

The Blessing of the Blossom

Mois Navon

Said R. Yehuda: When one goes out in the days of Nissan and sees trees blossoming, he says, “Blessed is He who didn’t leave out of His world nothing (*sic*) and created in it goodly creatures and goodly trees that man should beautify himself (*lebitnaot*).

(Brachot 43b)

This blessing, known as “Birkat HaHlanot”, seems simple enough: an appreciation of the beautiful phenomenon of blossoming trees; but closer examination reveals a truly enigmatic blessing that begs numerous questions:

- (1) Why is the blessing said specifically in Nissan? If the point is to bless blossoming, why not say it any time one sees blossoms?
- (2) Why is there a blessing especially for blossoming; cannot the beauty of a tree be enjoyed in other stages of its annual cycle?
- (3) Why does the text use the strange wording “He didn’t leave out of His world nothing” (*lo hiser b’olamo klum*)? Wouldn’t it be better to say, “He didn’t leave out of His world anything” (*lo hiser b’olamo davar*)?
- (4) Why does the blessing include the words “goodly creatures” when the blessing is instituted to be said only upon seeing “goodly trees”?
- (5) Why is the blessing phrased by R. Yehuda as “*lebitnaot*” – to beautify oneself? Rashi (*ibid.*), the Rambam (Hil. Brachot 10:13), and the Shulhan Aruch (OH 226:1) change the word to “*lebenot*” – to enjoy; what is the difference?

Our first question hints at the underlying intent of the blessing as whole. Nissan is the first month of the year as stated by God Himself, “This month shall be unto you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year to you” (Ex. 12:2).¹ As such, the blessing is about beginnings, new beginnings, renewed beginnings. Appropriately, the word for month, “*bodesh*”, shares its root with the word “*bidush*”, “*hithadshut*”, renewal.² The Ibn Ezra (Ex. 12:2) explains that whereas the sun is symbol of never changing nature, the moon is the symbol of ever-changing nature, “for its light renews itself.” The blessing of Birkat Hallanot, said as it is in the first of months, is about new beginnings and the power of renewal (*bidush*).

The Sefat Emet (Bo 532; Noah 563) explains that the commandment of designating the new month, as learned from the verse, “This month shall be unto you the beginning of months”, is indicative of the renewal that man is to bring to creation. He quotes the Midrash that has God saying, as it were, “there is no greater renewal than that denoted by the new month of Nissan.” The Sefat Emet explains that in Nissan the supernatural redemption took place wherein God changed creation, wherein God completely renewed the very force of creation by nullifying the old laws of nature and making new ones. This was not a one time occurrence, writes the Sefat Emet, but rather attests to a continual

¹ That this statement refers to Nissan, see Pesikta Zutra (Ex. 12:2) which quotes Esther (3:7); also Rashi, Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, and many others on this verse.

² We will use the term “renewal” to denote “*bidush*”, though we also intend the important meaning of “innovation” that “*bidush*” includes.

process in which God essentially recreates the world everyday. Furthermore, this continuous power of renewal is not limited to God, but on the contrary, God has bequeathed to man the ability to renew and create. In fact, He has insisted man do so, as indicated by the command: “This month shall be unto you the beginning of months”. So critical is it that man be cognizant of his ability and responsibility to renew himself and his world that this commandment is the very first commandment in the Torah!

As such, the answer to our first question is that the blessing of Birkat Hallanot is to be said specifically in Nisan because it is a blessing about renewal, about man’s power of renewal, about man’s obligation to renewal.³ Indeed, the month of Nisan is forever inscribed as the month of renewal and ultimately, of redemption, as the Gemara (Rosh Hashanah 11b) states: “In Nisan you were redeemed, in Nisan you will be redeemed.” Appropriately, the Gemara (San. 98a) speaks of the redemption in terms of a tree budding⁴ and giving fruit⁵ – for redemption is the fruition of the goal of creation, the blossoms having given forth their fruit.

This brings us to our second question as to why we specifically bless blossoming trees as opposed to beautiful trees in other stages of their annual cycle. The answer is that blossoming trees are the tangible expression of the capacity for renewal in creation. Indeed, this blessing is truly about renewal and not about aesthetic enjoyment, as there is a different and distinct blessing for enjoying beautiful trees. Interestingly, the Rambam (Hil. Brachot 10:13) brings that blessing in the same halacha as the blossom blessing, thus emphasizing that the one is for aesthetic pleasure whereas the other has a completely different purpose: renewal.

Once we understand that the blessing is about man’s capacity for renewal, for creativity, the strange wording of the blessing – “He didn’t leave out of His world nothing” (*lo hiser b’olamo klum*) – is actually not strange at all. That is, in order for man to be able to actualize his creativity he must be placed in a world that provides the “space” for creativity, a world that is, by definition, incomplete. The Midrash (Pesikta Rabati 6) teaches that this is precisely what God did. The concluding verse of the creation narrative states, “And God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, for on it He ceased from all His work – *asher bara Elokim la’asot.*” (Gen. 2:3). These last words are translated by JPS as, “which God in creating had made.”⁶ However, notes the Midrash, the last word is not, “had made” (*asah*), but rather “to do” (*la’asot*), rendering the phrase as, “which God had created to do.” The Midrash concludes that, following the culmination of God’s work, “there is still other work” to be done.

By leaving work to be done by man, by leaving the creation unfinished, God left some “nothingness” (*klum*), some area of creation, to be completed by man – or in the words of the blessing: “He didn’t leave out nothing.” This nothingness is explained by the kabbalists as the very place that God made within His infinite being to make room for creation to take place. The Zohar (Ber. 15a) states enigmatically, “In the beginning of the King’s authority, the lamp of scintillation carved out a hollow in the Supernal

³ For a halachic discussion of what one is to do in the Southern Hemisphere and places where blossoming occurs not in Nisan, see *Minhat Yitzhak*, Part 10, 16.

⁴ *tzemach*

⁵ San. 98a, esp. Rashi (s.v. *meguleh*).

⁶ <http://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt0102.htm>

luminescence.” R. Yehuda Ashlag (Peirush HaSulam, *ibid.*) explains that since God’s light initially filled all existence, He had to carve out of His being a place from which He was removed, as it were, to allow for creation to take place there.⁷ God then effected creation in this place by effusing His light into the hollow; however He did not entirely fill the void lest creation be made wholly complete.⁸ Rather, as the blessing states, He didn’t leave out the empty space, the “nothing”, the “place” in which creative action could still be effected.⁹

To answer our question as to why the blessing – said only on trees – praises God for creating both “goodly creatures and goodly trees,” we refer to the explanation of R. Yosef Hayim, better known as the Ben Ish Hai. He explains that “goodly creatures” are here paralleled to “goodly trees” in that, “similar to the tree, which was once dry and withered and has now come into full bloom, even the hopeless person can be rejuvenated. Watching the transformation of nature can provide us with the courage and inspiration to lift us out of our despair, and remind us that God has given us the tools to renew ourselves.”¹⁰ The “goodly” aspect shared by both man and tree is the capacity to renew. This is why both are included in the blessing said at the sight of blossoming trees, for the blessing is not about trees, but about the visible renewal in trees which is invisible, yet even more profound, in man.

And finally, the issue of enjoyment (“*lebenot*”) can now be addressed. As mentioned, the enjoyment referred to is not aesthetic enjoyment over trees but something far more sublime. Following our thesis that the blessing is concerned with expressing man’s capacity for renewal and creativity, I propose that the enjoyment referred to here is that which one achieves through evincing his creativity.

“God’s purpose in creation was to bestow of His good to another ... to create a being that could enjoy of His goodness. ... [H]owever, in His wisdom He decreed that in order that goodness be whole it is necessary that the one enjoying it must be the master of that goodness. This means that one should earn the goodness through his own effort.”

(Derech Hashem 1:2:1-2)

R. Moshe Hayim Luzzatto explains that true enjoyment in this world is attained only through effort, through striving to act, to create. Indeed it is precisely thus that one realizes his unique humanity, as R. Soloveitchik writes: “Action and creation are the true distinguishing marks of authentic existence.”¹¹ This “action and creation” is the expression of man’s unique ability to “*mehadesb*” (to innovate, to renew), “for only man,” teaches R. Hayim MiVolzhin, “renews and innovates (*mehadesb*), as this is not within the capacity of angels who were created perfect.”¹² As such, man is only worthy of his title

⁷ See also R. Aryeh Kaplan, *Sefer Yetzirah* (Weiser, Maine:1997), p.14.

⁸ For an overview of the topic of “*tzimtzum*” see R. J.I. Schochet, “Mystical Concepts in Chassidism”, ch.2, printed in *Likutei Amarim Tanya* (Kehot, N.Y.:1984), p.888.

⁹ It should be noted that this is all metaphoric language and does not imply that God is somewhere void, but only “concealed” in some manner to allow for free will – see R. J.I. Schochet, “Mystical Concepts in Chassidism”, *Likutei Amarim Tanya*, p.890.

¹⁰ See *Moadai HaShana–Halachot U’Minbagim*, Rav Yechiel Michel Stern (Jerusalem, 5756), p.327.

¹¹ *Halakhic Man*, (Sefer VeSefel, Jerusalem: 2005), p.125.

¹² R. Hayim Mivolozhin (*Ruah Hayim*, Avot 6:1).

in that he renews, innovates and creates. And it is only by so doing that man attains true enjoyment.

Now, while the *poskim* have determined that the *nusach* of the blessing is “*lehenot*” (to enjoy), R. Yehuda phrased the blessing in the Gemara as “*lehitnaot*” – that man should be beautified. Could it not be that this blessing, which expresses the wonder of renewal and creativity, comes to convey the notion that man, in renewing himself and expressing his creative power like that of the tree, is thus himself “beautified”? Is there anything more beautiful than man expressing his creative capacity? Conversely, is there anything more wretched than the man who accomplishes nothing? In this vein R. Soloveitchik distinguishes between two types of people, one he calls “species man”, the other, “man of God”:

Man, in one respect, is a mere random example of the biological species – species man – an image of the universal, a shadow of true existence. In another respect he is a man of God, possessor of an individual existence. The difference between a man who is a mere random example of the biological species and a man of God is that the former is characterized by passivity, the latter by activity and creation. ... [Species man’s] roots lie deep in the soil of faceless mediocrity... He has never created anything, never brought into being anything new, never accomplished anything... He live unnoticed and dies unmourned... [Conversely, the life of the man of God] is replete with creation and renewal, cognition and profound understanding... He recognizes the destiny that is his, his obligation and task in life ... His whole existence, like some enchanted stream, rushes ever onward to distant magical regions.

(Halakhic Man, pp.125-128)

R. Yehuda’s blessing is a call for man to beautify himself, to make himself worthy of the title “man”, by blossoming like the fruit trees in Nisan, by expressing his own special creativity. “Species man or man of God, this is the alternative which the Almighty placed before man.”¹³ By articulating the springtime blessing on the blossoming trees, man expresses his desire to be a “man of God”, to be a partner in creation, bringing the world one step closer to its destiny when he can enjoy the ultimate fruit of his labors, the fruit of redemption.

¹³ Halakhic Man, p.125.