

Birkhot Hashachar

Vocabulary:

Nefesh נֶפֶשׁ : Awareness of the body and the physical world; animal-like instinct.	Tichel : A headscarf worn by Jewish women	Rosh רֹאשׁ : Head
Ruach רוּחַ : Understanding of emotions; Breath; mediating between the upper and lower levels of soul.	Tefillin תְּפִלִּין : Small leather boxes containing Torah passages worn on the arm and forehead.	Selah סֵלָה : A liturgical/musical pause
Neshama נִשְׁמָה : Grasp of the intellect and understanding of divinity. Distinctly human endeavor.	Yad יָד : Hand	

Birkhot Hashachar are a series of blessings recited at the beginning of the day, essentially thanking God for another day and all that entails. After the destruction of the Second Temple, when communal prayer was moved to the synagogue, often Jews would still recite the Morning Blessings at home. During the era of Amram Gaon, morning blessings were moved to the synagogue as a matter of ritual purity (influenced additionally by Islamic rule at the time). Later authorities suggest that as Judaism became more widespread, knowledge of the liturgy became less likely among the general Jewish population, leading to the need for people to go to a synagogue where they would be able to listen to a prayer leader read from a handwritten prayer book and respond “Amen”. Maimonides, in contrast, was of the view that these blessings should occur along with their prescribed activities, therefore, they would largely be done at home. Although these are often public prayers, and are contained with Sharcharit in many prayer books, they do not require a minyan and are permissible to be said at home. These blessings are rooted in the text of [Tractate Berakhot 60b](#).

To consider our tradition in whole, and the context of thanking God for another day when we rise, we must look to the previous night. The Bedtime Shema includes asking for protection from the night, asking and offering forgiveness for our sins and those transgressed against us, and, essentially, getting right with God in the event that we don’t survive the night. The rabbis considered sleep to be one-sixtieth of death, therefore waking up is a cause worthy of celebration in the form of praise.

Upon waking, we begin the first blessing of the day, Modeh Ani:

I give thanks before You, living and eternal sovereign for You have returned within me my soul, with compassion; Your faithfulness is great.

Followed by the ritual handwashing (Netilat Yadaim), done with a cup, three times over each hand, reciting:

Blessed are you Adonai our God, sovereign of the universe Who sanctifies us with commandments and commands us concerning the washing of the hands.

Followed by Asher Yatzar, the blessing thanking God for the functioning of the body:

Blessed are You, Adonai, our God, sovereign of the universe, who has formed us in wisdom, and created within us numerous orifices and cavities. It is revealed and known before the Throne of Your Glory that if but one of them were to be blocked, or one of them were to be opened, it would be impossible to exist even for a short while. Blessed are You, Lord, who heals all flesh and performs wonders.

Followed by Elohai Neshama, a praise of God for our souls:

My God the soul that You have placed within me is pure. You created it, You fashioned it, You breathed it into me, You safeguard it within me, and You will someday take it from my body and return it to me in the world to come. As long as my soul is within me, I give thanks to You Adonai, my God and the God of my ancestors, Master of all works, Lord of all souls. Praised are You, Adonai, Restorer of souls to bodies that have died.

Traditional prayer books include a sequence of three blessings in which a man thanks God for not making him a gentile, a woman, or a slave. Since the instruction to recite them is included in the [Babylonian Talmud](#), rabbinic authorities have insisted on doing so, however, the fragments of history suggest that these passages have been regularly altered or censored nearly since their inception. These blessings were not always part of Jewish liturgy, but an addition stemming from Greek influence in late antiquity as they mirror Hellenic identity slogans that asserted various modes of superiority.

Comparison of Hellenistic and Palestinian texts:

Diogenes Laertius, "Thales," i. 33	Genizah fragment, TS NS 121:5
[I] was grateful to fortune that I was born a person and not a beast	Praised are You who made me a person and not a beast

I was born a man and not a woman	a man and not a woman
a Greek and not a barbarian.	an Israelite and not a gentile.

Historically, these phrases have been verifiably altered or completely excised in response to various events and movements throughout time. For instance, some liberal movements have completely jettisoned the notion that there should be gratitude for not being a woman. In times of oppression, when censorship was prevalent, the next blessing was altered, removing the word “goy” (meaning “nation”, but often taken to mean specifically “Christian”, rather than simply non-Jew). The entry for “did not make me a slave” has been at times changed from slave to “ignoramous”, on occasion “woman”. The explanation common among rabbinic authorities is that Jewish women are not required to fulfill positive time-bound mitzvot, while men are, therefore men are showing gratitude for the additional responsibility. This has been explained away in an essentialist manner, in that the presumption is that men are inherently less able to access divinity within themselves as a result of not possessing a womb or being able to create life (a commonality shared by God and women). That said, in an effort to reach 100 blessings per day, most denominations leave some variation of those blessings.

Morning Blessings:

- *Blessed are you Adonai, our God, sovereign of the universe, who gives the heart understanding to distinguish between day and night.*
 - “Sekhvi” often translated as “rooster” as well as “heart”, gratitude for discernment.
- *Blessed are you Adonai our God, sovereign of the universe, who has made me according to your will.*
 - Typically said by women, following two blessings thanking God for not making them a non-Jew or a slave. Many modern congregations reformulate this into positive framing.
- *Blessed are you Adonai our God, sovereign of the universe, who gives sight to the blind.*
 - The gift of sight
- *Blessed are you Adonai our God, sovereign of the universe, who clothes the naked.*
 - For clothing, one might say this while getting dressed.
- *Blessed are you Adonai our God, sovereign of the universe, who frees the bound.*
 - Freedom of movement
- *Blessed are you Adonai our God, sovereign of the universe, who straightens the bent.*
 - Standing upright

- *Blessed are you Adonai our God, sovereign of the universe, who spreads the earth upon the waters. Blessed are you Adonai our God, sovereign of the universe, who firms my footsteps.*
 - Walking
- *Blessed are you Adonai our God, sovereign of the universe, who provides for all my needs.*
 - All needs
- *Blessed are you Adonai our God, sovereign of the universe, who girds Israel with strength.*
 - Inner strength (hebrew: Gevurah, meaning strength or discipline), or in relation to putting on a belt.
- *Blessed are you Adonai our God, sovereign of the universe, who crowns Israel with splendor.*
 - Relates to head covering.
- *Blessed are you Adonai our God, sovereign of the universe, who gives strength to the weary.*
 - Renewed energy
- *Blessed are you Adonai our God, sovereign of the universe, who removes sleep from my eyes and slumber from my eyelids.*
 - Waking up

Blessing for Torah Study

Torah study is a continuous, everyday, obligation. Thus, the blessing for Torah Study is said early in the day and is valid once said, regardless of the time of Torah study taking place. The placement of this blessing links our dependence on a functioning body to the need for Torah study in our lives. The blessing offers us three dynamic relationships with regard to God and Torah: God-as-Teacher, Student-Teacher as we wrestle with the texts, and us as passive recipients of Torah. Each is a corollary to the various modes of life in which we find ourselves engaging.

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the world, who sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to engage in words of Torah. So, Adonai our God, make the words of Your Torah sweet to us and to the house of Israel, Your people, that we and our descendants, and the descendants of Your people, the house of Israel, that we all should know Your name and study Your Torah for its own sake. Blessed are You, Adonai, who teaches Torah to His people Israel. Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the world, who chose us from all peoples, and gave us His Torah. Blessed are You, Adonai, who gives the Torah.

Mah Tovv

Typically said upon entering a synagogue (although minhag varies from community to community), Mah Tovv, with its opening line referencing a blessing born of demand to curse the Israelites. We see multiple references to dwelling and gathering places, surmised to bring a spirit of awe for the blessing of communal gathering. The originating reference is linked to each line.

How good are your tents, O Jacob; your dwellings, O Israel! [Numbers 24:5](#)

It is through your abundant love that I enter Your home, and bow in awe in the direction of Your holy temple. [Psalms 5:8](#)

Adonai, I love the temple, Your home and the place where Your glory dwells. [Psalms 26:8](#)

I will bow down low and prostrate myself before Adonai, my Creator. [Psalms 95:6](#)

May my prayer find favor in Your sight, Adonai. In the abundance of Your loving-kindness answer me in the truth of your salvation. [Psalms 69:14](#)

Headcoverings

While the exact origins of Jewish head covering are unclear (though head covering is common in many religions), a biblical example of early head covering comes [Exodus 28:36](#) in which Aaron dons a ceremonial headdress. Head coverings are often discussed as a matter of respect for or awareness of the ever-presence of God. While less common for women, in general, many religious women wear a Tichel (a headscarf), some married Orthodox women wear wigs over their hair as a matter of modesty, with some sects even shaving their hair upon marriage. The common headcovering for men include: Kippot (skullcap), many Hasidim wear fedoras over kippot, Ultraorthodox sometimes wear a large fur hat called a Shtreimel for festive occasions (there is no religious justification for this item).



A display of historical Jewish headcovering. Israel Museum, Jerusalem 2021

Donning a Tallit

A tallit is a four-cornered prayer shawl with four strings attached through a hole in each corner and knotted to create a tassel with eight fringes. The tallit has come in and out of fashion in some contemporary movements as an artifact of mystical (nonrationalistic) notions of a personal creator. Some opposition to the practice of wearing a tallit is noted among more liberal sects that it is hierarchical in nature and idolatrous. There are a variety of minhagim with respect to the tallit; from the commitment of women to the practice, to the physicality of how one wraps it around one's head is subject to such variation (as historically, this may have been an effort to keep wind/sand out of one's eyes). An additional garment, the *tallit katan*, or "small tallit" is essentially an undershirt open on the sides worn under the shirts of observant men.

Although often, only the single line blessing is recited, there are three parts to the blessings that accompany donning a tallit. These blessings are both derivative of various Psalms and take different translations depending on the community. Tallitot (pl.) are only worn during the day, as the requirement states that one must be able to "see" the fringes.

The first blessing, often omitted, is a declaration of intent to fulfill the mitzvah of donning a tallit, as follows:

O my soul, bless Adonai! [Psalms 104:1](#) Adonai my God, You are very great, robed in glory and majesty. You wrap light like a garment, spread out heaven like a curtain. I hereby wrap myself in a tallit with tassels in order to fulfill the commandment of my Creator, as written in the Torah: They shall make themselves a tassel on the corners of their clothes in every generation. And as I cover myself with a tallit in this world, so may my soul be worthy of wearing a beautiful tallit in the world-to-come, in the Garden of Eden. Amen.

The second is said having checked the tzitzit and preparing to wrap the tallit around oneself:

Blessed are you Adonai our God, sovereign of the universe Who sanctifies us with commandments and commands us to wrap ourselves in tzitzit.

While putting on the tallit:

How precious is Your love [Psalms 36:8](#), God, that mankind can take refuge in the shadow of Your wings. They will eat from the abundance of Your house, and You will have them drink from Your stream of delight. For with You is the source of life; in Your light do we see light. Extend Your love to those who know You, and Your righteousness to the upright of heart. May it be Your will, Adonai our God and our ancestors' God, that this commandment of tassels be considered as though I've fulfilled it in every aspect, detail, and purpose, and the 613 commandments that are related to it. Amen.

Wrapping Tefillin

Tefillin (phylacteries) are small leather boxes (batim) containing small scrolls containing Torah passages, with leather straps (retzuot) that are worn on the head and the arm. They contain the following passages: ([Exodus 13:1-10](#), [Exodus 13:11-16](#), [Deuteronomy 6:4-9](#) (the Shema), [Deuteronomy 11:13-21](#)), they are worn to remind the wearer to unify the thoughts of the head and the heart and reinforce the connection between the wearer and God. The selected passages recited while wrapping tefillin have variable explanations, in particular those referencing betrothal; likening Israel to a bride, implying a relationship of partners rather than of master and subject. As per many Birkhot HaMitzvah (blessings of the mitzvah) this, too, is subject to community custom regarding egalitarianism and how the various blessings are structured. The reform movement, for example, entirely removed the phrase "..., *without any sinful thoughts whatsoever*." Similarly, this custom has been impacted by the cultural norms that exist in the broader world, like typically wrapping the left hand (non-dominant for most people) to restrain the left-side from doing evil, a common symbol in Western cultures (see: gauche and sinistra in French and Latin, respectively). The formation of the knots on the tefillin and the wrapping around the hand have significance to kabbalists

Not required, but Hiddur Mitzvah (beautification of the mitzvah), is the L'Shem Yechud, a declaration of intent to fulfill the mitzvah, as follows:

By putting on tefillin, I hereby intend to fulfill the commandment of my Creator, who commanded us to put on tefillin, as written in the Torah: Bind them to your hand as a sign and set them between your eyes as a symbol. They comprise the following four passages: "Hear ...," "If you carefully heed ...," "Sanctify ...," "And when He brings you ...," which contain His unity and oneness, blessed be His name throughout the world, that we should remember the miracles and wonders that He did with us when He brought us out from Egypt, for He has power and dominion, both heavenly and earthly, to do with them as He wishes. And He has commanded us to put tefillin on our arm in remembrance of His outstretched arm, and which is next to the heart, to subjugate our heart's desires and thoughts to His service, blessed be His name, and on our head, next to our brain, in order that the soul in my brain along with my other senses and powers be subjugated to His service, blessed be His name. And because the tefillin commandment flows through me with blessing, may I continue to have long life, holiness flowing through me with blessing, and holy thoughts, without any sinful thoughts whatsoever. May our evil inclination not tempt or provoke us, but leave us to worship God as our hearts desire. Amen.

It is customary to remove the arm tefillin (shel yad) from the bag first, followed by the head tefillin (shel rosh). Place the box on the upper part of your non-dominant arm, on the inner bicep toward the heart, and tighten. Recite:

Blessed are you Adonai our God, sovereign of the universe, who sanctifies us with commandments and commands us to put on tefillin.

Begin wrapping the strap. The strap should be wrapped seven times, even spaced. Once you've wrapped seven times, wrap the rest of the strap around your hand. Then place the head tefillin on, above your hairline (or where it would be), and positioned between your eyes. Ashkenazim typically only say the first blessing above, or add the following if the process has been interrupted by speech; Sephardim typically say both, regardless:

Blessed are you Adonai our God, sovereign of the universe, who sanctifies us with commandments and commands us regarding the commandment of tefillin.

Blessed is the One the glory of whose kingdom is renowned forever.

Share Your wisdom with me, God on high, and from Your knowledge help me know. With Your love do great things for me, and with Your power cut off my enemies and adversaries. Pour good oil on the seven branches of the menorah, to extend the flow of Your goodness upon Your creatures, opening Your hand, and satisfying every living thing with favor.

While wrapping around your hand, according to your custom, recite the following [Hosea 2:21](#):

I will betroth you to Me forever. I will betroth you to Me in righteousness, in justice, in kindness, and in mercy. I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness, and you will know Adonai. May it be Your will, Adonai our God and our ancestors' God, that this commandment of putting on tefillin be considered as though I've fulfilled it in every aspect, detail, and purpose, and the 613 commandments that are related to it. Amen, Selah.

Adon Olam and Yigdal

Two liturgical poems, Adon Olam (Eternal Lord) and Yigdal (Exalted), often included in the morning service, depending on custom. They each feature meter and end-rhyme, something biblical poetry lacks, but have a similar parallel style in which each line is divided into two parts; functioning similarly to the etnachta in a bible verse.

Adon Olam (Eternal Lord) expresses God's eternal sovereignty and unity, the foundational beliefs of Judaism regarding the nature of God. Its use of iambic tetrameter has made it easily moldable to a variety of tunes.

*Eternal Lord who reigned supreme,
Before all beings were created,*

*When everything was made according to His will,
Then He was called "King."*

*And when all shall cease to be,
He alone will reign supreme.
He was, He is,
And He will be crowned in glory.*

*He is One. There is no second
To compare to Him or consort with Him.
Without beginning, without end,
Power and dominion are His.*

*He is my God, my living redeemer,
My stronghold in troubled times.
He is my sign and my banner,
My cup when I call on Him.*

*In His hand I trust my soul
When I sleep and when I wake.
And with my soul, my body too,
Adonai is mine. I shall not fear.*

Yigdal (Exalted) is based on Maimonides 13 principles of faith. It is of some controversy among various communities for its notion of God "reviving the dead", particularly as that is seen as a non-kabbalistic view. Some groups have excised it altogether, while others simply recite it at other times (i.e. not part of Shacharit)

*Exalted and praised be the living God.
He exists: His existence is timeless.
He is One: there is no oneness like His oneness.
He is hidden: His oneness is endless.
He has no body: He is not a body.
We cannot fathom His holiness.
He preceded all that was created.
He was the first.
His beginning was beginning-less.
He is the eternal Lord; every creature
Declares His greatness and dominion.
He gave His abundant prophecy to*

*The men of His choice and His glory.
Never again has there arisen in Israel
A prophet like Moses who beheld His image.
God gave His Torah of truth to His people
Through His prophet, His faithful prophet.
God will never exchange or emend
His law for any other.
He watches us, and knows our secrets,
Foreseeing the end of everything at its inception.
He rewards good people according to their acts,
And gives evil to the evil according to their wickedness.
At the end of time He will send us our messiah
To save all who wait for His final redemption.
In His great mercy, God will revive the dead.
Blessed be His glorious name for ever and ever!*

The Akeidah (The Binding of Isaac)

The Akeidah (Genesis 22:1–19) is used in Jewish liturgy as part of the Korbanot section of the morning service, emphasizing devotion, covenantal merit, and readiness to serve God.

Korbanot (קִרְבָּנוֹת) refers to the biblical sacrificial offerings described in the Torah and Temple service, recited in prayer as a symbolic “re-enactment” or remembrance of the Temple rites, intended to spiritually frame the start of worship.

Some communities or movements omit the Akeidah from daily prayer because they reduce or restructure Korbanot passages, place less emphasis on sacrificial-era liturgy, prioritize streamlined services, or favor ethical and modernized prayer formats over Temple-based ritual recitation.