

Talmud portion

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Given the sad tidings we have all heard in recent days, I thought this passage might be appropriate. It mandates that we say *berachot* for everything that causes us to have a deep reaction, even bad things. Why did the sages insist that we praise God, even for pain? First of all, if you're really going to be a monotheist, you have to say it *all* comes from God or you'll end up thinking there are two gods, a good one and a bad one. Second, when really painful things happen, you need God and your community. The sages didn't want you to lose touch with God in the very moment that you need God most; even if it is the moment when you understand and accept God's actions least.

For shooting stars and for earthquakes and for thunderclaps and for storms and for lightning one says, "Blessed be the One whose strength and might fill the world."

For mountains and for hills, and for seas and for rivers and for deserts one says, "Blessed be the One who made creation."

Rabbi Judah says, "One who sees the Great Sea says, 'Blessed be the One who made the Great Sea.' [That is] if he sees it at [considerable] intervals.

For rain and for good tidings one says, "Blessed be the One who is good and bestows good."

For evil tidings one says, "Blessed be the One the True Judge."

One who built a new house and one who bought new vessels says, "Blessed be the One who has kept us alive and preserved us and brought us to this season."

One says a blessing for evil, similar to that said over good [tidings] and over good a blessing is said similar to that over evil. And one who cries over something that is past; behold he [utters] a vain prayer. If a man's wife is pregnant and he says, "[God] grant that my wife bear a male child", this is a vain prayer. If he is coming on the way and heard a voice crying in the city, and says, "[God] grant that this does is not in my house," this is a vain prayer... (**Mishnah, Berachot 54a**)

"If a man's wife is pregnant and he says, 'May [God] grant that my wife bear, etc.' this is a vain prayer..." During the first three days a person should ask for mercy, that the seed should not putrefy. From the third to the fortieth day he should ask for mercy that the child should be a male; from the fortieth day to three months he should ask for mercy that it not be a sandal (i.e. a miscarriage); from three months to six months he should ask for mercy that it should not be still-born; from six months to nine months he should ask for mercy that it will come out [of the womb] in peace.

But does such a prayer avail? Has not Rav Isaac the son of Rav Ammi said, "If the man first emits seed, the child will be a girl; if the woman first emits seed, the child will be a boy?"...With what case are we dealing with here? If, for instance, they both emitted seed at the same time. (**Gemara, Berachot 60a**)

The Questions:

1. Why do we have prayers for different experiences? What is the point?
2. How does the use of the *shehechyanu* differ here from the way it is usually said today? How would you use this *brachah* now that you've read this mishnah?

3. How do you respond to the *brachah* for evil tidings? Please be careful in your answer to this one. I'm asking you to tell me a rational, possibly even comforting, scenario where calling God a true judge makes sense. If you cannot, please describe and make your position rational and comforting, as well. How does the American notion of "judge" affect our insights into the *brachah*? Remember that a judge in the sages' day was a person who questioned witnesses as well as dispensed justice and was almost the defendant's advocate. What *brachah* would you formulate for the hearing of bad news to replace the one in the Gemara?

4. Have you ever said a "vain prayer"? Will you be more careful about it from now on?

5. BONUS QUESTION: What's going on with this "emitting seed" business? Why are women emitting seed? (The truly curious may look at Thomas Laqueur's *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, Harvard University Press, 1990, for a preview to this answer.)

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