

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

BLESSING OUR TORAH STUDY

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As you may know, Torah study is one of those mitzvot which can be done almost without limit and can actually serve as a "defense lawyer" for us during the High Holidays. You can learn more about this at <http://www.maqom.com/mitsvah.html>.

If you do the study without the blessing it will not be credited to your "account" on Rosh Hashanah. It's a bit like making sure your frequent flier number is recorded when you take a flight. If your number wasn't noted you'd get the trip, but you wouldn't receive the additional benefit of the frequent flier miles. Just so it is with Torah study. If you study without saying the blessing you'll have the joy of learning but it won't be sent off, as it were. It would be like a letter that is stamped and addressed but not mailed.

But if you think about it, the Torah blessing you probably know best is the one you hear during the Torah service, right? The Talmud, as you'll not be surprised to learn, offers numerous blessings for something as important as Torah study:

What benediction is said [before the study of the Torah]? Rav Judah said in the name of Samuel: [Blessed are You, O Lord, Ruler of the Universe] who has sanctified us by Your commandments, and commanded us to study the words of Torah.

Rabbi Johanan used to conclude as follows: Please make pleasant, therefore, we beseech You, O Lord our God, the words of Your Torah in our mouths and in the mouths of Your people, the house of Israel, and let us, and our children, and children of Your people, the house of Israel, all know Your name and occupy themselves with Your Torah. Blessed are You, O Lord, who teaches Torah His people Israel.

Rav Hamnuna said: [Blessed are You, O Lord, Ruler of the Universe] who has chosen us from all the nations and given us His Torah. Blessed are You, O Lord, who gives the Torah.

Rav Hamnuna said: This is the finest of the benedictions. Therefore let us say all of them. (B. Berachot 11b)

Each of these blessings is used during Jewish worship services. The last one is the blessing said over the reading of the Torah during services. The first one may be said anytime you commence the study of the written or oral Torah. This blessing is also said as part of the preliminary prayers preceding the morning service. In the prayer book, it is followed by the second blessing listed in the Gemara, then by passages from the Torah, Mishnah and Gemara which are to be studied.

This sugya reflects two principles of Jewish liturgy. First, we say a blessing and then perform an act immediately afterward, without interruption. Occasionally, we say a blessing immediately after we perform an action, for example, when lighting the candles on Shabbat evening. Making a blessing without performing a mitzvah is deemed a bracha l'vatalah, a prayer said in vain, and is prohibited. Second, when the redactors of the prayer book had a choice between two or more versions of a blessing, they included as many of them as possible.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why was Rabbi Hamnuna's blessing considered the best? Could it be because the first blessing emphasizes God almost exclusively, and the second focuses on us and our offspring, while the third one (the one chosen), focuses on the relationship created between God and the people of Israel by the Torah? If you had to choose, which one would you choose?
2. If you were to create your own Torah study blessing what would it say?