BIRKAT HAGOMEL Summary of the four cases

As we have explained last week, there is a fundamental difference between Sephardim and Ashkenazim regarding the recitation of haGomel. In the Ashkenazi tradition, haGomel is recited only when one has recovered or was saved from some sort of a life-threatening or dangerous situation. For the Sephardic custom, haGomel is recited in four scenarios: imprisonment, illness, sea- sailing and traveling, even if one's life has not been compromised. For the Sephardic tradition these four cases represent an exhaustive list of the cases in which haGomel is recited, while for the Ashkenazi tradition these four cases are examples of "dangerous situations", and haGomel should be recited in similar scenarios. For example, a car accident, or when one is a victim of an armed robbery or an attack by a wild animal, etc. These two opinions are brought explicitly in the shulhan 'arukh 219:9

Let us see now a summary of the rules of haGomel according to the Sephardic tradition.

Prison. If a person was imprisoned, kidnapped or deprived of his physical freedom, when released, has to recite haGomel.

Illness: As we have explained, once recovered from an illness that required bed-rest, one has to recite haGomel even if one's life or health was not compromised (shulhan 'arukh 219:8). A woman who gave birth, yoledet, belongs to this category. According to Ben Ish Hay haGomel should be recited only if one had to be in bed-rest for three or more days.

Sea-sailing: When going in a cruise, a ship or even in a fishing boat, into the open sea for 72 minutes or more, one has to recite haGomel when back from the trip ("open-sea" to

this effects is considered when one cannot see the shore anymore, Halakha Berura, V.11, p 208).

Traveling: The basic rule is that when traveling from one city to another city, traveling at least for 72 minutes outside the city, haGomel should be recited. This rule applies for traveling by car or by plane. The application of this halakha is relatively easy in places like Israel where the definition of “the city” is simple. In big cities like Los Angeles or New York, it is more difficult to define “the city” that one has left, to the effects of this halakha: if you travel, for example, from Manhattan Beach NY, to Deal NJ, is Manhattan Beach considered “the city” that you just left? Or is it Brooklyn? Or is it New York State *to the effects of this berakha*?

In this last case and other similar cases, when we are not sure if the particulars of our traveling fit into the above mentioned categories, the best suggestion would be to ask the local rabbinic authorities about the halakhic precedents (=the Minhag) of the community, or to be included in the recitation of haGomel of someone who for sure has to say haGomel.