

HALOCHOSCOPE ^{TOI}

Does one recite the *Birchas Hagomel*, thanksgiving blessing, for recovery from surgery under anaesthetic?

Someone has been suffering from an ailment for a while with no known medication. Now a new medication has been discovered which relieves the symptoms. The patient feels a deep sense of gratitude. Is this a valid cause for *Birchas Hagomel*? Should a woman recite this *Brocha*?

The issues:

(A) *Birchas Hagomel*

(B) What qualifies as sickness and recovery

(C) Women and this *Brocha*

(A) *Birchas Hagomel*

Anyone saved from a perilous situation is obliged to show thanksgiving to Hashem. In the times of the *Bais Hamikdash* one would bring a *Korban Todah*, thanksgiving offering. This offering has the specific purpose of acknowledging the kindness of Hashem. The Talmud derives the four main examples of such perilous situations from statements in *Tehilim* 107. They are one who arrives at his destination at the end of a sea voyage, one who travelled across an uninhabited wilderness, one released from imprisonment and one healed from illness. When the *Bais Hamikdash* is rebuilt, speedily in our days, we will offer this *Korban*. In one view offerings will not be brought in the future, but the *Todah* will be offered, even according to this view [see *Midrash Rabah Tzav* 9:7.]

Though the actual offering is not possible nowadays, we are obliged to offer thanksgiving in other ways. Anyone miraculously (not necessarily supernaturally) delivered from danger should distribute *Tzedaka* to Torah scholars. This will be considered a substitute for the *Korban*. He should also recite the Torah chapter dealing with this *Korban* (*Tzav* 7:12-15). It is also customary to make a thanksgiving feast, *Seudas Hoda'ah*. Many people observe this annually on the day they experienced the miracle. Four types of bread accompanied the *Todah* offering, ten loaves of each. Four were given to the *Kohain* who offered the *Korban* and the rest were eaten by the person offering it. Since it had to be eaten in one day (plus the following night) it had to be shared with well wishers.

This Korban is a *Nedava*, voluntary offering. The Talmud rules that the four groups mentioned in Tehilim 107 have a separate compulsory obligation to recite *Birchas Hagomel*. This acknowledges Hashem's abundant kindness, despite the shortcomings of the human reciting it. It is based on the voluntary Todah offering, which is offered by anyone who feels grateful to Hashem, for any reason. However, the Brocha may only be recited by those who are included in the Rabbinically instituted list. Those who choose to recite it of their own accord are in violation of a *Brocha She'aina Tzricha*, unnecessary Brocha. Some consider this a Scriptural violation of *Lo Sisa*, forbidding uttering Hashem's Name in vain. Others maintain that being in the middle of a Brocha, it is praise of Hashem, and is not to be considered in vain. However, it is a violation of the positive Mitzvah to fear and revere Hashem. Therefore, *Safeik Brocha Lehakeil*, Brochos, which are Rabbinical institutions, should not be said when in doubt. The overriding concern is with the Scriptural violations. To express one's thanks in situations which are either excluded from the list or questionable, the Poskim rule that one should recite the Brocha omitting the Names of Hashem.

The Poskim debate whether the Talmud's use of the number "four" limits the list to these four perils, or whether they are frequent examples. The focus of the debate is another Brocha, required for one passing through a place where he was delivered from danger. In this case the Talmud does not specify a particular danger, implying that there is no distinction. Accordingly, if one is delivered from another type of life-threatening danger, the question is raised whether he may recite the Brocha. The conclusion of the Shulchan Aruch is to recite it without the Names of Hashem, but the prevailing practice is to recite it in full for any danger.

The Poskim debate the severity of danger. The Talmud refers to travel through seas or deserts. Travel through populated areas also involves danger, requiring the wayfarer's prayer. Therefore, some Poskim maintain that when arriving from such trips *Birchas Hagomel* must be recited. Sephardim follow this ruling. Following the same reasoning they recite *Hagomel* when recovering from any illness for which they were bedridden. Others maintain that only for a life-threatening illness and desert travel may one recite the Brocha. Ashkenazim follow this practice.

Imprisonment is assumed to mean being held against one's will out of control of his fate. Being held in the company of criminals is also considered dangerous. A minority view maintains that only one held for execution is obliged to recite the Brocha. Another view maintains that a stay of less than three days is generally insufficient to warrant the Brocha. This issue of being out of control of one's fate

raises the issue of air travel. While it is not in the sea or the desert, it is also in a place where one is not in control if something should go wrong. Some distinguish between travel over land (even deserts) and over a sea. The pilot has less control over the fate of the aircraft if he gets into trouble over a sea. [See Brochos 54b Poskim Tur, Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 218:4, 219:1 7-9, 697:2, commentaries. Chayei Adam 155:41. Igros Moshe O.C. II:59 Minchas Yitzchok II:47.]

(B) The type of illness

The severity of illness has already been discussed. In addition, it seems to mean protracted sickness, in Talmudic terms, occupying the sickbed. If one survived such an illness through medical intervention, avoiding a stay in bed, the issue is raised whether this is true sickness, or similar to a near miss, which does not require a Brocha. A sudden attack of sickness, which one recovers from very quickly, is also dangerous. However, does it fall into this category? Those who include any danger on the list would include this as well. Those who limit it to bedridden sicknesses might not. Anaesthesia can be one of three types, local, general or something inbetween (HAC). General is considered life-threatening, simply due to the danger the patient is in while he is under it. The intermediate level is a type of general anaesthesia, but is continuous, is easier to monitor and can be stopped as soon as the surgery is finished. However, the patient is in some danger while he is under it. This includes danger of shock and of overdose. Therefore, those who recite the Brocha on any danger would include this.

A chronic sickness would be included in the list by Sephardim if one is periodically bedridden. If the sickness completely leaves the patient and then returns, he does not have a chronic sickness, but a predisposition for this condition. In this case, he recites *Hagomel* every time he recovers. When diagnosed as chronic, one must assume that the sickness is continuous, with periodic ups and downs. He could not recite *Hagomel* until he is sure of recovery. This view believes that any sick person, because he is bedridden, feels that he is undergoing Divine judgment. When he recovers, he recites the Brocha due to his relief. Thus, if the condition is such that it is not known to have a true cure, gaining control of the symptoms, or having the condition "under control" should be considered recovery for the purposes of *Hagomel*. Possibly, partial control combined with relief felt by the patient is sufficient to allow the Brocha. The Poskim debate reciting *Hagomel* for the recovery of a good friend. The personal relief is such that one feels the urge to express his gratitude. For a parent or teacher's recovery one may recite it (though

some maintain that the clause referring to the shortcomings must be omitted.) For friends, the consensus is to refrain from reciting it. However, for oneself it would be much more appropriate, since the relief is evidently substantial. [See Sh. Ar. O.C. 219:4 8, commentaries.]

(C) Hagomel for women

The Brocha corresponds to the Korban Todah. This may be offered by women. The Brocha is based on the chapter in Tehilim, which applies to all people. However, there is a technical problem. The Talmud derives from the wording of the Tehilim that this Brocha should be recited before ten males, and even that two should be elders, i.e., Rabbis. [Some say the Rabbis are in addition to the Minyan.] If Rabbis are not available, one should still recite it with a Minyan. It is customary to recite it at the same time that one gets an *Aliya* to the Torah. The Poskim debate whether one fulfills the Mitzvah without a Minyan. To avoid a Brocha She'aina Tzricha, one should not do it without a Minyan. This poses a problem for a woman. For a married woman, some Poskim maintain that the husband should recite it. This is not considered reciting it for another person. The Talmud considers a husband and wife as one. The Poskim say that a woman may recite it in the women's section of the shul and the Minyan answer Amein. Some Poskim suggest reciting it in front of men whom she knows or in front of women. However, this only works according to the view that does not consider the Minyan essential. Therefore, unless it is possible for the woman to arrange a Minyan, she should recite the Brocha without Hashem's Names.

One should recite this Brocha within three to five days of the experience. However, the Brocha corresponds to the Korban Todah, which may be offered later. Accordingly, many Poskim maintain that just as the Korban has *Tashlumin*, the ability to make it up later, so too may one recite this Brocha later. This raises the issue that if one recited the Brocha without Hashem's Names due to a technicality, he should recite it a gain later when the opportunity arises. However, it is possible that having recited it the first time, albeit without Hashem's Names, he has already fulfilled his thanksgiving obligation. Therefore, if the woman cannot convene a Minyan, she should recite it anyhow, and should not repeat it later. [See Brochos 54b Poskim. Tur Sh. Ar. O.C. 219:3-4, commentaries, Kaf Hachaim 3.]