

Starting the Day Mindfully

Source Sheet by Dina Becker

Goals and Overview

- We will discuss observations about how Jewish practice encompasses many strategies helpful for coping with adversity
- Will give an overview of some of these strategies.
- Will do some textual study of some of the morning blessings and ask together how these can help us start the day mindfully, and with optimism, gratitude, and meaning

Jewish Practice Helps us Cope with Adversity

- Daily structure
- Behavioral activation: scheduling events that are pleasurable, meaningful, and social
- Emphasis on mindfulness: noticing and staying present in the moment
- Evokes relaxation response as opposed to stress response
- Gives us a break from focusing on the past and on the future
- Emphasis on gratitude, optimism, positive reframing
- Retelling and making meaning of past traumas
- Enables tolerance of ambiguity ("both/and")

Mindfulness

- Intentionally living with awareness in the present moment
- Non-judgmental awareness
- Can include awareness of sensory input (sights, sounds, physical sensations, smells, tastes)
- Can include awareness but not fusion with thoughts and emotions (some emphasize compassionate awareness)
- Focus can be on any present experience
- Practice can include observing, describing, participating

Refs: Linehan, 2015, DBT Skills Training Manual; Orsillo & Roemer, 2011, The Mindful Way Through Anxiety.

Psychological Benefits of Mindfulness

- Included in treatment protocols that reduce anxiety and depression
- Regular practice may evoke "relaxation response" which can counter "stress response"
- Can aid in emotion regulation and distress tolerance, aids in decentering from emotions and recognizing the transience of negative emotional states
- Spiritual benefits: focus on transience of experience, connectedness, one-ness

What we might choose as a focus for mindfulness

- Breath, bodily sensations
- Repetition: breathing, repeated word, rhythmic action
- Any absorbing action (walking, cooking, prayer, play with a child)

-Practice involves focusing on the stimulus of choice; if other thoughts or sensations or feelings intrude, let them passively float away or recede, without judgment or “should”s, and gently return to the point of focus.

-Demonstration

Optimism, Gratitude

-Events lead to emotions not directly, but indirectly, mediated through the thoughts or “spin” we place on the event.

EVENT--->FEELING

EVENT--->THOUGHT--->FEELING

-Optimistic outlook: seeing negative events as external, temporary and specific (as opposed to personal, permanent and pervasive)

-Gratitude-inducing interventions alone have only a very small effect on depression and anxiety

-Modifying negative cognitions to eliminate cognitive errors has a stronger evidence base.

Refs: Beck et al., 1987, Cognitive Therapy of Depression; Seligman, 2006, Learned Optimism; Cregg & Cheavens, 2021 Journal of Happiness Studies 22:414.

Morning Blessings: Three Examples

Elokai Neshama (blessing about restoring the soul)

Al Netilat Yadaim (handwashing with blessing upon awakening)

Birchot ha-Shachar (blessings for the beginning of the day)

Siddur Ashkenaz, Weekday, Shacharit, Preparatory

Prayers, Elokai Neshama

My G-d!

the soul You have placed within me is pure. You created it

You formed it

You breathed it into me

You guard it within me.

You will take it from me in the future, and restore it to me in the future-to-come.

As long as the soul is within me

I thankfully acknowledge You,

Eternal my G-d, and G-d of my ancestors, Master of all deeds [or creatures],

L-rd of all souls.

Blessed are You, Eternal, Who restores souls to the dead.

סידור אשכנז, ימי חול, תפילת שחרית, הכנה לתפילה, אלהי נשמה

(א) אֱלֹהֵי נַשְׁמָה שֶׁנִּתְּתָ בִּי טְהוֹרָה הִיא אַתָּה בְּרַאתָה

אַתָּה יִצְרַתָּה

אַתָּה נִפְחַתָּה בִּי

וְאַתָּה מְשַׁמְרָה בְּקִרְבִּי

וְאַתָּה עֹתִיד לְטַלְּהָ מִמֶּנִּי

וְלְהַחְזִירָהּ בִּי לְעֵתִיד לְבָא,

כָּל זְמַן שֶׁהַנְּשָׁמָה בְּקִרְבִּי מוֹדָה אֲנִי לְפָנֶיךָ ה'

אֱלֹהֵי וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתַי

רְבוֹן כָּל הַמַּעֲשִׂים

אֲדוֹן כָּל הַנְּשָׁמוֹת:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' הַמְּחַזֵּיר נְשָׁמוֹת לְפָגְרִים מֵתִים:

English translation adapted from R. Hammer, 1994, *Entering Jewish Prayer*.

Blessing to be Recited Upon Arising: Background

-Cited in the Talmud (Brachot 60b) as “When one awakens, one recites...”

-The prayer from the Talmud is modified slightly for the siddur by omitting “atahv'rata” (“You created it”), adding “bi” (“in me”) to the next line, and saying “Rbbonkol ha-olamim” (“Master of all worlds”) at the end.

-Explanation from Hammer, *Entering Jewish Prayer*, p.108):

In rabbinic parlance, sleep was considered “one sixtieth of death.” Consciousness is surrendered, the body enters a state of minimal animation. There is no way of knowing if awareness will be regained and physical activity restored. Therefore, to wake to life in the morning is to experience a foretaste of resurrection. It requires us to give thank to the creator of our soul and our consciousness, and to bless G-d for life itself.

-A shorter version (Modeh Ani) that doesn't mention G-d's name and that could be said first thing upon awakening (before washing) was developed in around the 17th century.

- Meaning? (Gratitude, celebration, staying in the now)'

Washing hands with the blessing

Siddur Ashkenaz, Weekday, Shacharit, Preparatory Prayers, Netilat Yadayim

סידור אשכנז, ימי חול, תפילת שחרית, הכנה לתפילה, נטילת ידיים

Blessed are You, Adonoy our God, King of the Universe, Who sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us concerning the washing of hands.

**בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ
בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ עַל נְטִילַת יָדַיִם:**

Handwashing: Background

-The wording of this prayer is also set out in Brachot 60b

-But where are we actually commanded?

-An extension of the requirement that the Kohanim (priests) wash their hands prior to engaging in Temple rituals.

-After the destruction of the Temple, the rabbis extended the requirement to people outside of the Temple in multiple situations (before meals, before prayer, on leaving a bathroom, cemetery, etc.)

Handwashing: Meaning?

-Purification

-From nighttime impurities

-From sleep, which is 1/60th of death (symbolic association of death with impurity)

-Sanctification

-Making ourselves holy like priests

-Sanctifying our hands to do G-d's work (see Mei Ha-Shiloach; R. Mordechai Leiner [1801-1854], the Izhbitzer Rebbe)

Mei HaShiloach Vol 1 Exodus Ki Tisa

The priest working [in the Temple] had to wash, in order to remove his contact [with impure or wordly things] and to nullify his mind and will before the will of G-d. That is, his service is only that which G-d wishes.

And so it is when we are commanded to wash our hands before the morning service and before meals. Before people occupy themselves with the needs of the body, they need to pray to G-d that if something from this world comes to their hands that, G-d forbid, is against G-d's will, they ask that G-d will remove their desire for this...

מי השלוח, חלק א, שמות, כי תשא א'
...הכהן העובד הוצרך לרחיצה, היינו שיסיר
נגיעתו ומבטל דעתו ורצונו נגד רצון הש"י, היינו
שאינו עובד רק מה שהש"י חפץ.
וכן אשר נצטוינו לטול ידינו שחרית וקודם
סעודה, הוא ג"כ קודם שיתחיל האדם לעסוק
בצרכי הגוף צריך תפלה להש"י, באם שיבא לידו
דבר מעניני עוה"ז שהוא ח"ו נגד רצון הש"י, אז
הוא מבקש מהש"י שיטול ויסיר את תאומו
מזה...

Birchot Hashachar: Blessings for the Beginning of the Day

Siddur Ashkenaz, Weekday, Shacharit, Preparatory Prayers, Morning Blessings

- (1) Blessed are You, Eternal our G-d, Ruler of the Universe, Who gives the rooster (or the heart/mind) understanding to distinguish between day and night.
- (2) Blessed are You, Eternal our G-d, Ruler of the Universe, Who made me in G-d's image.
- (3) Blessed are You, Eternal our G-d, Ruler of the Universe, Who made me of the people of Israel.
- (4) Blessed are You, Eternal our G-d, Ruler of the Universe, Who made me free.
- (5) Blessed are You, Eternal our G-d, Ruler of the Universe, Who gives sight to the blind.
- (6) Blessed are You, Eternal our G-d, Ruler of the Universe, Who clothes the naked.
- (7) Blessed are You, Eternal our G-d, Ruler of the Universe, Who releases the imprisoned.
- (8) Blessed are You, Eternal our G-d, Ruler of the Universe, Who straightens the bent.
- (9) Blessed are You, Eternal our G-d, Ruler of the Universe, Who spreads the earth above the waters.
- (10) Blessed are You, Eternal our G-d, Ruler of the Universe, Who provided me with all my needs.
- (11) Blessed are You, Eternal our G-d, Ruler of the Universe, Who prepares the steps of man.
- (12) Blessed are You, Eternal our G-d, Ruler of the Universe, Who girds Israel with might.
- (13) Blessed are You, Eternal our G-d, Ruler of the Universe, Who crowns Israel with glory.

- סידור אשכנז, ימי חול, תפילת שחרית, הכנה לתפילה, ברכות השחר
- (א) בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר נָתַן לְשִׁכּוֹי בִּינָה לְהַבְחִין בֵּין יוֹם וּבֵין לַיְלָה:
 - (ב) בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם שֶׁעָשָׂנִי בְּצַלְמוֹ:
 - (ג) בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם שֶׁעָשָׂנִי יִשְׂרָאֵל:
 - (ד) בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם שֶׁעָשָׂנִי בֶן/בַּת חוֹרִין:
 - (ה) בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם פּוֹקֵחַ עֲוֹנוֹת:
 - (ו) בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם מְלַבֵּישׁ עֲרֻמִּים:
 - (ז) בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם מְתַיֵר אֲסוּרִים:
 - (ח) בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם זוֹקֵף כְּפוּפִים:
 - (ט) בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם רוֹקֵעַ הָאָרֶץ עַל הַמַּיִם:
 - (י) בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם שֶׁעָשָׂה לִי כְּל־צַרְפִּי:
 - (יא) בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם הַמְכִינֵן מִצַּעְדֵי גִבּוֹר:

(14) Blessed are You, Eternal our G-d, Ruler of the Universe, Who gives strength to the weary.

(15) Blessed are You, Eternal our G-d, Ruler of the Universe, Who removes sleep from my eyes and slumber from my eyelids...

(יב) בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם אוֹזֵר יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּגִבּוֹרָה:

(יג) בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם עוֹטֵר יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּתַפְאֵרָה:

(יד) בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם הַנוֹתֵן לַיַּעַף כֹּחַ:

(טו) בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם הַמַּעֲבִיר שָׁנָה מֵעֵינַי וּתְנוּמָה מֵעַפְעָפַי:

Berakhot 60b

Upon hearing the sound of the rooster, one should recite: Blessed...Who gave the heart [*sekhvi*] understanding to distinguish between day and night.

Upon opening his eyes, one should recite: Blessed...Who gives sight to the blind.

Upon sitting up straight, one should recite: Blessed...Who sets captives free.

Upon dressing, one should recite: Blessed...Who clothes the naked, as they would sleep unclothed.

Upon standing up straight, one should recite: Blessed...Who raises those bowed down.

Upon descending from one's bed to the ground, one should recite: Blessed...Who spreads the earth above the waters, in thanksgiving for the creation of solid ground upon which to walk.

Upon walking, one should recite: Blessed...Who makes firm the steps of man.

Upon putting on his shoes, one should recite: Blessed...Who has provided me with all I need, as shoes are a basic necessity.

Upon putting on his belt, one should recite: Blessed...Who girds Israel with strength.

Upon spreading a shawl upon his head, one should recite: Blessed...Who crowns Israel with glory.

ברכות ס' ב

כִּי שָׁמַע קוֹל תִּרְנַנְגוּלָא, לִימָא: "בְּרוּךְ ... אֲשֶׁר נָתַן לַשְׁכּוֹי בִּינָה לְהִבְחִין בֵּין יוֹם וּבֵין לַיְלָה".

כִּי פָתַח עֵינָיָה, לִימָא: "בְּרוּךְ ... פּוֹקֵחַ עֵוְרִים".

כִּי תִרְיֵץ וַיְתִיב, לִימָא: "בְּרוּךְ ... מַתִּיר

אֲסוּרִים".

כִּי לְבִישׁ, לִימָא: "בְּרוּךְ ... מְלַבֵּשׁ עֲרוּמִים".

כִּי זָקוּף, לִימָא: "בְּרוּךְ ... זוֹקֵף כְּפוּפִים".

כִּי נִחִית לְאַרְעָא, לִימָא: "בְּרוּךְ ... רוֹקַע הָאָרֶץ

עַל הַמַּיִם".

כִּי מְסֻגִי, לִימָא: "בְּרוּךְ ... הַמְכִּין מְצַעְדֵי גְבֵר".

כִּי סַיִם מְסַאֲנִיָה, לִימָא: "בְּרוּךְ ... שְׁעָשָׂה לִי

כָּל צְרָכָי".

כִּי אָסַר הַמַּיִנִּיָה, לִימָא: "בְּרוּךְ ... אוֹזֵר יִשְׂרָאֵל

בְּגִבּוֹרָה".

כִּי פָרִיס סוּדְרָא עַל רִישִׁיָה, לִימָא: "בְּרוּךְ ...

עוֹטֵר יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּתַפְאֵרָה".

Blessings for the Beginning of the Day: Background

- Originally, these blessings were said as the activities were done
- In the time of the Talmud, people slept unclothed and drew their clothes on under the sheets
- Wearing a belt was obligatory for men to separate the lower (physical) part of the body from the upper (spiritual) part.
- Men and women covered their heads
- Later, these were changed so that we recite them at the beginning of the Shacharit (Morning) prayers, in synagogue or when praying at home.

Blessings for the Beginning of the Day: Meaning?

- Concrete focus on activities of the morning: staying in the moment
- Repetitive mindful focus: the sing-song repetition of the prayers
- Finding more symbolic meaning?
 - What does it mean to “open one’s eyes”?
 - To “clothe oneself”?
 - To “be freed, or unfettered”?
 - To be grounded on the earth?
 - To have all one’s needs met?
 - To walk in one’s path?
 - To gird oneself with “Gevurah” (restraint? Sephirotic/Kabbalistic meaning of this term?)
 - To crown oneself with “Tifarah” (another Kabbalistic sefira)?
 - To get strength and to remove sleep from our eyes?

