

## The origin of ברכות המצוות

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In his article ברכות המצוות: הלכה ותולדותיה, David Henshke provides a complete account of what we know about blessings recited on the performance of *mitzvot* and, through a thorough study of all extant sources, traces their origins and development. It is impossible to do justice to this article here, but I will briefly summarise his most important claims.

- 1) The earliest figure to whom we can definitely attribute the opinion that blessings must or should be recited on *mitzvot* is Rabi Yehuda, the student of Rabi Aqiva.
- 2) The principle only seems to have become generally accepted at the very end of tannaitic period, including by Yehuda haNasi, the chief compiler of the Mishnah.<sup>1</sup> (The fact that the principle is cited in the Talmud Bavli five times in the name of the first generation *amora* Shmuel, may indicate that it was only then that it became clearly established as *halacha*).
- 3) The Mishnah itself, however, is conspicuous in never referring to blessings over *mitzvot*, of which not a hint is found in M *B'rachot* nor in any of the descriptions of different *mitzvot* that appear in other tractates.
- 4) By contrast, the Tosefta emphasises the importance of blessings on *mitzvot* and interprets statements in the Mishnah, wherever possible, as alluding to them.
- 5) The general rule stated by the Tosefta (*B'rachot* 6:9) is העושה כל המצות מברך עליהן. However, despite the plain meaning of the rule apparently referring to all *mitzvot*, all the examples given in the Tosefta itself and throughout Hazalic literature relate to ritual or ceremonial *mitzvot*.<sup>2</sup>
- 6) There are two probable reasons why saying blessings over ritual *mitzvot* were invented and popularised in the last two generations of the *tannaitic* period, which are not exclusive. The first is that during this period, Christians were arguing for a distinction between the ritual and moral elements of the Torah and that the former had been abrogated or were, at least, of lesser importance. The second is that outward signs of Jewish observance were subject to Roman persecution. Either or both of these reasons would provide a rationale for emphasising the importance of ritual and ceremonial *mitzvot* by saying a blessing which emphasises that it is through these *mitzvot* that the Jewish people are sanctified.

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<sup>1</sup> See B. *Succah* 46a.

<sup>2</sup> An apparent exception to this rule is found in Y *B'rachot* 6:1. In printed editions of the Yerushalmi, two *amoraim* go up to בית הנוותא and one of them says a *b'racha*, while the other one praises him for doing so. As explained by *Haredim*, this refers to the *mitzvah* to inspect the measuring vessels to see that they were honest (*Shemot* 19:36, *Devarim* 25:15, *Mishneh Torah, hilchot geneiva* 8:20). *Mahara Pulda* explains it as referring to the *mitzvah* of sitting to judge a legal case. According to either explanation this would be a source for also saying blessings on מצוות בין אדם לחבירו. However, the correct *girsā* is מי הטאתה and the passage refers to the two *amoraim* going up to purify someone or something from טומאת מת.

The purpose of this article is to make a suggestion as to the possible origin of the distinctive *nusah* used for all blessings on *mitzvot*, אשר קדשנו במצותיו וציונו ל/על. A great deal of discussion has been focussed on the last part of this formula, specifically as to why different *b'rachot* end with an infinitive, with על + gerund, or with על מצות + noun. In this essay, I want to focus on the first four words. It is, of course, possible that the formula was invented specifically for the purpose, by Rabi Yehuda himself or by one of his contemporaries, but I believe that it is possible to trace it back to an earlier liturgical formulation that was then adapted for use in the new concept of saying blessings on *mitzvot*.

Let us start by looking at what many still believe to be the sole example of the Mishnah describing ברכות המצוות.

בירך ברכת הפסח פטר את שלזבה. את שלזבה לא פטר את שלפסח דברי רבי  
ישמעאל. רבי עקיבה אומר לא זו פוטרת זו ולא זו פוטרת זו.

[If] he blessed the blessing of the *Pesah* he has exempted that of the *zevah* (i.e. the *Hagigah*), [the blessing of] the *zevah*, he has not exempted the *Pesah*; the words of Rabi Yishmael. Rabi Aqiva says, this one doesn't exempt that one and that one doesn't exempt this one.

Henshke shows that the general assumption according to which Rabi Yishmael and Rabi Aqiva are arguing about *bircot hamitzvot* cannot be correct. First, both *tannaim* lived a full generation before we find any other mention of blessings on *mitzvot*. Secondly, since the Mishnah nowhere else mentions the existence of any such blessings, it is unlikely that it would include a reference to them here with the apparent assumption that you know what it is talking about. Thirdly, the phrase ... ברכת ה... is never used in *Hazalic* literature to describe blessings on *mitzvot*, but is used to describe other types of blessings, such as ברכת המזון and ברכת השיר. Finally, the *amoraim* of the Yerushalmi discuss this Mishnah in a way that suggests they did not consider it to be referring to blessings on *mitzvot*. Based on all this, we can confidently conclude that the Mishnah is describing a special kind of blessing that was recited on eating the *Pesah* and *Hagiga* respectively and which was not part of a general category of blessings to be said on the performance of *mitzvot*.

The only problem with this explanation is the Tosefta (*Pesahim* 10:13), which reads as follows:<sup>3</sup>

אי זה היא ברכת הפסח, ברוך אשר קדשנו במצותיו וציונו לוכל פסח. אי זה היא  
ברכת הזבה, ברוך אשר קדשנו במצותיו לוכל הזבה.

What is the blessing of the *Pesah*? 'Blessed ... who sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to eat the *Pesah*.' What is the blessing of the *zevah*? 'Blessed ... who sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to eat the *zevah*.'

Henshke explains that the Tosefta 'again comes to emphasize the subject of *bircot hamitzvot* and here fixes the form of the blessing, which in the Mishnah was not specified, in the

<sup>3</sup> All citations are from S. Lieberman's edition.

format of standard *bircot hamitzvot*.<sup>4</sup> In other words, the Tosefta's explanation of the Mishnah is wrong, and perhaps deliberately so. The Mishnah is talking about one thing and the Tosefta makes it talk about something else.

This is quite a disturbing claim, though that doesn't make it any less (or more) true. However, I believe that there is another way of explaining the data that is at least equally convincing and, if correct, ties a up a couple of loose ends in the history of *bircot hamitzvot*.

Let us start by looking at another *halacha* from the Tosefta (*B'rachot* 5:23):

היה מקריב מנחות בירושלם אומר ברוך שהגיענו לזמן הזה כשהוא מקריבם  
אומר ברוך אשר קדשנו במצותיו וצונו להקריב מנחות. כשהוא אוכלן אומר  
המוציא לחם מן הארץ. היה מקריב זבחים בירושלם אומר ברוך שהגיענו לזמן  
הזה. כשהוא מקריבן אומר ברוך אשר קדשנו במצותיו וצונו להקריב זבחים.  
וכשהוא אוכלן אומר ברוך אשר קדשנו במצותיו וצונו לאכל זבחים.

He was offering grain offerings in Jerusalem, he says 'Blessed ... who made us reach this time'. When he offers them he says 'Blessed ... who sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to offer grain offerings'. When he eats them he says '... who brings out bread from the land'. He was offering sacrifices (i.e. peace offerings or thanksgiving offerings) in Jerusalem, he says Blessed ... who made us reach this time'. When he offers them he says 'Blessed ... who sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to offer sacrifices.' When he eats them he says 'Blessed ... who sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to eat sacrifices.'

The Tosefta juxtaposes the case of a *cohen* offering a *mincha* and a person offering a *shelamim* or *todah*. In both cases they are to say three blessings, the first two of which are exactly parallel. The first is the blessing *sheheheyanu* thanking God for having the opportunity to perform their respective offerings. The second is a standard blessing over the *mitzvah* of offering the *mincha* or *zevah* respectively. However, at the end of list, the parallel between the two cases seems to break down entirely. In the first case, the Mishnah describes the person saying a standard *bircat nehenin* on eating food and in the second (apparently) describes him saying a *bircat mitzvah*.

The reason for undermining the symmetry between the two offerings is not obvious. One would have thought that in both cases, the offeror would need to say a blessing on eating the food *and* a blessing on the *mitzvah* of eating that food. Both lists, therefore, should stretch to four *mitzvot*, which would be exactly parallel. Lieberman explained the omission of *bircat nehenin* on the *zevah* as an indication that sacrifices were normally eaten on bread, and were exempted in the *b'racha* of *hamotzi*. The omission of a *b'racha le'echol menahot*, however, is harder to explain if we take the Tosefta to be referring to a *b'racha* said on the *mitzvah* of eating the *zevah*.

However, if we don't make that assumption, both this Tosefta and the one explaining the Mishnah in *Pesahim* become easier to explain. It is possible that Henshke's reading of the

<sup>4</sup> Henshke, p. 48.

Mishnah and that of the Tosefta are both correct: the Mishnah is not talking about a *bircat mitzvah*, but rather a special *bircat hashevah* said on the occasion of eating a sacrifice, and the Tosefta is providing the *nusah*. No such *nusah* is provided for the *minha*, because no such *b'racha* was recited upon it.

Corroboration for such an interpretation can be found in early medieval *haggadot* of the Palestinian rite. Before eating *matzah* and *maror*, which in the Land of Israel and its satellite communities were eaten together according to the practice of Hillel, they would recite an extended blessing with the *hatima zocher habit*. The most common version runs as follows:<sup>5</sup>

ברוך אתה יי א-להינו מלך הע[ו]לם אשר קדשנו במצותיו וצונו על אכילת מצה  
ומרור בלילה הזה להזכיר גבורתו שלהמלך מלכי המלכים ברוך הוא שעשה נסים  
לאבותינו בזמן הזה בעבור אברהם יצחק ויעקב ברוך אתה יי זוכר הברית

Blessed are You *HASHEM* our God, King of the world who sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us on the eating of *matzah* and *maror* on this night to recall the might of the King, King of kings, blessed is He, who performed signs for our fathers at this time for the sake of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Blessed are You *HASHEM*, who remembers the covenant.

The first part of this blessing is identical to the standard formula of blessings said on *mitzvot*, but the rest of it is apparently a special *bircat shevah* specially composed for the *matzah* and *maror*. Henshke surmises that 'in a later period, this blessing of ... *matzah* and *maror* was thus made from a combination of a the *bircat shevah* and the *bircat mitzvah* together'.<sup>6</sup> However, there seems to me no need to make such an assumption. Instead the simplest way of interpreting this blessing is as an expression of praise for God that opens with a formula describing his sanctification of Israel through the commandments. Another blessing found in Palestinian rite *haggadot* reads as follows:<sup>7</sup>

ברוך אתה יי א-להינו מלך [ה]עולם אשר צוה את אבותינו לאכול מצות ומרורים  
בשר צלי אש להזכיר את גבורתו. ברוך אתה יי זוכר הברית.

Blessed are You *HASHEM* our God, King of the world who commanded our fathers to eat *matzot*, and *merorim*, meat roasted on fire to recall His might.  
Blessed are You *HASHEM* who remembers the covenant.

Clearly this version is much shorter, but it has the same basic format as the longer version, praising God for commanding the eating of *matzah* and *maror* (and roasted meat in accordance with a widespread custom) in order to memorialise His might. There is certainly no question here that a *b'racha* was composed by combining a *bircat mitzvah* and a *bircat shevah*. Rather, we have a single *b'racha* that opens by praising God for commanding Israel to eat *matzah* and *maror*.

Nor do we, in fact, have to look so far afield for similar examples of blessings that are decidedly not part of the category *bircot mitzvot*, but open by praising God for giving His

<sup>5</sup> Safrai & Safrai, pp. 63, 288-9.

<sup>6</sup> Henshke, p. 52.

<sup>7</sup> Rovner, p. 426.

commandments to the people of Israel. The *nusah* of *qidush* on *erev shabbat* according to the Babylonian rite begins as follows:

ברוך אתה יי א-להינו מלך העולם אשר קדשנו במצותיו ורצה בנו...

Blessed are You *HASHEM* our God, King of the world who sanctified us with His commandments and favoured us...<sup>8</sup>

The Babylonian *qiddush* for festivals opens with a similar formula:

ברוך אתה יי א-להינו מלך העולם אשר בחר בנו מכל עם ורוממנו מכל לשון וקדשנו במצותיו...

Blessed are You *HASHEM* our God, King of the world who chose us from every people, and lifted us from among every language and sanctified us with His commandments...

I propose, therefore, that the *bircat hapesah* and the *bircat hazevah* referred to in Mishnah *Pesahim* 10:9 were special blessings said while the temple still stood before or during meals containing sacrificial meat whose closest parallel was the *qiddush* before the Shabbat or festive meal. It seems likely that *bircat hapesah* closed with the formula *zocher habrit*, though we can't know for certain, and we have no way of knowing whether *bircat hazevah* had a *hatimah* and, if so, what. After the destruction of the temple, these blessings would have mostly fallen into disuse except that a version was preserved upon eating roast meat, *matzah* and *maror* at the Seder meal. While the precise formulation of these blessings likely differed, they all open by praising God either for commanding the sacrifices or for giving the commandments in general, and a common version started with the formula אשר קדשנו במצותיו וצונו. Subsequently, Rabi Yehuda, or someone of his generation, borrowed this opening formula and used it to create a new form of blessing to be said on the performance of ritual *mitzvot*. The Tosefta in *Pesahim* 10:13 preserves an original version of the opening of the *bircat hapesah* and *bircat hazevah*, though it is not clear whether the author was aware that this was just an opening or intended it to be understood as such.

This claim, of course, is no more than a hypothesis. However, there is one more source which corroborates it while suggesting a minor modification both to the way we understand *bircat hapesah/zevah* and to our understanding of the genesis of different categories of blessings in general. *Mechilta D'Rabi Yishmael* contains the following passage, which is quoted in a slightly modified form in B *B'rachot* 48b:

אין לי אלא ברכת המזון שהוא טעון ברכה לאחריו, לפניו מנין – היה ר' ישמעאל אומר קל וחומר, מה כשאכל לשובע טעון ברכה, שהוא תאב לא כל שכן. ר' נתן אומר, הרי הוא אומר בבואכם אל העיר כן תמצאון אותו בטרם יעלה הבמתה לאכול כי לא יאכל העם עד בואו כי הוא יברך הזבח...

<sup>8</sup> The *Siddur* of Rav Sa'adya Gaon, however, omits the word במצותיו. His *qiddush* (assuming the *nusah* is correct, which is always hard to ascertain for this text) therefore opens with praising God for sanctifying Israel, but not necessarily through the *mitzvot*. Interestingly his *qiddush* for festivals does include a clause specifying sanctification through *mitzvot*, but the optional extended version that he provides does not. See Safrai & Safrai, pp. 262-3.

I only know that (the blessing on) food requires a blessing afterwards, beforehand from where? Rabi Yishmael would say *a fortiori*, just as one who eats to satiation requires a blessing, one who is craving, is it not more so? Rabi Natan says, behold it says 'When you come to the city, there you shall find him before he comes up to the *bama* to eat, for the people will not eat until he blesses the *zevah*' (1 *Shmuel* 9:13)

The topic of this section of *Mechilta* is the obligation to say a blessing before eating food. The three blessings after a meal are derived from *Devarim* 8:10 (and you shall eat, and you shall be satisfied and you shall bless *HASHEM*...), but the origin of the obligation to say *bircot nehenin* beforehand is not clear. *Mechilta* quotes a number of attempted derivations, none of which are convincing and it is not surprising that all later authorities interpreted these proofs as *asmachtot* and categorized *bircot nehenin* as being of Rabbinic origin.<sup>9</sup> What is interesting for our purposes, however, is the second *d'rasha*, quoted in the name of Rabi Natan.

Rabi Natan cites a verse from *Shmuel*, which describes how the Israelites would not begin the sacrificial meal until *Shmuel* blessed it. However, while *Mechilta* cites this verse in proof of the principle that all food requires a blessing before consumption, the plain meaning is that a special blessing was said specifically on the occasion of eating sacrificial meat. As Henshke argues, it is very likely that this verse was the basis for the practice discussed by Rabi Aqiva and Rabi Yishmael of reciting a special *qidush*-type blessing on a *zevah*. Even the language of the Mishnah seems to be based on the verse: the term זבה, which in Rabbinic Hebrew is a term that usually applies to all sacrifices including the *Pesah* itself and those that are not eaten, is used instead of הגיגה or שלמים and the opening words of the Mishnah, בירך המזבח הפסח mirror the wording יברך הזבח from *Shmuel*. It would seem, then, that Rabi Natan, or the *Mekhilta* itself in citing him, is mixing up two different concepts: *bircot nehenin* recited before eating any kind of food and the special *bircot zevachim* recited before consuming sacrificial meals.

However, if we look again at our sources, we find the same 'confusion' between the two concepts is a recurring feature:

- 1) Mishnah *Pesachim* 10:9 discusses whether saying the blessing on the *Pesah* 'exempts' [פ ט ר] the *zevah*, but one *b'racha* exempting the other is something that in tannaitic sources we find exclusively associated with blessings on food (Mishnah *B'rachot* 6:5, 6:7; Tosefta *B'rachot* 4:14, 5: 12)
- 2) The Yerushalmi cites an opinion that explains Rabi Yishmael's ruling as being an example of the principle of *iqar* and *tefelah*. Again, this is language normally associated with blessings on food. (Mishnah *B'rachot* 6:7)

<sup>9</sup> See B *B'rachot* 35a, where the *gemara* concludes that they are based on סברא rather than any explicit source or even an inference from one.

3) Tosefta *B'rachot* 5:23 appears to suggest a direct parallel between the blessing *hamotzi* said on eating a grain offering and the blessing *le'echol zevah* said on eating sacrificial meat.

When the earliest sources all seem to confuse two distinct concepts, the most likely explanation is that these two concepts were not initially considered wholly distinct. It seems to me likely that the *bircat hapesah* and *bircat hazevah* discussed by Rabi Aqiva and Rabi Yishmael were considered to be a special or more elevated type of the blessings said on eating any food, which required a more elaborate formula because of the greater importance of the food being consumed. This explains why the Tosefta provides no other blessing to be said upon eating sacrificial meat, though this was not necessarily clear to its compiler.

## Conclusion

While it cannot be conclusively demonstrated, I believe that limited sources we have indicate that the formula אשר קדשנו במצותיו וצונו has its origins in special blessings said on eating sacrificial meat during the temple period, which took the place of ordinary blessings said on food. These blessings opened with a formula praising God for commanding Israel to eat sacrificial meat, and possibly also for sanctifying the Israel through the commandments in general. After the cessation of sacrifices, the only surviving form of these blessings was said on the eve of the 15<sup>th</sup> of Nissan. This is almost certainly related to the fact that in the first generations after the destruction of the temple, Jews continued to eat a sort of simulacrum of the *Pesah* (גדי מקולס) and even after this practice fell into disuse many continued to make a point of eating roast meat.<sup>10</sup> Forms of this blessing were preserved in the Palestinian *haggadah* rite, but did not survive in the Babylonian ritual according to which *matzah* and *maror* were eaten separately with separate blessings, only subsequently being eaten together without a blessing.

However, in the generation after the Bar Kokhba revolt, a version of the opening formula from *bircot zevahim* was adapted, perhaps by Rabi Yehuda himself, and turned into a new form of blessing to be said on the performance of ritual and ceremonial *mitzvot*. While no mention of these blessings was included by the compilers of the Mishnah, they were strongly emphasised by the Tosefta and became a clearly demarcated and universally accepted *halachic* concept by the first generation of *amoraim* at the latest. Early sources, however, still testify to a degree of ambiguity in classifying the blessing starting with the formula אשר קדשנו במצותיו וצונו לאכל הזבח, which seems to be simultaneously conceived of as a blessing recited on eating sacrificial meat and as a blessing on performing the *mitzvah* of eating it.

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<sup>10</sup> See Kulp, pp. 238-40 for a discussion of this process.

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