



Birchas haGomel & COVID-19

"If he shall offer it for thanksgiving, he shall offer with the thanksgiving offering unleavened loaves mixed with oil, unleavened wafer smeared with oil, and loaves of scalded fine flour mixed with oil." (Vayikra 7:11-12).

The *Korban Todah* (thanksgiving offering) is ostensibly a form of *Shelamim* (peace offering) and should therefore be voluntary. Its purpose, as alluded to by its name, is to enable a person to thank Hashem for His overwhelming kindness. Curiously, *Rashi* explains that this *Korban* is actually an *obligation* upon somebody who was saved from a danger:

*If [the Korban is brought] as thanksgiving for a miracle that was performed for him, such as seafarers, those who travel through deserts, those who were incarcerated, [or] a sick person who was healed – for these people need to offer thanks, as is written, "They should give thanks to Hashem for His kindness, and for His wonders to mankind, and they should slaughter thanksgiving offerings" (Tehilim 107:21-22). If it was for one of these reasons that he pledged peace offerings, they are *Shalmei Todah*...*

According to *Rashi*, not every *Korban* that is set aside in order to offer thanks to Hashem is automatically considered a *Korban Todah*. Only if a person's salvation from one of the perilous circumstances described above does he have grounds for offering this *Korban*. Moreover, *Rashi's* use of the phrase "need to offer thanks" implies that this *Korban* is obligatory and not voluntary¹.

The source of the concept that there are four circumstances that lead to an obligation to offer thanks for their salvation is found in the Gemara in *Brachos* (54b) that derives these categories from *Pesukim* in *Tehilim* 107. Interestingly, the Gemara makes no mention of *Korban Todah* – it merely discusses the parameters of the Mitzva of *Birchas haGomel*. Evidently, *Rashi* derived from this that these were also the parameters of the *Korban Todah* and in fact, this is clearly implied by the Pasuk he

¹ *Rashi* explains that those who have experienced Hashem's salvation "need to offer thanks". This expression is found in the Gemara and, as we shall see, connotes that they are obligated to do so. *Rashi* there explains that the expression "Need to offer thanks" (rather than the expected "Are obligated to offer thanks") indicates that there is an optimal time period during which a person should offer thanks. It is not intended to imply that the Mitzva to bring a *Korban Todah* is not mandatory.



cites which states – “*They should give thanks to Hashem for His kindness, and for His wonders to mankind, and they should slaughter thanksgiving offerings*”

This also appears to be the view of the *Rosh* (*Brachos* 9:3). The *Rosh* asks why it is that specifically those who traverse deserts must recite *Birchas haGomel* but those who journey in other areas do not. Surely, any travel carries a level of danger (as stated by the *Yerushalmi* (*Berachos* 4:4) – “*Kol haderachim b’chezkas sakono*”). He answers that while the fact that travel is dangerous is a reason to recite *Tefilas haDerech*, ***Birchas haGomel* was instituted in place of the *Korban Todah***² which is only offered by the four people delineated by the Gemara.

There are several difficulties with this approach. The *Chasam Sofer* (*Shu”t O.C.* 51) asks that *Birchas haGomel* is already alluded to in another verse in this Perek of *Tehilim* (“*viRomemuhu b’Khal Am*”) which means that it cannot have been instituted by the *Chachamim* only after the destruction of the Beis haMikdash as a replacement for the *Korban Todah*. Furthermore, neither the *Pesukim* nor the Gemara give any indication that those who experience salvation are **obligated** to offer a *Korban Todah*. Rather, the Torah implies that the *Korban Todah* is merely a subsidiary of *Korban Shelamim* which is offered voluntarily (*Shita Mekubetzes, Menachos* 89b). Due to this difficulty, the *Pri Megadim* (*O.C.* 219, *Eishel Avraham* 1) contends that Rashi only means to say that there is an obligation *mi’d’Rabbanan*.

Regardless, there is certainly an obligation to recite *Birchas haGomel* if one experienced a salvation from one of the four perilous situations stated above. The *Poskim* discuss the details and extent of the danger that would lead to a person’s obligation to recite this Bracha. We will focus on the person who recovered from illness.

There are three views among the *Rishonim* as to which illnesses warrant *Birchas haGomel* upon one’s recovery:

The *Aruch* (*Erech* 4, cited by the *Rosh* *ibid.*) holds that a person must recite *Birchas haGomel* when recovering from the slightest complaint, even a sore throat or headache and even if he wasn’t bedridden. The *Rosh* adds that according to the *Aruch*, recovery from a bout of intestinal discomfort would also be cause for *Birchas haGomel*.

² R’ Shimon Sofer *zt”l* (*Michtav Sofer* 2:1) explains that *Birchas haGomel* is recited during *Krias haTorah* since the *Bimah* represents the *Mizbeach*. See *Minchas Asher, Bamidbar* 54.



Tosfos (Brachos 54b, s.v. v'Eima) cite *haRav R' Yosef* who rules that a person recites *Birchas haGomel* only if he was bedridden and not if he suffered from a mere headache or intestinal discomfort. The *Ramban (Toras haAdam, Inyan Hoda'ah)* and *Rosh (ibid.)* concur.

Tosfos imply, and the *Ramban* (as cited by *Beis Yosef O.C. 219*) states explicitly, that one needn't have been dangerously ill or grievously injured to be obligated in *Birchas haGomel* – so long as one was bedridden. Their reasoning is that whenever a person takes ill, even though he may not be in mortal danger, Heavenly judgment is passed upon him at that time as explained by the Gemara in *Shabbos (32a)*:

*The Rabbis taught: If somebody is ill and is on the verge of death, we instruct him, "Confess" for all those who are executed confess. If a person goes out to the market – it shall be in his eyes as though he is being handed over to an officer of a foreign army. If he has a headache – it shall be in his eyes as though he has been placed in chains. **If he retires to his bed – if shall be in his eyes as though he has been taken up to the executioner's gallows; for anybody who is taken up to the executioner's gallows, will be saved if he has great defendants, but if not – he will not be saved.** And these are man's defendants – repentance and good deeds.*

Based on this Gemara, the *Rishonim* distinguished between somebody who is merely suffering from a headache and somebody who is bedridden (though not dangerously ill). One who is bedridden should consider that judgment is hanging over him and that he will require great merits (such as repentance and good deeds) in order to be saved. The *Mishna Berura (219:25)* also adds that any illness that confines a person to his bed has the potential to develop complications that will ultimately endanger his life, unlike milder complaints. The *Rashba (Shu"t 1:82)* writes similarly.

The *Tur (O.C. 219)* cites the *Ra'avad* who appears to hold a third view (though the *Tur* appears to equate it with that of *R' Yosef*):

*Similarly, regarding a sick person – haRav R' Yosef writes that it only applies to a sick person who is bedridden but somebody who has a head or stomachache needn't recite the Bracha. The Ra'avad writes similarly – **only with an internal injury that entails a danger.***



It is unclear whether the *Tur* holds that *R' Yosef's* opinion is identical to the *Ra'avad's*, but it is certainly clear that the *Ra'avad* holds that one only recites *Birchas haGomel* upon recovery from a life-threatening illness or injury (see below).

The *Tur* also contends that the *Rambam* concurs with the *Aruch*, and recovering from even the slightest illness is cause for *Birchas haGomel*:

"...but the Rambam writes that for every journey and every illness one is obligated to give thanks, as we find in the Yerushalmi, 'Kol haderachim b'chezkas sakono' (and all who are ill are 'b'chezkas sakono'), and so did the Aruch write that even one who has eye pains or a headache is required to recite Birchas haGomel, and this is the custom in Spain."

The *Beis Yosef* notes that the *Rambam* does not write this clearly and the correct text in the *Tur* should be "*Ramban*" rather than "*Rambam*". However, this approach raises its own problems, as the *Tur* writes explicitly that this opinion sides with the *Aruch* and, as explained above, the *Ramban* and *Aruch* differ. Perhaps the *Beis Yosef* merely meant that the *Tur* intended to group the *Rambam* (or *Ramban*) and *Aruch* together only in the sense that they disagree with the *Ra'avad* and don't require a life-threatening illness or injury in order to be obligated to recite *Birchas haGomel*.

The *Shulchan Aruch* (*ibid.* 8) rules like *Tosfos* and the *Ramban* that anyone who was bedridden must recite *Birchas haGomel*. The *Rema* cites the opinion of the *Ra'avad* and attests that the custom in *Ashkenaz* was in line with his view. The *Mishna Berura*, however, cites the majority of the *Acharonim* who rule that one should be concerned for the opinion of the *Shulchan Aruch* and therefore recite *Birchas haGomel* even when recovering from a non-life-threatening illness³.

Today, there are many people who have recovered from COVID-19. Are they obligated to recite *Birchas haGomel*?

It seems clear that those who tested positive for the virus but who were asymptomatic should not recite the Bracha, even according to the *Aruch*. Though the *Aruch* rules that if somebody recovers from a mild headache (that may just be a result of slight dehydration) he must say *Birchas haGomel*, and COVID-19 is an actual disease which also carries a risk to life, if a person does not display any symptoms he should

³ We should add that the *Taz's* approach seems to create consensus between these opinions: If a person's life was in danger, he should recite *Birchas haGomel* even if he was only sick for one day, but if not, he should only do so if he was bedridden for three days.



not recite the Bracha, even if he is considered high-risk of developing dangerous complications.

The rationale is that although modern diagnostic methods can detect the presence of disease even in the absence of illness, this does not have any bearing on Halachos such as *Birchas haGomel*. If someone's immune system has successfully fought the virus and he has not been affected at all, he is considered thoroughly healthy according to Halacha, even if others in his state have developed serious illness or complications due to this particular virus. In this regard, the virus is not a "*Machala*" for which one says *Birchas haGomel* – even though a common headache is!

According to the *Shulchan Aruch*, who holds that there is only an obligation of *Birchas haGomel* if a person was bedridden (though not endangered), the same would apply to COVID-19. If a person developed a fever that confined him to bed, particularly if he also experienced other symptoms (and certainly if he remained for three full days in bed), he should recite *Birchas haGomel*.

According to the *Rema*, one only recites *Birchas haGomel* when recovering from a life-threatening illness. In the case of COVID-19, if a person needed the aid of mechanical ventilation, his life was certainly in danger. It is also likely that an elderly person, or one with preexisting conditions who develops pneumonia, would also be considered in danger. In those circumstances, *Birchas haGomel* should be recited even if he was only sick for a short time. (As mentioned, the *Mishna Berura* notes that the *Acharonim* do not rule like the *Rema*.)

Certainly, a Posek should be consulted about any doubts regarding *Birchas haGomel*, or for any other questions.

May we soon merit that Hashem will rid the world of this terrible plague so that we may join our voices in praise and gratitude to Hashem for His benevolent kindness and miraculous wonders.