



Bet Horaah

בית הוראה

Shaa're Ezra

עברי עזרא

Parshat Vaera
Zmanim for New York:
Candle Lighting: 4:46pm
Shabbat ends: 5:49pm
R"T 6:18pm

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THE BLESSING OF MATIR ASURIM (HE WHO FREES THE CAPTIVES) VS. HAGOMEL
 WRITTEN BY **RABBI SHAY TAHAN**
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Question

I've heard that some people recite the blessing of "Matir Asurim" upon the return of captives. My question is whether it is permissible to recite this blessing, and if only the captives themselves can say it, is this the correct wording of the blessing?

Answer

BH we have merited to see our sisters, the captives, return home. May it be Hashem's will that we see all remaining captives return to us healthy.

Our sages taught us (*Berachot* 54b) that there are four individuals who are obligated to give thanks: those who have traversed the desert and reached a settlement, those who have crossed the sea and reached dry land, one who has recovered from illness, and one who was released from imprisonment. The *Shulchan Aruch* (O.H. 219:1) codifies this, and the prescribed text of the blessing is: "Blessed are You, Hashem, our God, King of the universe, who bestows goodness upon the guilty, who has bestowed upon me every goodness."

Accordingly, the correct blessing for captives to recite is *Birkat HaGomel* (the Blessing of Gratitude) and not *Matir Asurim*. The blessing of *Matir Asurim* is found in the *Morning Blessings*, which express gratitude for the renewal of bodily functions each morning. For example, *Matir Asurim* is recited as one rises from bed, as described in the Gemara (*Berachot* 60b): "Upon stretching and sitting up, one should say, 'Blessed is He who frees the bound.'"

Furthermore, the blessing of Hagomel pertains exclusively to the individual who has been released from captivity, not to others who witnessed their release, even if they feel immense joy.

The *Shulchan Aruch* (Orach Chaim 219:4) addresses this issue, stating: "If another person recited the blessing and said, 'Blessed are You... who has bestowed every goodness upon you,' and the individual an-

swered Amen, they have fulfilled their obligation."

This implies that others are permitted to recite the blessing on behalf of the released individual. However, the *Biur Halacha* (s.v. *Ve'ein*) cites dissenting opinions, asserting that only the person who experienced the release may recite the blessing. Additionally, this opinion permits reciting the blessing only if one is very close to the released person, such as a family member, spouse, or a student of a rebbi who was released. It is important to understand that this blessing is recited on behalf of the released individual, meaning it is said for them, allowing them to fulfill their obligation. However, it should not be recited in their absence.



The *Mishnah Berurah* (219:18) concludes that, due to this disagreement, it is preferable that others refrain from reciting *Birkat HaGomel* on behalf of their relatives or loved ones.

Question

How about the blessings of *Shehechyanu* or *Mechaye Hametim*?

Answer

Our sages (S.A. siman 225) instituted that one who hasn't seen a friend for 30 days should say *Shehechyanu*. After 12 months, *Mechaye Hametim* is recited. The reason is that after 12 months, Rosh Hashanah has passed, during which Hashem judges people for life or death. Therefore, seeing that the person has lived through the year, *Mechaye Hametim* should be recited (Maharsha brought down in mishna brura 4).

Still, the blessing upon the release of hostages is very questionable, as reciting this bracha is typically reserved for very close friends and relatives, not for the public who may not know the hostages personally and only feel happy due to general *Ahavat Yisrael*, the desire for the well-being of others. Although Harav Hagaon Shmuel Eliyahu permitted the bracha, in my opinion, it is at least a doubt, and in cases

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of doubt, we do not recite any bracha.

Question

How about the blessing *Dayan Haemet* for the release of terrorists?

Answer

Harav Shmuel Eliyahu addressed this question and said that the bracha is recited only when the event is seen as a decree from Heaven. Since the release was carried out by the government and not by Hashem, we do not say it. This is similar to a person who intentionally burns his house and then wants to say *Dayan Haemet*; of course, he does not, as he brought it upon himself.

Question

When does a person recite the bracha of Hagomel upon release from prison?

Answer

There is a debate among the poskim regarding the situation in which Chazal instructed to recite this bracha. The Magen Av-

raham's position is that it is only recited if a person was detained to be judged for a potential capital punishment and execution, meaning they were in a life-threatening situation. However, if a person was simply imprisoned as punishment for a crime or until they could pay a ransom, there is no bracha. Nevertheless, if the prison is a dangerous place due to the presence of violent or dangerous inmates, the bracha may be recited.

Lema'ase, the Biur Halacha explains that there is a difference between Sepharadim and Ashkenazim regarding this bracha. The Shulchan Aruch states that Sepharadim who become ill, even with a mild sickness requiring bed rest, should recite the bracha of *Hagomel*. Similarly, in the case of being detained without danger, they should recite the bracha. However, for Ashkenazim, the Rema writes that the bracha is only recited if the illness is life-threatening, and a person who is simply sick does not recite it. Therefore, a person detained without risk should not recite the bracha according to Ashkenazi practice.

RIDING THE WAVES OF HISTORY: A DIVINE PLAN IN MOTION

Welcoming a new president can often be misleading, as their election seem to be the result of American politics or the mismanagement of the previous president, particularly in areas like the economy and immigration. However, *Parashat Shemot*, which we just read, seems to send a different message. In last week's *parasha*, we learn that a new king rose to power in Egypt, the world's superpower at the time. He immediately recognized the new threat to Egypt—the Jewish nation (as always, of course). He took swift action, issuing executive orders to control the perceived threat, which ultimately led to the harsh slavery of the Israelites. At first glance, it seems like a chain of events that unfolded naturally, but that understanding is incorrect. What happened to the Jewish nation in Egypt was not a random series of events but was preordained by Hashem. It was foretold to Avraham Avinu during the *Brit Ben Habetarim*—the covenant between the pieces. Thus, the exile in Mitzrayim was part of Hashem's grand plan for the Jewish people, and it had to happen as part of that divine purpose.

The same applies to the history of the empires that ruled over the world, such as the Greeks and Romans. They didn't simply rise to power by chance and take control of the world; rather, it was preordained. We know this clearly from the prophecy of Daniel, who foresaw the four empires and informed King Nebuchadnezzar about who would rule and how their reigns would unfold.

This is akin to a ride in an amusement park, such as those in Orlando, where the ride takes you through different phases of history, from primitive times to today's modern era. The ride moves through each stage, showing how things advanced slowly over time. No one on the ride believes that the advances are happening in real time as they experience them; everyone realizes that the entire journey is carefully designed by artists to demonstrate different stages in history. Similarly, in reality, everything is preordained, and we are mere-

ly passengers on a ride, watching events unfold before our eyes. Just as the ride progresses through time, the same understanding applies to the new president. He is simply a stage in the ride that Hashem has preplanned for the world.

Moreover, as we explained a few weeks ago, the president-elect is actually the least powerful person in the world, as everyone else has free will, while the president, in relation to his presidency, does not. Shlomo HaMelech, in *Mishlei*, says: "The heart of the king is like streams of water in the hand of Hashem; He directs it wherever He desires" (*Mishlei* 21:1).



This *pasuk* explains that a king is not able to act on his own but rather that Hashem completely controls his decisions and actions. We also mentioned the *Gemara* (*Megillah* 11a) that illustrates this concept with the decree during the time of Haman. The

pasuk, "A song of ascents: If not for Hashem who was on our side, let Israel now say, if not for Hashem who was on our side when a man rose up against us" (*Tehillim* 124:1-2), uses the word "man" rather than "king," emphasizing that Haman was not a king. The Maharatz Chayot explains that if Haman had been a king, he would have been subject to Hashem's control, as it says, "The hearts of kings and rulers are in the hand of Hashem." Evil enacted by a king is a reflection of Hashem's judgment. But since Haman was merely a man with free will, he acted on his own wickedness, without Hashem's direct influence. Therefore, the *pasuk* highlights that only with Hashem's help were the Jews able to overcome him, as he had acted out of personal choice and not as a controlled ruler.

The reason for this is that Hashem's plan for the world must move forward according to His will, and thus, the one who seems to have the ability to navigate it cannot truly control it. If he could, he might disrupt or alter Hashem's plans.

WHEN GOOD FEELS BITTER: SEEING BEYOND THE PAIN

Revisiting the concepts of *emunah* and *bitachon* that we discussed over the past couple of weeks in relation to the famous new song, we gain a deeper understanding of these ideas from the beginning of our *parasha* through Moshe's conversation with Hashem.

In last week's *parasha*, Hashem instructs Moshe Rabbeinu to begin the process of freeing the nation from the slavery of Mitzrayim. While one might expect that taking steps toward their release would improve their dire situation, the reality was quite the opposite. Things became significantly worse, as Pharaoh increased the demands on the Hebrew slaves, requiring them to produce more work under even harsher conditions.

Moshe Rabbeinu, witnessing the unbearable suffering that resulted directly from his actions—actions guided by Hashem to speak to Pharaoh for their release—approach Hashem and voice his complaint: Why has the situation worsened instead of improving?

Hashem's response to Moshe had to wait until the beginning of our *parasha*, and it conveys a profound lesson that can guide every person through life's challenges. Hashem rebukes Moshe Rabbeinu sharply for claiming that He worsened the situation of the Jewish people. He then reveals His future plan: to free them from slavery and bring them to the Land of Israel.

Additionally, Hashem contrasts Moshe's reaction with that of the patriarchs, highlighting their greatness in never questioning Him, even though He had not shown them tangible rewards for their actions, whereas Moshe expressed doubts. This comparison underscores the patriarchs' unwavering faith and trust in Hashem's ultimate plan, even when it was not immediately apparent.

Even after understanding the above, we are still left questioning how Hashem's response addresses Moshe Rabbeinu's complaint. Moshe asked why, after Hashem sent him to work toward the nation's release, their situation worsened instead of improving. Wasn't Hashem supposed to follow through on His promise and make their conditions better?

The answer to this is deeply profound. While we may perceive some-



thing as bad and see conditions worsening, Hashem has the true perspective, and what appears negative can actually be good. Good and bad are not defined by our limited perception but by the reality as it truly is—and the ultimate reality is known only to Hashem.

This is why Hashem rebukes Moshe, who should have understood that Hashem does not do anything bad, but only good—even when circumstances are hard and bitter. As a rabbi once said, when things become difficult, we should not say they are bad but rather that they are bitter. This means that while it may be hard for us to tolerate them, in reality, they are ultimately good for us.

This also highlights the concept of *bitachon* as explained in the *sfarim*: Hashem does only good for us, but we should not expect that things will align with our desires. Instead, the good that Hashem provides is the true and ultimate good as He sees it, which may not always match our limited understanding.

The Pele Yoets writes (Havtacha): "The concept of *bitachon* is not about relying on Hashem to fulfill all one's needs exactly as one desires or to ensure that no harm befalls them. If this were the basis of *bitachon*, one's expectations would sometimes be disappointed; as we see many righteous individuals endure great suffering, severe hardships, hunger, and other misfortunes and troubles that arise in the world.

Rather, the essence of *bitachon* is to place one's confidence in Hashem with the understanding that everything decreed from Heaven is ultimately for the good. Before Hashem, it is clear what is truly beneficial, and He acts accordingly. Humans, by contrast, judge based on appearances and often mistake evil for good and good for evil. Hashem alone knows what is genuinely good for a person's service of Him and for the rectification of their soul, spirit, and essence. Therefore, one should accept whatever happens with contentment and joy, trusting that nothing bad comes from Heaven—only good. With this mindset, a person casts their burden upon Hashem, directs their soul toward Him, and refrains from futile efforts to force their own will to prevail."

THE ONGOING ETHICAL DILEMMA: RELEASING HOSTAGES IN JEWISH TRADITION

Jews around the world have strong sentiments regarding hostages, stemming from a profound sense of unity and familial connection. When one member of the community suffers, it's felt as if a close relative is in pain. During periods when Jewish hostages endure exceptionally harsh conditions, the collective anguish reverberates throughout the community.

Tracing back to our forefather Abraham, who waged war to rescue his nephew Lot from captivity, and continuing through the battle against Shechem, who had kidnapped Dinah, the tradition persists to this day. Even in modern times, the Jewish people have released many prisoners, including terrorists, to secure the freedom of a single hostage.

In Jewish tradition, the preservation of life is of paramount importance. This principle, known as "pikuach nefesh," mandates that almost any commandment can be suspended to save a life. However, navigating situations involving hostages can be com-

plex. Halacha recognizes the obligation to secure the release of hostages, emphasizing the importance of negotiation, ransom payment and diplomatic efforts.

The plight of the captive is dire. In captivity, they are expected to endure suffering and potentially face death (בבא בתרא ח,ב). Therefore, it is established in halacha (יורה דעה רנב א-ג) that the redemption of captives takes precedence over all other charitable acts. There is no greater mitzvah than redeeming captives, and every moment delayed in their redemption, when it is possible to expedite it, is akin to shedding blood.

Despite this emotional response, it's crucial to examine the matter through the lens of Jewish law and Torah teachings.

Release of hostages for a substantial price

Our sages enacted a principle that warrant discussion (גיטין פרק ד') (משנה ו'). They established a prohibition against redeeming

THE ONGOING ETHICAL DILEMMA: RELEASING HOSTAGES IN JEWISH TRADITION

captives for more than their worth. In other words, it is forbidden to pay a higher price for the release of a Jewish captive than what is normally paid for other captives

There are two rationales behind the first enactment (גיטין מה,א): One is to avoid financially burdening the public, and the second is to prevent enemies from deliberately capturing Jewish hostages due to the high price they receive for them. If the rescue of captives comes at an inflated cost, it could lead to the future abduction and captivity of many other Jews.

Applying those reasons to our time, where the price of releasing hostages might involve the release of convicted terrorists with blood on their hands, both rationales apply. Firstly, even though the terrorists aren't requesting money, the cost is still high as it entails the risk of these individuals returning to harm other Jews, as history has shown. Additionally, the rescue of such terrorists is deeply painful for the victims' families and indeed for the entire Jewish community. Secondly, the high price paid for their release could indeed encourage further abductions, perpetuating the cycle of violence and endangering more of our people.

One notable story that aligns with your query is that of Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg (המהר"ם מרוננבורג), prominent medieval Jewish scholar and leader. Rabbi Meir was taken captive by the German authorities in 1286.

During his captivity, Rabbi Meir was offered several opportunities to secure his release, either by paying a hefty ransom or by converting to Christianity. However, he steadfastly refused to do so, maintaining his commitment to the halacha that a hostage may not be released for more than the accepted value.

Despite enduring harsh conditions and pressure to renounce Judaism, Rabbi Meir remained resolute in his beliefs. He saw his captivity as an opportunity to demonstrate unwavering devotion to his religion and inspire others to remain steadfast in the face of adversity.

Rabbi Meir's decision not to pursue his release had significant consequences. He remained in captivity until his death in 1293, spending his final years imprisoned in the fortress of Ensisheim

There are exceptions to this rule, particularly if a person's life is in danger. The Gemara (גיטין נח,א) recounts a story of Rabbi

Yehoshua ben Chananya, who encountered a beautiful Jewish boy in captivity, later known as Rabbi Yishmael ben Elisha. Rabbi Yehoshua decided to redeem him from captivity at any cost they would ask for him. Tosfot raises the question of whether this contradicts the rule established by Chazal, and answers that since the boy's life was in danger, he could be released at any price.

From this incident, we learn that when a hostage's life is threatened, the principle of not redeeming captives for more than their worth is uplifted. On the other hand, the Ramban contends that

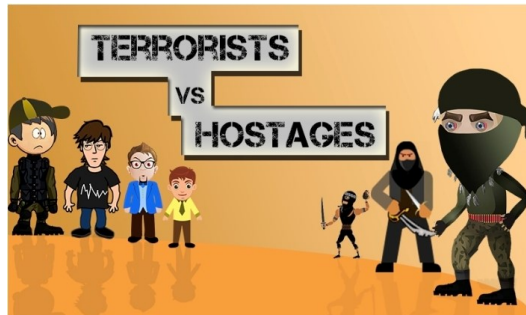
every hostage is inherently at risk of losing their life, and Chazal established their rule precisely with this in mind. Therefore, it is forbidden to pay more than their assessed value for their release.

Contemporary poskim debate whether it is permitted to release Jewish hostages for a hefty and extortionate price, such as releasing terrorists. Chacham Ovadia (יבי"א ח"י עמוד תעא) permits this based on

opinion of Tosfot, who permits redeeming Jewish hostages whenever their lives are in danger. Secondly, regarding the concern that such actions might encourage terrorists to further kidnap people, he argues that terrorists attempt such acts regardless, and releasing hostages under these circumstances is unlikely to change their behavior.

Today, we may observe a departure from his previous ruling. We can no longer rely on the logic of releasing hostages solely because they are at risk. Recent events have shown that releasing them in exchange for convicted murderers often leads to more bloodshed among innocent Jewish people. Therefore, we cannot justify saving one Jew while placing others at real and tangible risk.

Additionally, the argument that terrorists will attempt kidnappings regardless of our actions seems less valid today. The incentive for terrorists to kidnap has intensified, as they now perceive a greater reward if successful. Consequently, we cannot dismiss the potential consequences of releasing hostages lightly.



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