

Parshat Ha’azinu

The Blessings on Torah Study

In this week’s parsha is expressed the obligation to make a blessing before the commencement of Torah study. This sicha analyzes this obligation as it applies to the Torah study of women.

Concerning the obligation to make a blessing before the commencement of Torah study, the Talmud employs a verse from our Torah portion and states:

Text 1

Where do we find that a blessing before studying the Torah is ordained in the Torah? Because it says (Devarim 22:3): When I call out the name of the Lord, ascribe greatness to our G-d.

Talmud, Berachot 21a

Now, prior to the fulfillment of any commandment one recites a blessing that G-d commanded us and sanctified us through this *mitzvah*. From this though, that notwithstanding this general obligation there is an additional source to derive that one must bless the Torah prior to Torah study, it is understood that it is due to a difference in the type of blessing.

The focal difference can be explained as follows:

In general, when makes a blessing on a *mitzvah* it is in thanks to G-d that through the *mitzvah* one becomes sanctified. However, the blessing made on Torah study, is on the *actual* Torah study. This can be likened to the blessing that one makes before one partakes of food—where the blessing is on the *actual* enjoyment of the repast.

Indeed, when one examines the wording of the two blessings it is clear that the blessing on *mitzot* is on the sanctification and the blessing of

the Torah is on the very fact “that he gave us His Torah.”

That the blessing is—similarly to food—on the actual enjoyment of the study, is expressed in the code of Jewish law, authored by the 1st Chabad Rebbe, as follows:

Text 2

[The Torah], G-d’s precious vessel in which He delights every day, should therefore be valued so highly by every individual that he recites its blessings with a joy that surpasses his joy over all the pleasures in the world.

Shulchan Aruch ADHZ, Orach Chaim 47:1

It is therefore clear that the blessing is not only on the sanctification but that one is to enjoy the study of Torah more than any pleasure in the world. One must therefore make a blessing before the study of Torah similarly to the blessing that one makes before he partakes of any physical pleasure.

Women making the blessing

Now, although women are technically not obligated to study Torah day and night as men are, they nevertheless recite the Torah blessing every morning. The reason, explains Rabbi Shneur Zalman is as follows:

Text 3

Women should recite the blessings before Torah study, for they are obligated to study [the laws governing] the [positive] *mitzvot* which relate to them so they will know how to observe them, and [they need to know] how to avoid violating all the prohibitive commandments, which devolve upon them as upon men.

Shulchan Aruch ADHZ, Orach Chaim 47:10

However, according to what was explained above about the intent of the blessing on Torah study, the above does not seem to be understood.

It would seem, that even minus the *responsibility* to learn in order to know how to act, they would nevertheless be responsible to make the blessing on Torah study. This is because, as expressed in the Talmud and enunciated by the Alter Rebbe, the blessing on Torah study is because of the actual *enjoyment* of the study and that G-d gave us the Torah, and not merely because it is a commandment like any other.

It must therefore be understood: Why does the Alter Rebbe explain that the reason that they must make a blessing is because they too are obligated to study Torah, when the foundation of the blessing seems to have nothing to do with an obligation in Torah study?

A blessing in the morning

In order to answer the above question, an additional question about the blessing of the Torah must first be asked and answered:

Customarily, the blessing on the Torah is stated in the morning and this encompasses anything that will be learned throughout the day—even if

the individual took a break from study before returning to it.

This though is not understood:

Seemingly, the law should be that there be no appointed time to make the blessing. Just as it is with other forms of enjoyment that one makes the blessing each time they commence the act anew, the law should be that each time a person begins studying Torah, they should make a blessing on its study.

[Or one can say in the reverse: that because the blessing is in appreciation that G-d gave us the Torah, one can make it once a year, or once in his life, and this can reckon as the only blessing he must make.]

However, the recitation of this blessing once each morning does not seem to make sense.

In discussion of this, the Alter Rebbe expresses two opinions in his code:

Text 4

If one began studying after reciting the blessings over Torah study, then stopped studying and became involved in his own matters and later returned to his studies is not required to recite a blessing again—if he is a person who is accustomed to studying continuously. For when he leaves [his studies] to become involved in his livelihood, he hurries as fast as he can to accomplish what he must so that he can return to his studies. Hence, this activity is not considered an interruption with regard to the blessing, for at the time he is involved in his livelihood, his mind is on his studies. Similarly, going to the bathhouse or the lavatory, [or] taking a brief nap...is not considered an interruption. If however, one sleeps on his bed for a substantial time, this is considered an interruption.

Some authorities maintain that the blessings for Torah study resemble the Morning Blessings; that it was ordained they be recited only once daily...this is the accepted custom.

Shulchan Aruch ADHZ, Orach Chaim 47:7

The Alter Rebbe maintains—even according to the first opinion—that although a person is in a position that precludes Torah study—for example a lavatory—they nevertheless must not recite the blessing when they return to their study. For, even while they were incapacitated they nevertheless maintained the desire to return to their studies.

What remains to be understood is the difference between Torah study and Tefillin. For although, concerning Torah study, the Alter Rebbe maintains that going to the lavatory is not considered an interruption that would obligate him to recite a new blessing, concerning Tefillin he does. Why the difference?

Concerning an interruption from laying Tefillin the Alter Rebbe writes:

Text 5

If, when a person removed the Tefillin, he intended to put them on again immediately thereafter; if he does put them on immediately, he does not recite a blessing...if however he relieved himself in the interim, he is required to recite a blessing [when] putting them on again.

Shulchan Aruch ADHZ, Orach Chaim 25:29-30

It is not understood though: What is the difference between Tefillin and Torah study. Why regarding Tefillin is a trip to the lavatory considered an interruption that mandates an

additional blessing, yet, the same is not said concerning the study of Torah?

Both the study of Torah and the wearing of Tefillin are excluded in the bathroom, so concerning both, entering a lavatory should be considered an interruption that necessitates a new blessing.

The prohibition of distraction

In order to appreciate the above, some background regarding the prohibition of removing one's mind from the Tefillin they are wearing must be prefaced.

The Alter Rebbe states:

Text 6

It is forbidden to divert one's attention from Tefillin even for a moment and long as one is wearing them. This conclusion is derived from the [High Priest's] forehead plate. With regard to the forehead plate it is written (Shemos 28:38): "It shall be on his forehead at all times," meaning that his mind should not be diverted from it....It is considered a diversion of attention if a person is involved in levity or frivolity. If however, one continues with reverence and engages in his own concerning...and his attention is not focused directly on his Tefillin, he is not considered to have diverted his attention.

Shulchan Aruch ADHZ, Orach Chaim 28:1

What remains to be understood, is why it is not considered a diversion unless one is completely distracted? The law should seemingly be similar to the forehead plate, where the High Priest constantly prohibited from removing his attention from it. Why concerning one's Tefillin can one indeed remove their attention to a certain respect?

One can answer this question in a scantily tolerable fashion by redefining the prohibition of “averting one’s attention.”

It can be postulated that *removal* of attention is not the *lack* of attention, but the *negation* of attention. Unless the individual is involved in “levity or frivolity” it cannot truly be considered the negation of one’s attention—and therefore is not forbidden.

However, the Alter Rebbe’s statement “It is forbidden to divert one’s attention from Tefillin even for a moment” seems to preclude this hypothesis. As what is intimated herein is that any removal of attention is forbidden and not merely the negation thereof.

The explanation

The explanation in all of the above questions is as follows:

In the mitzvah of the Tefillin there are two aspects: 1) the basic commandment to lay the tefillin 2) the intent stated in Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 25:50 of “subjecting one’s mind” in the service of G-d.

Derived of these two aspects are the various laws regarding Tefillin:

As long as the Tefillin are on his head—even when he is not completely attentive to the Tefillin—it is not considered an interruption. This is because, as long as they are on his head he is in fulfillment of the commandment of wearing Tefillin.

However, when the Tefillin are removed, his connection to the Tefillin is interrupted. As such, he must return and recite a new blessing on them, unless he intended on putting them on once more.

Additionally: When a person goes to the lavatory, they must recite once again recite a blessing on their Tefillin—even if they intended to put them on once again. For, although he intends to put them on once more, the laying of the Tefillin cannot be considered a continuation of his original blessing—as there was an interim period where he was forbidden to wear them.

Because one of the facets of the commandment is to “subjugate one’s heart” it is understood that this feeling must be present throughout the performance of the commandment.

However, because this intent was present at the onset when the person lay the Tefillin, this intent extends to the entirety of the time that he has the Tefillin on his head.

This is similar to an expression that the Alter Rebbe expresses about intent as it concerns Torah study:

Text 7

The essential preparation [of intent] "for its own sake," where it is *sine qua non*, is before the beginning of stud... This is the same as in the case of [writing] a bill of divorce or a scroll of the Torah, requiring *sine qua non* "for their own sake," and it is sufficient if at the commencement of writing he says: "I am now about to write for the sacred purpose of the scroll of the Law," or [in the case of a bill of divorce] "For him and for her..."

Tanya, Chapter 41

This is all the more so concerning Tefillin where what is necessitated is a general subjugation and not a constant focus.

This is not so concerning the attentiveness that the High Priest must have concerning the

forehead plate. There, the intent is to rectify a specific offering brought on the altar, and not a general intent, and therefore requires more focus.

However, when a person is engaged in levity and frivolity this does cancel the original intent of the Tefillin, as it is clearly contrary to the subjugation of one's mind.

Torah Study

Concerning Torah study, the Alter Rebbe, brings two opinions about what constitutes an interruption between the blessing and the study:

Text 8

There are authorities who maintain that there is no need to study immediately after reciting the blessing over Torah study. Instead, even if one made an interruption between the blessing and his studies, it is as if he made an interruption in the studies themselves...These blessing do not resemble the blessing over the mitzvot.. (as) Torah study is different. Since one is obligated to study at *all times*, making an interruption is of no consequence, for he is *obligated* to learn at the time of the interruption.

Shulchan Aruch ADHZ, Orach Chaim 47:7

While the Alter Rebbe does bring an opinion which disagrees to this ruling—which we follow—it is not that an argument over the essential principle but an argument about whether this rule can be applied to the specific case of Torah study.

It therefore can be explained that the reason why even when one interrupts their studies to go to the lavatory it is not considered an interruption that necessitates a new blessing is because the obligation to study Torah is

constant—even when in the bathroom—even though practically one is unable to study.

The only thing that would constitute a separation to obligate a new blessing is a substantial sleep, or someone who never learns to begin with. This though is not the case with Tefillin, as there is no constant obligation to wear Tefillin, and therefore one must make a new blessing when they make a similar type of interruption.

Women and the blessing

According to the above the initial question as to why the Alter Rebbe mentions that “women should recite the blessings before Torah study, for they are obligated to study [the laws governing]” the performance of mitzvot, instead of saying that they are obligated to make a blessing because the pleasure they derive from study or in appreciation that G-d gave us the Torah, can be answered.

Were it not for the explanation of the Alter Rebbe, women would be obligated to make the blessing of Torah *each time* they sit down to learn—and not suffice with the blessing that they make in the morning.

This is because, without a *constant* obligation to study Torah, there is nothing that connects the initial blessing that is made in the morning to the *various* times that they may study throughout the day.

It is for this reason that the Alter Rebbe explains that they do indeed have a *constant* obligation to study Torah. Being that they have an obligation to know all the laws of practical mitzvot, they too, constantly must study.

It is therefore understood why women too suffice with one blessing that counts for all their study throughout the day.

Morning blessing

As expressed above, in practice, the blessing on the Torah is made only in the morning, for: "Torah study resemble the Morning Blessings; that it was ordained they be recited only once daily..."

It would seem then that according to the likening to the morning blessings, the Alter Rebbe would not need to explain that women too have a constant mitzvah of Torah study to explain why they only make the blessing once, for the reason that they make it once is similar to the rest of the morning blessings that are made only once.

This though is not the case, and it is indeed necessary. For, in regards to the morning blessings the Alter Rebbe explains:

Text 9

Our sages ordained that the Morning Blessings be recited for the natural order and its functioning, from which the created beings derive benefit *every day*. For this they should

bless the Holy One, blessed be He, the first time they derive such benefit *every day*.

Shulchan Aruch ADHZ, Orach Chaim 46:1

It is therefore understood that the morning blessings are only recited on things that are constant each day. However, benefits that are not constant each day are not recited each day.

However, because women too must learn each day to know their commandments they too must learn each day.

It is for this reason that the Alter Rebbe states that women have a constant obligation in the study of Torah as this explains why they make the blessing each morning.

(Based on Likutei Sichos 14, 2, reworked by Rabbi Dovid Markel. To see other projects and to partner in our work, see: www.Neirot.com)