HAGOMEL: The Jewish Thanksgiving

ארבעה חייבים להודות : יורדי הים , הולכי מדבריות , ומי שהיה חולה ונתרפא , ומי שהיה חבוש בבית האסורים – ויצא.

(ברכות נד ע”ב)

Our Rabbis taught that there are four specific occasions when we must publicly express gratitude to HaShem for saving us from potentially dangerous situations. This obligation is derived from Tehillim (Psalm 107). During the times of the Bet-haMiqdash, this public expression of gratitude was fulfilled through the qorban todá, the offering of thanks. Today, until the Bet-haMiqdash is rebuilt בביא, we express our gratitude with a special blessing known as HaGomel. The text of this blessing is:

“Blessed are You, HaShem, our God, King of the universe, who performs favors for those in debt [to You], and You have granted me all that is good.”

Let us delve into the meaning of this Berakha. The phrase “Hagomel lachayabim tobot” (“Who grants favors to those in debt”) reflects our understanding of the balance between our debts and credits with our Creator. We recognize that we are constantly receiving innumerable blessings and favors from HaShem. Even if we may possess specific merits (zekhut) that could earn us “credit,” these are insignificant compared to the overwhelming kindness and blessings we owe HaShem. Furthermore, when we consider our transgressions and faults (‘aberot), which diminish our merit, we see even more clearly that HaShem’s saving us is an act of pure goodness (hesed) that we did not deserve.

This is why a minor child does not recite HaGomel. At their

age, they are not yet fully accountable for their actions and transgressions. Hence, they cannot be classified as “chayabim” (debtors), which is central to the meaning of the Berakha (Rabbi Ovadia Yosef).

When is HaGomel recited?

We recite this Berakha when one has emerged unharmed from any of the four situations typically considered dangerous, as mentioned in Tehillim (Psalm 107):

a) Upon being released from prison (in ancient times, from a dungeon).

b) After traveling safely across the ocean.

c) Upon recovering from a serious illness.

d) After successfully crossing a desert.

In Hebrew, there is a mnemonic to remember these four situations: the word חיים (Hayyim, meaning “alive,” which here signifies being “unharmed”). It corresponds to the initials of חבוש (prison), ים (ocean), יסורין (suffering, referring to illness), and מדבר (desert).

The classic English translation in most Siddurim of the Hebrew words “Birkat haGomel is: “Blessing of Thanksgiving.”