



Experiential Learning in the Morning Berakhot

Submitted by Eliyahu Krigel

Subject Area

Birkot HaShakar, and one alternative meaning of the word berakha.

Target Age Group

Three-hour Fifth or Sixth Grade Sunday School Class in a Synagogue School Environment.

Lesson Objective

The primary goal of this lesson is to understand the meaning of the word berakhot and then to fully engage students in the morning berakhot through movement and an embodied kinesthetic awareness of how the blessings apply to our own lives.



“To be a Jew means to wake up and to keep your eyes open to the many beautiful, mysterious, and holy things that happen all around us every day.”—

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner





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(Read introduction for preparation time of 10 minutes)

The Birkot Hashakar (Morning Blessings) represents an opportunity for prayer leaders and teachers to bring experiential learning into the worship service or class. The 14 berakhot in Birkot Hashakar are based on a passage in the Talmud from Berakhot 60b when Sages in the Gemara (Talmud) express the perspective of encouraging the individual worshiper to bless and praise God for each day. When these berakhot are said in a group context, students have an opportunity to fully experience the messages of the language by using movement as a way to clarify the meaning of the blessing recited. The Talmud also in Berakhot 35a asserts, “It is forbidden to enjoy anything in this world without a blessing.”

Before introducing the berakhot individually, the lesson focuses on the word berakhot and one interpretation related to what it may mean. After the word berakhot is discussed in groups answering all the questions related to the paradoxical word, this lesson has fourteen sub-parts which include the berakhot Who enables Her creatures to distinguish between night and day, Who made me in Her image, Who made me a Jew, Who gives sight to the blind, Who clothes the naked, Who straightens the bent, Who raises the downtrodden, Who spreads out the earth upon the waters, Who has provided me with my every need, Who



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guides us on our path, Who strengthens the people Israel with courage, Who crowns the people Israel with glory, and Who gives strength to the weary. In this lesson, each blessing is meant to be read in Hebrew, English, and then chanted with ruach (spirit) and kavanah (intention). There are different ways to translate the beginning formula that begins each blessing, and the translation I generally use is Praised are You, Hashem, our God, King of the universe.

(60 Minutes) Divide the class into learning groups and introduce half of Rabbi Artson's sheet on the word berakhah to one group and the other half of the source sheet to the other group and ask each group to answer the related questions. Each group should begin to read the sources aloud and try to answer the questions as best they can and ask for help when needed. The teacher should spend an equal amount of time with each group.

Group One Sources

- "A berakhah has two distinct meanings. When applied to God by people, it constitutes an act of praise... When berakhah is applied by God to people, it is a declaration of Divine favor (34)."



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- “The berakhah is not a direct address to God alone, but rather a public opportunity for the worshiper to enhance God’s standing with the holy community by recounting an act of divine bounty. Praise is the outcome of the berakhah, not the content of its words – greater appreciation of God emerges from an articulation of the latest example of divine beneficence (41).”
- “The Bible and the rabbis didn’t intend to sharply distinguish between “praised” and “blessed,” else they would not have used the same word. Instead, berakhah shares elements of both, because God is a constant source of blessing to the world in general and to the Jew in particular, and we are motivated to offer public thanks and praise (43).”

Group Two Sources

- “If berakhah is understood as an adjective, then it reveals that God is a steady source of blessing...The berakhah, by virtue of its ubiquity in Jewish prayer, becomes the single most important part of any Jewish description of God.”



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- ❑ “Rather than understanding barukh as a passive participle, like “pleased” or “saddened” (meaning that someone else has actively transferred this trait or feeling to the subject), Joseph Albo understands barukh as an adjective, like “merciful” or “compassionate” (implying that it is descriptive of God’s nature, or that it is a quality that god bestows on everything else (38).”
- ❑ “The berakhah asserts that God is bountiful and that this occasion, this encounter, or this particular mitzvah embodies that bounty (42).”
- ❑ “You are bountiful, Adonai... Rather than constituting an act of praise through direct address, the berakha functions to remind us of God’s bountiful nature and then elucidates the proximate example of that pervasive bounty in the mitzvah about to be performed. The translation of barukh that I would propose for our age is bountiful (40).”

Questions to Consider

Group One

- ❑ How do you think you should translate barukh and why?”
- ❑ What are the different ways the berakha demonstrates our relationship with God?
- ❑ Is relating to God through the word barukh helpful or useful for you? Why?



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Group Two

- How do you think you should translate barukh and why?”
- Is barukh a passive participle or an adjective? What’s the difference?
- What do you have an abundance of in your own life and do you appreciate it as much as you could? What are you lacking in your life you would like more of?

(30 minutes) Ask each group to teach the other group about what they just learned from their respected sources as well as share their answers to the questions that parallel each set of source comments.

(15 minutes) Before the actual instruction or overview of the discussions is recapitulated for the class by the two groups, challenge the entire class to write down three things they now know about the word barukh from reading Rabbi Artson’s quotes and two questions they have about the word barukh. Now compile the whole list of questions on the board related to understanding the word barukh. Once the questions are raised on the board, ask group one to share the answers to their questions. Group two should then share their answers to their specific questions. Have the major questions been answered that were



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written on the board? What questions does the group still have about the intention or meaning of the word barukh and the characteristics of a berakha?

After a complete discussion has been had on the word berakha, begin to prepare the class to move each blessing in their bodies by formulating movements that go with the berakhot in Birkot Hashakar. Pronouncing all the Hebrew words correctly and understanding the meaning of the blessings in a way that makes sense on an individual level with the students own morning ritual is a goal that takes time and effort. Each of the fourteen berakhot mentioned in the following paragraphs are not meant to be taught in a vacuum but are rather intended to be gone over slowly first in English, then in Hebrew, and then with a particular nusach (style) or melody. The following berakhot should be taught thoroughly and comprehensively in class before the body gestures are introduced. I believe the entire class should be competent in reciting the berakhot before the movements are added so that the original meaning of the berakhot is preserved.

(10 minutes for each game, 40 minutes total. The games can be broken up and played throughout the morning and are most effective if they aren't played one after the other immediately but rather integrated into the day. You know you need the students to play a game when they are having a hard time sitting still.)



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Here are four different ways to teach the Hebrew and meaning of the berakhot before adding the movements or gestures:

- ❑ Play around the world with the blessings. Who ever says the blessing the most fluidly and without fumbling through the Hebrew gets to progress around the table until they reach their original seat.
- ❑ Play charades with the blessings. Act out the blessings with out words and have your team guess which blessing you are describing with your body.
- ❑ Divide class into groups of four and give each group two blessings to read. Have the group read the blessings by each member reading only one word then skip to the next person to read a word. Which group can read the blessings in rotation and make it sound like one person is reading.
- ❑ Challenge students to pick a blessing that is close to their hearts and speaks to them on an individual level. Now take that blessing and make a blessing card with the blessing on the top of the page and a picture of what the blessing means in the middle of the page. Give the blessing cards to elders or family members in the community.



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(35 minutes) Blessings with Movements and Gestures

Praised are You, L-rd our G-d, King of the Universe...

Who enables Her creatures to distinguish between night and day

Ask the students to cover their eyes when they slowly say the blessing, open your eyes pretending like you just woke up out of bed.

Who made me in Her image

We look like G-d on the inside, and to show this movement on the outside, we can give each other a warm Shalom greeting. Have all turn to their neighbor and greet them with enthusiasm and happiness.

Who made me a Jew

Ask the kids what kind of uniform they wear when they play soccer or any sport. Then ask the students what kind of uniform do we wear pray in shul? (Yamukah, Tzitzit, and Talit.)

Who made me free

Challenge students to come up with the most creative way to give each other high-five.



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Who gives sight to the blind

Before the group says this blessing, pair students up in chavruta (study) partners, two to a group. Pass out blindfolds to the group. Have one student don the blindfold and the other student take the blindfolded yeled (student) somewhere in the sanctuary, classroom, or natural setting depending upon the location of the class that is beautiful to them and represents a place of the Presence of God.

Challenge the students to recite the blessing blindfolded. Then ask the student to take off the blindfold and say the blessing with their eyes open. What is it like for them to say the blessing blindfolded and then to open their eyes to something that represents God's holiness in our Tradition? How is saying the blessing blindfolded different or similar to saying the blessing with your eyes open?

Switch and ask the other student in the pair to wear the blindfold and repeat the experience. Rabbi Yossi said in Hagigah 12b, "Alas for people who see but know not what they see and for people who stand but know not on what they stand."



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Who clothes the naked

Ask students to act like they're getting dressed in the morning. Imagine you are putting on your pants and shirt. In Exodus 3:5, God said, "Do not come closer. Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place whereon you stand is holy ground." What is the importance of sandals in this passage?

Who straightens the bent

Challenge the students to stand up straight and then bend over and touch their toes while keeping their legs straight. After they touch their toes, ask them to slowly raise their torso up and become stiff as a board.

Who raises the downtrodden

Ask students to squat down as low as they can go. Then, on the count of three, the students can burst up with energy and spirit.

Who spreads out the earth upon the waters

Advise the students to raise their hands and arms parallel to the ground and then spin in two full circles.



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Who has provided me with my every need

Ask the students to give themselves a big hug and ask them to wrap their arms completely around themselves so their fingers almost touch on their back. Rabbi Nachman in Liquei Mo'Haran 1 5:1 asserts, "According to the Rabbis every person must say the entire world was created for me." How would you act differently if you remembered in each moment that the world was created just for you?

Who guides us on our path

Place your hand on your forehead and pretend like your looking all around and being guided on a particular path. Have students mirror your actions.

Who strengthens the people Israel with courage

Act like you are adorning a crown, with the most holy jewels and riches. Once don't stand up tall because Israel is being strengthened by courage.

Who crowns Israel with glory

Challenge the students to act like they're donning a crown made of gold and jewels and this crown represents their special relationship with Israel and God.



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Who gives strength to the weary

Direct the students to act like they're tired in one instance, then alert and awake in another moment by flexing their muscles.