

HALOCHOSCOPE

This week's question:

- A soldier is allowed to leave the active field of operations for a day or a weekend.
- Someone was shot at with a pellet gun, and it shot through his hat.
- Someone stopped an extreme allergic reaction with a self-administered injection.

Should these people recite hagomel, the brocha of thanksgiving? Should they make a seudas hoda'ah, thanksgiving feast?

The issues:

A) *Birchas hagomel*; *seudas hoda'ah*; *birchas naness*, brocha recited for a miracle

B) Defining the danger or the illness

A) *Hagomel*

One saved from peril shows thanksgiving to Hashem. When the *Bais Hamikdash* stood, he would bring a *korban todah*, thanksgiving offering. This included many loaves of bread, that he would need to share. Thus, he would express his thanksgiving with a gathering of well-wishers. The Talmud derives from statements in Tehilim 107, that there are four main categories of peril: those who travel by sea, when they arrive at their destination; those who pass through uninhabited wilderness; one released from imprisonment; and one healed from illness. In one view, when the temple is rebuilt, speedily in our days, other offerings will no longer be brought, but *korban todah* will always be offered.

Nowadays, we show thanksgiving in other ways, both practical and spiritual. One miraculously (though not necessarily supernaturally) saved from danger should distribute *tzedakah* to Torah scholars, a substitute for the *korban*. He should recite the relevant passage in the Torah (Tzav 7:12-15), according to some, immediately. It is also customary to host a *seudas hoda'ah*, annually on the date of the miracle.

The *korban* is *nedava*, voluntary. The Talmud rules that the four categories mentioned in Tehilim 107 have a separate obligation to recite *birchas hagomel*. This acknowledges that Hashem saved him in His abundant loving-kindness, despite his shortcomings. It is based on the voluntary *todah*, which is offered by all who feel gratitude. The poskim debate whether this *brocha* is indeed considered *chovah*, compulsory, or *reshus*, voluntary. Even those who consider it *reshus* maintain that one should make every effort to recite it. However, it may only be recited by those included in the Rabbinic list. Reciting it on one's own violates *brocha she'ainah tzricha*, an unnecessary *brocha*. Some consider this a Scriptural violation of *lo sisa*, do not utter Hashem's name in vain. Others maintain that in the middle of a *brocha* of praise, this is not violated. However, it violates the positive *mitzvah* to revere Hashem. Therefore, when in doubt, *safeik brochos lehakeil*, one refrains from reciting this *brocha*. This leads to a common solution for many questionable such situations. The *brocha* is recommended, but without the Names

of Hashem. This satisfies the basic obligation, but avoids the Scriptural violations.

Birchas haness is recited by those who experienced a truly miraculous event, when they revisit the location of the miracle. Most poskim maintain that the escape must be obviously due to something beyond the usual laws of nature. This does not mean that night turned into day, but that by the usual laws of nature, the person could not have been saved. An exceptional display of *hashgacha pratis*, the Hand of G-d, or the extreme luck of all the right things happening is not necessarily included in this category. Therefore, in most such situations, an independent opinion should be sought from a *rav*.

In our cases, the only situation that could be considered outside the laws of nature would be if an inexplicable action saved the person's life. 'Normal' escapes from the danger would not warrant *birchas haness* with the Names of Hashem.

Birchas hagomel is recited in the presence of others. Ideally, there should be ten men present. They should respond to the one reciting it, that he should continue to merit Hashem's kindness. To properly show thanksgiving, one publicizes it, similar to the *korban todah* idea, as mentioned. There is a basic principle of *pirsum haness*, publicizing miracles. The prevailing *minhag* is to recite it in *shul*, and preferably when the Torah is read. It is similar to the *korban todah*, which is brought in the *Bais Hamikdash* on the altar. The time of Torah reading is considered an *ais ratzon*, an auspicious time for divine appeasement. He receives an *aliyah*, or he recites it just after the reading. [See references at the end of next section.]

B) Defining the danger

The concept of the *brocha* is that when one is in danger, the adversarial forces are aroused. One who has an account of sins deserves to be punished. Hashem intervenes to protect, even if one does not deserve this. Generally, it is a situation where one cannot control events. He recognizes Hashem's protection, and he shows special thanksgiving.

The poskim discuss the danger from various perspectives, some of which apply in our cases. There is debate on whether the categories are specific; on whether the danger must be actual or possible; on whether it must be life-threatening; on the extent of the danger, such as in its length of time; on the frequency of the danger; on whether the danger must be unusual or expected and predictable.

In the case of *birchas haness*, the Talmud does not specify any particular type of danger. The poskim debate whether the same is true with *birchas hagomel*. Some say that the number 'four' is very specific. Others maintain that they are frequent examples. The prevailing *Ashkenazic minhag* is to recite the *brocha* on any type of danger.

The Talmud discusses traveling through dangerous areas. There is no mention that the danger must actually arise. Nonetheless, many poskim maintain that only in such cases does one recite it without an actual event. If one recites it for other dangers, he must experience the actual danger. A near miss does not count. For example if a heavy stone fell right next to the person or a wagon (car) rolled right next to him, he does not say *hagomel*. If it fell on or rolled over him, but he survived, he recites it. There is also debate on whether the stone was big enough to kill, or even to cause severe injury. Should the person have been actually injured, or just hit by it? What if it was something that could have killed had it landed on a sensitive spot, but did not? A single pellet is not de-

signed to kill a human. However, if it hits a sensitive spot, such as the ear, it can penetrate and have disastrous results. Our case does not count as a near miss, since the pellet did hit. Furthermore, it landed on the head, and was clearly aimed at the head. The hat brim protected the person from the pellet hitting his ear. This seems to be a case where *hagomel* should be recited. While there might have been no definite life-threatening danger, there was clearly a danger of injury, likely to have been serious.

The Talmud mentions traveling through uninhabited areas. The Talmud requires *tefilas haderech*, the wayfarer's prayer, for those traveling through sparsely populated areas as well. The issue is that on the road, there are dangers. Accordingly, some poskim require *hagomel* even when one travels between cities, if there is a wild, un-policed expanse between them. Others maintain that the *brocha* is for seas and wildernesses specifically. In this case, *Sepharadic* practice is more stringent. Moreover, only one who traveled 'in the sea or wilderness' is included. One who flies over them does not recite it. Many contend that in the air, should an emergency happen, it is hard to control. Some distinguish between flying over land, where there is an opportunity to land and over sea.

Sepharadim also recite the *brocha* more readily for any illness. The poskim mention being bedridden for three days. Some maintain that it applies to serious illness only. A life-threatening emergency can also be categorized. A sudden attack of sickness from which one recovers quickly is also dangerous. In some cases, it is a regular event, albeit serious. The patient is equipped to handle it easily, and it happens all the time. For example, if one's blood sugar drops, they know to replenish it quickly. Dehydration can also be resolved quickly. However, some people are not ready to remedy these. Furthermore, they can get to a point that the patient is unable to extricate himself. These life-threatening situations need not force the patient to be bedridden, but require the *brocha* nonetheless. In the case of the extreme allergic reaction, the event was not an everyday regular occurrence. It was actually an acute event, and could have caused death.

Imprisonment includes being held against one's will and out of control of one's fate. The company of criminals is considered dangerous. A minority view holds that only one held for execution recites *hagomel*. Some require a minimum of three days.

As mentioned, the poskim discuss whether the illness must involve staying in a sickbed. If one avoided a protracted stay due to medical intervention, the question is whether this is considered a near miss. A near miss does not require the *brocha*. One should certainly give thanks, but he may not consider himself delivered from a clear and present danger. The poskim discuss one who was poisoned and recovered through medical intervention. The only debate seems to be when he should recite *hagomel*. Some say that one only recites it when the symptoms have disappeared, while others maintain that as soon as the danger passes he recites it. This applies to those who recite it specifically for the four categories, including illness. According to those who recite it on any danger, this is anyhow included. On the other hand, if one ingests medicine, which is poison in the wrong amounts, he does not recite it. The medicine is administered in a controlled manner. Similarly, having the condition under control all the time reduces it from being an acute event to being considered somewhat everyday.

Sometimes, a chronic condition is under control, but is prone to critical events. The

poskim debate whether he recites *hagomel* after every such event. This touches on our question about relief from the battlefield. Some maintain that one should offer thanksgiving for each event, while others say he should wait until the symptoms are gone. Some distinguish between categories based on the Talmudic terminology. Travelers are mentioned in the present tense, implying that they travel regularly. They recite it when they stop for a rest. Some say reaching a destination, even for a short stay, counts. The ill and imprisoned are mentioned in the past tense. They only recite it after it is all over.

The poskim discuss the case of the soldier. He can be sent back from the battlefield to rest, or sent home for a break. Some say that the battlefield itself is considered a danger, while others say that one must be involved in the battle. Some consider the general field of operations dangerous, due to the existence of enemies all around. Some maintain that membership in the army, especially during wartime, is itself a danger that requires a *brocha* on release. Some point out that the *brocha* was instituted for those who are placed in an unusual circumstance due to their sins, and are saved. Conscription to the army is either voluntary, or it is compulsory for every citizen. This cannot be considered a result of personal sin. Others maintain that sin is actually debated. Childbirth is cited as an example of the *hagomel* obligation, depending on one's practice. There are some righteous women! The poskim agree that a soldier leaving the the area of operations for a few days, he should recite *hagomel* each time. [See Vayikra Raba 9:7. Brochos 54a-b, Poskim. Tur Sh Ar OC 218-219, commentaries. Cayei Adam 155:41. Levushei Mordechai II:OC:162:2, references cited there. Igros Moshe OC:II:59. Minchas Yitzchok II:47. Betzail Hachochma I:21. Shevet Halevi IX:45. Divrei yisroel I:45. Avnei Yashpeh I:46.]

In conclusion, in all of the cases, *hagomel* should be recited, except the soldier if he will not be on a full break. A *seudas hoda'ah* is usually made on the anniversary of a miraculous delivery. These cases do not seem to fit that category. If the allergic reaction was so acute that the person can claim to have recovered from near-death, and if the soldier experienced an actual miraculous event, they should make a *seudas hoda'ah*.

On the parsha ... [Aharon] placed the *ketoress* and atoned for the people .. and the plague stopped .. Aharon returned to Moshe to the entrance of the *Ohel Moed*, and the plague stopped. [17:12-15] Why is the phrase repeated? [See *Sforno, Or Hachaim* etc.] Aharon returned to Moshe and the *Ohel Moed* to argue with the *Malach Hamavess*. Why did he need to argue after the *ketoress* had stopped the plague? The *ketoress* could only prevent the plague for the moment. It could still come back [see *Haamek Davar*]. The terminology the first time is, “it stopped”, and the second time, “it was stopped”. Perhaps an illness stopping by itself is temporary and not final. One cannot rely on the *Malach Hamavess* leaving, and one cannot say the *brocha* for this. If it is stopped permanently, the adversarial forces have been silenced, and one thanks Hashem for that.

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