



## Why are Blessings so Central to Judaism?

### “You are What You Eat” or ‘You are What you Speak?’

Giving blessings is central in Judaism. The root for blessing (*bet-reish-chaf*) is mentioned no less than 464 times in the Tanach (Bible)! As soon as Hashem selected Avraham, He declared that “those who bless you will be blessed... “All the families of the earth will be blessed through you” (*Bereishit* 12:3). Since then, the mission of a Jew is intrinsically linked with being a blessing to the world. From the time of Avraham, giving blessings to one another is essential to being Jewish. Just think of the Hebrew word of greeting, “shalom!” which virtually means, “I bless you with peace!” Since the distinction and perfection of humanity is through speech, it is our aspiration to use this gift of speech to benefit people, by bestowing upon them generous blessings. This is contrary to the secular lifestyle, where people often gossip and speak negatively of others. In the Torah world, we appreciate the impact of speech. Just as G-d created the world with words, we too, can destroy or build worlds with our words. The very words דִּבּוּר/*dibur* – speech and דָּבָר/*davar* – matter, are related. They are different perceptions of the same thing. Some people say, “You are what you eat!” I believe that this proverbial saying must be modified to, “You are what you speak!” Humanity is defined by our speech. We are speaking spirits! (Targum Onkelus and Yonatan, *Bereishit* 2:7). Perhaps, I particularly relate to giving blessings, because my second name is בְּרָכָה/*Bracha* which means ‘blessing.’ I revel in giving elaborate blessings to anyone trying to tune in to their most essential needs. I look forward to Friday night, when my younger son is home, to bless him with the blessings of the Kohanim, as this *minhag* (custom) is not reserved for fathers alone. Mothers and grandmothers, too, may share the privilege of blessing their children and grandchildren at the Shabbat Table. One of the main Jewish birthday rituals – that I promote – is blessing our loved ones. We believe that, on the day when Hashem originally created us, all our energies are aligned, and we can connect with the source of our souls above. This empowers us to bestow the most potent blessings.

### Can We Tap into Divine Inspiration When Bestowing Blessings?

Not only on a person’s birthday, but also before he leaves this world (until 120), when he has completed his life and fulfilled his mission, he is aligned with his power of blessing. Therefore, the Torah records both Ya’acov’s and Moshe’s blessings before they expired. Another reason for giving blessings on the last day of a person’s life is that the recipients are much more open to receive the blessings, when they realize that these may be the last words they hear from their beloved parent or mentor. Why was Moshe called אִישׁ הָאֱלֹקִים/*Ish Haelokim* – “man of G-d” when he blessed Israel? When Moshe blessed Israel before his demise, the Shechina spoke through him, so that Moshe’s words became Divine blessings (*HaEmek Devar, Devarim* 33:1). Moshe is called “man of G-d” to teach us that his blessings were prophetic and not just words he made up himself (Ibn Ezra *ibid.*). *Parashat V’Zot Haberacha* is Moshe’s goodbye blessing. Therefore, the Torah wanted to emphasize from what kind of person the bracha emanated (R. S. R. Hirsh, *ibid.*).

**ספר דברים פרק לג פסוק א** וְזֶאת הַבְּרָכָה אֲשֶׁר בֵּרַךְ מֹשֶׁה אִישׁ הָאֱלֹהִים אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לִפְנֵי מוֹתוֹ:

“This is the blessing with which Moshe, the man of G-d, blessed the children of Israel before his demise (*Devarim* 33:1).

Since it was close to his passing, the flame of G-d within him was greatly lit up. This is like a candle which flickers to go out. Right before its last moment, the strength of its fire is increased. Likewise, is the neshama of the tzaddik, at the time of its demise, when it is preparing to enter the bundle of life. It then ascends and becomes empowered with the strength suited for this particular neshama... Likewise, at this endpoint of his life, Moshe was at his highest level (*HaEmek Devar, Devarim* ibid.). It is not only at the brink of death that we become Divinely inspired, when bestowing blessings. I experience a glimpse of Divine inspiration when blessing at any time. This is why I treasure the opportunity to bless. Even if, G-d forbid, we are too weak or sick to do physical acts of kindness, as long as we can speak or write, we have this power of bestowing blessings and tapping into Divine inspiration. Our *Parasha* opens with “this is the bracha...” The word for “this” is תַּזְאֵת/*zot* in Hebrew. It contains the letter ט/*zayin* which stands for seven + the letters א/*alef* and ת/*taf*. This means that everything –from א/*alef* to ת/*tav* must be subordinate to the seventh – the holiness – of the Divine Shechina.

### Why Must We Answer Amen to Blessings?

It is recommended to request the blessing of a holy person, because a tzaddik is even closer to Divine inspiration, and his or her words are more likely to become fulfilled, as it states, “*tzaddik gozer v’Hakadosh Baruch Hu mekayem* – when a righteous person makes a decree, G-d carries it out’ (Inspired from *Babylonian Talmud, Ta’anit* 23a). Although nobody’s blessing is a guarantee, it is possible that the spiritual level of believing in the power of a tzaddik’s bracha, will take us beyond the need for suffering, and bring personal *yeshu’ah* (deliverance). When we receive a blessing, it is vital to answer “Amen!” which expresses our belief in the power of the blessing and confirms its words. Someone asked Maran Rabbeinu Ovadia Yosef zt”l, whether to answer “Amen” when overhearing someone say to another, “Be well!” The Rav answered in the affirmative, based on *Mishnah Berura* 215:9, that when we overhear a person praying for something or blessing someone, we must answer “Amen.” Even if a given prayer or blessing is not an actual blessing established by our Sages, and does not even contain the name of Hashem, it is, nevertheless, not merely proper but obligatory to answer “Amen” to that prayer or blessing. The Netziv, however, writes that this is not an actual obligation, but it is the proper thing to do, for by answering “Amen,” one strengthens the matter so that it truly comes to fruition. I really relate to the fact that Maran zt”l was so careful regarding answering “Amen.” When people would offer him various blessings, he would always say “Amen.” He would even answer “Amen” to blessings of simple Jews. Whenever he blessed his grandchildren, he expected them to answer “Amen.” When they did not do so, he would, at times, point out to them that they should answer “Amen” ([Maran Rabbeinu Ovadia Yosef zt”l, Halacha Yomit](#)). One who answers, “Amen” is even greater than the one who recited the blessing” (*Babylonian Talmud, Berachot* 33b). This is due to the prosecuting angels’ attempt to prevent the fulfillment of the bracha. They may have much compelling evidence as to why a certain person is undeserving of his blessing. Yet, answering, “Amen” has the power to tip the scale and “win the case.” We can understand the power of the word אָמֵן/*Amen* by its numerical value 91, which is the same *gematria* as the Hebrew word for angel מַלְאָךְ/*malach*. Thus, answering, “Amen” creates a defending angel that acts as positive reinforcement and thus turns the tide in the battle with the prosecuting angel.

### Who is Most Suitable for Bestowing Blessings?

The word בִּרְכָה/*bracha* has the same letters as the word בִּרְכָה/*bereicha* – ‘wellspring’ (*Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* 39:11); (Rabbeinu Bachya *Devarim* 8:10). This teaches us that a blessing is like a wellspring that flows down from the heavens. This concept is alluded to in the root letters of the word “bracha” – ב-ר-ך – *bet-reish-chaf* – whose numerical values are 2, 20 and 200. While the number ‘one’ represents the minimal amount, ‘two’ begins the series of multiplicity and increase, hinting at the power of a bracha to increase goodness in the world (Maharal, *Tiferet Yisrael* 34,

*Netzach Yisrael* 45). Due to the power of blessing, we understand the Talmudic statement, "Don't regard the blessing of a commoner lightly. For two greats, of their respective generations, were blessed by two commoners, and each blessing was fulfilled..." (*Babylonian Talmud, Megillah* 15a). Usually, we take this saying as a statement about how we should treasure getting a blessing from anyone. If commoners could help great biblical role-models with their blessings, who knows what the words of someone we pass on the street may do for us? Yet, the Talmudic statement also teaches us to be steadfast in wishing good upon others! No one can say, "What difference does it make? Who am I, that my blessing should matter?" We are all children of the Infinite Creator, made in His Image. Even the lowliest person carries tremendous power. Everyone's blessing can be powerful, regardless of social, moral, or spiritual status. By believing in the power of our own blessings and that of others, we can bring them to fruition. Let us tap into the power of blessing, inherited from Avraham our father, and use this potent tool to benefit the world. Let us bestow blessings whenever we have the opportunity, and answer "Amen" to reinforce any blessing we hear! Through perfecting our ability of speech, by applying it in ever increasing blessings, we can bring healing and redemption to the world!