

## Introduction to Tractate Berakhot

As noted in the following outline, tractate Berakhot expounds the liturgical obligations of the Israelite, particularly the recitation of the creed, the Shema' ("Hear, Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one") morning and evening, and the Prayer (the benedictions of supplication) morning, afternoon, and evening as noted in the first two sections of the outline. It proceeds to the requirement to recite blessings before and after eating in the third section, and the protocol for saying grace at public or communal meetings in the fourth. It concludes in the fifth section with blessings recited for exceptional occasions.

- I. The declaration of the creed (Shema')
- A. Reciting the Shema', evening and morning
- B. The attitude and the manner in which one recites the Shema'; to carry out one's obligation to do so
- C. Those exempt from the obligation to recite the Shema' and certain other obligatory prayers
- II. Reciting the prayer
- A. Reciting the prayer morning and evening
- B. The correct attitude for reciting the prayer
- C. Inclusion of prayers for special occasions in the recitation of the prayer
- D. Inclusion of votive prayers in the recitation of the prayer; errors in the recitation of the prayer
- III. Blessings recited on the occasion of enjoying the benefits of creation
- A. The requirement to recite blessings
- B. Appropriate blessings for various edibles
- IV. Communal meals and their protocol
- A. Establishing the communal character of a meal; private and public gatherings and the recitation of blessings
- B. Declaring a quorum for the recitation of grace; special problems
- C. Special problems debated by the houses of Shammai and Hillel in regard to the protocol of blessings at table; the normative law
- V. Blessings on exceptional occasions
- A. Blessings for evil as much as for good
- B. Blessings in commemoration of miracles or other exceptional events
- C. Prayers and protocol in connection with entering a given location; a town, the Temple in Jerusalem

The law of *Berakhot* bears no direct connection to the written Torah (Scripture), though it cites or systemically encompasses passages thereof, e.g., the Shema' itself is found in Deu. 6: 4–9. The order of topics is simple and logical, following the natural sequence of

the day and the sequence from formal worship, to conduct in connection with eating, to other occasions of worship. We have, then, a handbook of practical piety. The sequence within each section moves from general to particular, from rules of broad applicability to special cases. Two theological principles govern.

First, God takes a constant and intense interest in the condition of Israelite attitudes and opinions. He cares that Israel affirm his unity and declare his dominion through the recitation of the Shema<sup>6</sup> and related acts of prayer. What is important is that when the correct words are spoken, they are spoken with the attitude of acknowledging God's dominion as an explicit act of accepting the government of heaven and the discipline ("yoke") of the commandments. That is what is meant in the laws covering reciting the blessings, for instance, "Blessed are you... who..." or "Blessed are you, who has sanctified us by his commandments and commanded us to..." . God values these words of acknowledgement and thanks.

Second, through the life of prayer and fulfillment of commandments, Israel wraps itself before God in a cloak made up of the fabric of actions that sanctify—thread by thread. From Israel's perspective, all Israel and individual Israelites conduct life under the perpetual rule of that just and merciful God who made the world, and that his rule is personal, immediate, and penetrating. In the morning the Israelite accepts God's dominion in an act of personal submission, and then explicitly undertakes to carry out God's commandments, in all their concrete specificity.