

# Blessing Hashem for the Freedom of Spring

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha Siegelbaum

## Introduction

I love spring in Israel, especially in the Judean hills. At this time Hashem shows his love for me by presenting me with a new bouquet of live flowers every day. I thank Him by doing the best I can to take care of the precious flowery land that He has entrusted in my hands. As I sit in my office and write, my neighbor's rosebush stretches out its beautiful pink heads to wish me good morning! I nod my head back in appreciation of their loveliness. Over the last two months I have watched the fruit trees flower one by one. First the diligent almond trees, followed by the nectarines, then the apples, plums, apricots and cherries. Since this year is a leap year we have to wait longer to the month of Nissan when we have a special mitzvah to recite a blessing over the flowering fruit trees. As I have watched the flowers turn into tiny shiny fruits on the trees, I was concerned that no flowers would be left for the month of Nissan. Yet, I just went out in my garden to check, and thank G-d the pear and cherry trees are still blossoming, patiently waiting for the month of Nissan to receive their hard earned blessing!

## A The Flowering Fruit Tree – A Sign of Redemption

This Shabbat is Shabbat *Mevarchim Chodesh*, as we celebrate *Rosh Chodesh* Nissan Monday night, March 31 and Tuesday, April 1. The name Nissan is related to the Hebrew word *Nitzan* (bud), since this is the month in which everything buds. The month of Nissan carries the promise that redemption is on its way. *Rosh Chodesh* Nissan marks the beginning of the season for *Birkat ha-Ilanot* – the blessing we recite upon seeing fruit trees in bloom. We have the opportunity to recite this blessing, which praises Hashem's ongoing renewal of creation, only once a year, during the month of Nissan.<sup>1</sup> Women too have the special Mitzvah to say a bracha (blessing) on a flowering fruit tree, since it is not considered a "time-related mitzvah" from which women are exempt.<sup>2</sup> We need to recite the blessing when seeing the actual flowering of the tree. The growth of leaves alone is not sufficient to recite the blessing.<sup>3</sup> We praise G-d for the flowers that herald the promise of the fruits sanctified as *bikurim* (the first fruit sacrifice) on Shavuot. Just as the redemption from Egypt leads to the giving of the Torah, the flowering tree testifies that the fruits are yet to come.

## The Words of the Blessing for the Flowering Fruit Tree

The different blessings that we say when we witness various phenomena of creation help us to draw closer to Hashem by deepening our appreciation for the wonders of His creation. Upon seeing the blossoms of fruit trees in the month of Nissan – the first month of spring – we recite the following annual blessing of thanksgiving to Hashem:

<sup>1</sup> *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 226:1.

<sup>2</sup> *Har Tzvi Orach Chaim* 118.

<sup>3</sup> *Mishnah Berurah* 226:2.



בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' שֵׁם אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם שֶׁלֹּא חָסַר בְּעוֹלָמוֹ כְּלוּם (דְּבָר), וַיִּבְרָא בּוֹ בְּרִיּוֹת טוֹבוֹת וְאֵילָנוֹת טוֹבִים לְהַנּוֹת בָּהֶם בְּנֵי אָדָם: (סדור תפלה - נוסח ספרד - סדר תפילת הדרך)

*Baruch ata Hashem Elokeinu melech haolam shelo chisar baolamo klum, uvara vo beriyot tovot v'ilanot tovim lehanot bahem benei adam.*

Blessed are You, Hashem, our God, Sovereign of the universe, Whose world lacks nothing, and Who created within it good creatures and good trees to bring pleasure to human beings.

### A *Tikun* (Rectification) for Reincarnated Souls

According to kabbalah, the blessing on the flowering fruit trees has special significance. It is important to be very careful to have a strong *kavanah* (intention) when reciting the blessing as it is a *tikun* (rectification) for the souls that are reincarnated in the trees and herbs at this time. We need to bear in mind to request mercy for them. The following verse applies to each of us when we are careful to recite this blessing, "See, the smell of my son is like the smell of a field which Hashem has blessed: Therefore may Hashem give you of the dew of heaven and the fatness of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine."<sup>4</sup> Before reciting the blessing it is good to recite *Vayehi Noam – Tehillim 90*, followed by *Tehillim 148*. It is good to say this blessing in a group, and afterwards collect *tzedakka* (donations to a worthy cause) from everyone. A minimum of three *perutot* (the smallest amount of currency – such as a penny or a 5 *agurot* coin) is recommended corresponding to the three levels of the soul, (*nefesh, ruach, neshama*). If ten men are present they may recite *kaddish* at the end of the blossoming tree-blessing ceremony, as this is a great *tikun* for the souls who are reincarnated in the rocks, plants, trees, birds and other living beings.<sup>5</sup>

### When is the Optimal Time to Recite *Birkat Ha-Ilanot*?

The preferred time to recite the blessing on the flowering fruit tree is immediately when we first see a fruit tree blossom during the month of Nissan. It is recommended to make a special effort to look for flowering fruit trees to recite the blessing on *Rosh Chodesh Nissan*, unless it falls on Shabbat or it is raining. It is the *minhag* (custom) especially among Sephardim to visit the country on *Rosh Chodesh Nissan* in order to recite this blessing. Although the fruit trees in our garden began to flower more than a month ago, Rav Daniel of Bat Ayin holds that we still need to wait until the month of Nissan – the month of our redemption – to recite this special blessing. During the month of Adar we watch the blooming trees and look forward to Nissan when we finally can praise Hashem for these flowers that reflect our own yearning for redemption, which flowers during this same month of Nissan.

<sup>4</sup> Bereishit 27:27.

<sup>5</sup> Kaf HaChaim, Orach Chaim 226:6-7.

## When May We Still Recite this Blessing?

If you don't live in an area with fruit trees, and only saw the flowers on the tree after the month of Nissan had passed, you may still recite the blessing the first time you see the flowering tree, as long as the fruit of the tree has not yet ripened. Once the fruit has ripened, it is too late to recite this blessing.<sup>6</sup> If you saw the trees in bloom during Nissan, but forgot to recite the blessing, you may still say the blessing later, but only until the time that the fruit of the tree has begun to grow.<sup>7</sup> It is important, however, to be careful with reciting the blessing at our first opportunity, since several *poskim* (halachic authorities) maintain that the blessing may not be recited if we failed to say it at our first opportunity. For this reason it is important to know the text of the blessing by heart so that we can say the blessing as soon as we see the blossoms. There is a difference of opinion whether we can say the blessing on Shabbat and holidays. According to Kabbalah, this blessing may not be said on Shabbat and Yom Tov. In addition, the blessing may lead to shaking or breaking a branch off the tree.<sup>8</sup>

## Which Trees Require the Blessing *Birkat Hallanot*?

We do not recite the blessing on trees that are *orlah*. (A tree is considered *orlah* for the first three years after it is planted). The *poskim* debate whether one is allowed to say the blessing on a tree which has been **grafted** from two species, since the halacha does not permit such grafting. It is therefore preferable not to make the blessing on such a tree.<sup>9</sup> According to some Rabbis, we are required to say the **blessing near more than one flowering fruit tree**.<sup>10</sup> It is a *hidur mitzvah* (beatification of the mitzvah) to recite the blessing on as many trees as possible. The more trees the better.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, it is preferred to recite the blessing on trees in an orchard that is planted outside the city limits.<sup>12</sup> In the city you will sometimes find a single fruit tree, but never an orchard. In this way the mitzvah of reciting the blessing on the flowering fruit tree insures that people from the city come out to the country during the month of Nissan, in order to experience the processes of renewal of nature that is reflected in our own souls during the month of our redemption. Being in touch with nature especially during the month of our redemption thus helps prepare us for our ultimate renewal and freedom during Pesach.

## A Spring Blessing and Story

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Horowitz - known as the 'Bostoner Rebbe' tells a story from his childhood regarding the annual blessing for blossoming fruit trees. His father was a Chassidic Rebbe living in Boston; however, there were no fruit trees in his neighborhood. Each year, his father sent out messengers to search for the ideal place where he, his family, and his Chassidim could make the annual blessing upon seeing the blossoms of the fruit trees.

<sup>6</sup> Mishnah Berurah 226:4.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.5.

<sup>8</sup> Kaf HaChaim 226:4.

<sup>9</sup> Like for example a nectarine tree which was grafted from a peach and plum tree.

<sup>10</sup> Chida Moreh b'Etzba 198, Chazon Ovadiyah, p. 9-10.

<sup>11</sup> Teshuvot Halachot Ketanot 2:28.

<sup>12</sup> Teshuvot Lev Chaim 45 quoted in Kaf HaChaim 226:3 and in Chazon Ovadiyah, p. 8.



One year, we went to Allston, which was then quite new and green. We drove up in front of a house that had a large plot of land, with what seemed to be fruit trees inside a tall surrounding fence. One of the drivers, Mr. Israel Sachs, of blessed memory, went in to ask permission for us to enter and say our blessing over the trees. The man of the house wasn't in, but his wife, a good Italian Catholic, was quite gracious, and she said, "Of course, by all means!" Father got out of the car, and followed by a procession of his Chassidim, entered the gate. We said our bracha (blessing), and prepared to leave, happy to have done our mitzvah. When Mr. Sachs went over to thank our hostess, she asked him: "Could you please ask the Grand Rabbi for a special favor?" "What is it?" "Well, do you see that tree in the corner of the yard over there? It used to have very good apples, but for the last few years, it hasn't produced any at all. Since the Rabbi gave a blessing to all the other trees, perhaps he could give that tree a blessing too." Mr. Sachs translated her request to Father in Yiddish, and Father agreed. He turned around and said in Hebrew, "May this tree bring forth good fruits." That fall, Father's new *gabbai* (sexton), came upstairs to tell him that a woman had come by and left him a large basket full of bright red apples. With the apples, she left this message: "Please tell the Grand Rabbi that all these apples are from that barren apple tree he blessed!" (*And the Angels Laughed*, pages 29-32, Mesorah Publications).

