merit or the authority who grants the blessing to the needy. So, what does it mean that we “bless” God? In Hebrew “Blessing God”, unlike blessing another human being, simply means that we acknowledging God as the source of all our blessings.

For example: When we say a blessing before eating a fruit: *barukh Ata HaShem… bore peri haets*, we are saying, “I acknowledge, I declare, that YOU are the Creator of the fruits of the tree.

All the bearakhot share the words *Barukh Ata haShem…* which should never be translated as “Blessed **BE** You, HaShem”, as if we would be wishing God to have something He lacks □”□; but “Blessed **ARE** You, HaShem…” in the sense of “You ARE the source of …..”.

The berakhot are recited mainly for three different functions.

1. Birkot hanehenim, are the blessings we recite before we enjoy a material event, even simple, routinary occurrences . For example, before we eat, drink, or enjoy a pleasant aroma we say a berakha acknowledging God as the source of that material blessing.

2. Birkot haMitsvot, these are the blessings we recite when we perform one of God’s commandments. For example, before we fix the mezuza in the doorpost we “bless God” saying *asher qiddeshanu bemitsvotav vetsivanu liqboa’ mezuza*. “It is YOU HaShem the One Who sanctified us with His Mitsvot, and it was YOU the One Who ordered us to place a mezuza in our doorposts.” In other words, I’m declaring that the reason I’m

doing this act is because I'm following YOUR commands.

3. Birkot haShebah, are the blessings of praise. We also use the formula of a berakha *barukh ata hashem* to praise HaShem for the multitude of events, occurrences in the past and in the present, that we know of or that we experience every day. Again, we declare that YOU HaShem are the source of these events. And by reciting a blessing we train ourselves to perceive HaShem's subtle and invisible intervention in our lives. Illustartion: All birkot hashahar, the blessing we say in the morning when we wake up, belong to this category. We bless haShem, for example, saying that He "restores life to the lifeless bodies", in other words, when we wake up in the morning we realize, thanks to this berakha, that our inert bodies were inert and passive (see this) but now, HaShem has given us our souls back.

Although a berakha is technically a plain declaration (or for Maimonides a "sworn declaration"), many or probably most of the blessings could be also classified as statements of appreciation and gratitude.

There is one blessing in particular that is known as the blessing of gratitude per excellence. And that is birkat hagomel.

Next Monday, BH, we will begin to explain what are we saying in this beautiful berakha.