

The Florence Melton Adult Mini-School  
Section: Rhythms of Jewish Living  
<http://mcohen02.tripod.com/rhythms.html>  
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## Topic: *Berakhot* (Blessings)

**Key Idea:** *Berakhot* are a way of inviting God's presence into our everyday lives by infusing acts of normal daily living—eating and drinking, observing the world around us, and rituals performed with or for the body—by performing them with awareness and intent. The *berakha* formula is a way of transforming actions from routines into ritual, and awareness into appreciation. The custom of reciting formulaic blessings is attributed by tradition to the *Anshei Knesset Hagedolah* ("men of the Great Assembly"), the spiritual leaders in the time of Ezra (mid 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE). Discussions of both the rules and the rationale for the recitation of *berakhot* are found in the **Talmud, in Maimonides, Abarbanel**, and in subsequent discussions and codifications of Jewish practice (*halakha*).

There are three types of *Berakhot*: 1) blessings over various types of enjoyment (*birkhot ha-nehinin*) including eating, drinking and inhaling fragrances; 2) blessings recited before the fulfillment of a ritual commandment (*birkhot ha-mitzvot*), such as candlelighting, handwashing, study, etc.; 3) blessings of praise and thanks (*birkhot ha-shevach v'ha-hodaya*), which include the numerous blessings of the liturgy and the *birkat hamazon* (grace after meals), as well as *berakhot* recited on various special occasions—happy, sorrowful, and extraordinary—such as deliverance from danger (*gomel*), seeing a long lost friend, hearing bad news or seeing a rainbow.

Some *berakhot* are recited spontaneously as occasions arise. Others are recited during ritually prescribed prayer. The *Shema* and its blessings, the *Amida*, and the *birkat hamazon* (grace after meals) are composed of chains of *berakhot*, some of which have formulaic beginnings as well as endings, others just a *barukh* formula only at the beginning (*petikha*) or a *barukh* formula only at the end (*chatima*).

The Hebrew word *b'rakha* (blessing, singular) and other derivatives of the three Hebrew letter root *b-r-kh* are etymologically connected to both the words *berekh* (knee) and *breikha* (pool). In Arabic, *B-R-K* is the root of *barrak* (to bless), *barakat* (blessing, abundance), and *mubarak* (blessed), as well as *barrak* (bend the knees) and *birkat* (pool), and also to *bark* (to stand firm, dwell in), *tabarrak* (to bode well), and *barik* (happy, fresh dates with cream!). *Mabruk*, from the same root, is the Arabic equivalent of "mazel tov!"

### *Our discussion of the texts:*

**Text 1: Deuteronomy 8:7-10.** The biblical commandment to thank God after eating our fill.

**Text 2: Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 35a.** The rabbinic rationale for reciting blessings before as well as after eating. These blessings are examples of *birkhot ha-shevach v'ha-hodaya*.

**Text 3: Babylonian Talmud, Pesachim 7b.** Recitation of a blessing before performing a ritual commandment (*birkhot ha-mitzvot*).

**Text 4: Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch.** The rationale for reciting *berakhot*.

**Text 5: The traditional berakhah formula.**

**Suppl text: From Tefillah (Lesson 10), Text 5, pp. 95-100.** The Amidah as a chain of *berakhot*.

**Text 7: Marsha Falk.** A contemporary writer's discomfort with the *berakha* formula.

**Text 8: Examples of *berakhot* for various aspects of enjoyment (*birkhot ha-nehinin*).**

**Text 9: Examples of *berakhot* of praise and thanksgiving (*birkhot shevach v'hodaya*).**

**Text 10: Examples of *berakhot* recited before performing a ritual commandment (*birkhot hamitzvot*).** These add *asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu...* to the *berakha* formula.

**Text 11: Marsha Falk, *The Book of Blessings*.** A modern alternative to traditional *berakhot*.