

STOP

CONCENTRATE

PAY ATTENTION



The Asher Yatzar Miracle

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“We have two guests for *Shabbos* lunch,” my wife informed me one day recently. “A man who said he is a former *talmid* of yours and his seven year old son.”

“We have a guest for breakfast on Sunday morning at the yeshiva, ”my colleague in the *Ohr Somayach* administration informed me. “He is the fellow whose initials you see at the bottom of those *Asher Yatzar* posters hanging everywhere.” In addition, to helping our yeshiva and other worthy causes, he has made a pet project of distributing these posters with translations in many languages in order to heighten people’s awareness of what this blessing means.”

Little did I realize the connection between these guests and that on Sunday morning I would be relating to one guest what I had heard the day before from the previous guest. This was his touching tale:

“Chaim (not his real name) was born prematurely and was soon diagnosed as autistic. At the age of six, he did not speak, could not control his sanitary functions and was otherwise disconnected from the world. His father, a true ben torah who had been involved both in the world of *chinuch* and business, desperately sought some merit for his child. One day, he noticed an *asher yatzar* poster and he decided that popularizing the idea of *kavana* in reciting the blessing related to health might be the key. He purchased 300 such posters and distributed packets of 25 each to *shuls* in his city.

After offering intense prayers to Heaven for his son’s recovery, he went to sleep. The next morning he awoke with his face mysteriously drenched with tears, something he had never experienced before. That day, his son suddenly began to speak, began keeping himself clean, and was soon performing like a perfectly normal six-year-old.

As I sat listening to this now seven-year-old beautiful youngster reciting blessings, singing *zemiros* and maintaining intelligent conversation, I was compelled to hold back tears as I asked for the purpose of the father-and-son visit to Israel.

The explanation went as follows:

There was no Jewish school for autistic children in his city, so he had had to enroll the boy in an inner-city special public school kindergarten. When the miraculous recovery took place, he wanted to take him out of the school and

place him in a cheder. But the authorities refused to allow this. He had been diagnosed as autistic, they insisted, and it was impossible for him to have recovered to normalcy. In Jerusalem, there is an observant Jew who is a world renowned expert on autistic children and he invited the father to bring his son to him for a diagnosis and a medical opinion which might make them change their mind.

When he saw the child and spoke to him, the expert said, "He is as autistic as I am!"

The miracle of *Asher Yotzar*.

For Everything a Blessing

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When I was an elementary school student in yeshiva - a Jewish parochial school with both religious and secular studies - my classmates and I used to find amusing a sign that was posted just outside the bathroom. It was an ancient Jewish blessing, commonly referred to as the *asher yatzar* benediction, that was supposed to be recited after one relieved oneself. For grade school children, there could be nothing more strange or ridiculous than to link to acts of micturition and defecation with holy words that mentioned God's name. Blessings were reserved for prayers, for holy days, or for thanking God for food or for some act of deliverance, but surely not for a bodily function that evoked smirks and giggles.

It took me several decades to realize the wisdom that lay behind this blessing that was composed by Abayei, a fourth-century Babylonian rabbi.

Abayei's blessing is contained in the Talmud, an encyclopedic work of Jewish law and lore that was written over the first five centuries of the common era. The Jewish religion is chock-full of these blessings, or *brachot*, as they are called in Hebrew. In fact, an entire tractate of Talmud, 128 pages in length, is devoted to *brachot*.

On page 120 (*Brachot* 60b) of the ancient text it is written:

"Abayei said, when one comes out of a privy he should say: Blessed is He who has formed man in wisdom and created in him many orifices and many cavities. It is obvious and known before Your throne of glory that if one of them were to be ruptured or one of them blocked, it would be impossible for a man to survive and stand before You. Blessed are You that heals all flesh and does wonders."

An observant Jew is supposed to recite this blessing in Hebrew after each visit to the bathroom. We young yeshiva students were reminded of our obligation to recite this prayer by the signs that contained its text that were posted just outside the restroom doors.

It is one thing, however, to post these signs and it is quite another to realistically expect preadolescents to have the maturity to realize the wisdom of and need for reciting a 1600-year-old blessing related to bodily functions.

It was not until my second year of medical school that I first began to understand the appropriateness of this short prayer. Pathophysiology brought home to me the terrible consequences of even minor aberrations in the structure and function of the human body. At the very least, I began to no longer take for granted the normalcy of my trips to the

bathroom. Instead, I started to realize how many things had to operate just right for these minor interruptions of my daily routine to run smoothly.

I thought of Abayei and his blessing. I recalled my days at yeshiva and remembered how silly that sign outside the bathroom had seemed. But after seeing patients whose lives revolved around their dialysis machines, and others with colostomies and urinary catheters, I realized how wise the rabbi had been.

And then it happened: I began to recite Abayei's *bracha*. At first I had to go back to my *siddur*, the Jewish prayer book, to get the text right. With repetition - and there were many opportunities for a novice to get to know this blessing well - I could recite it fluently and with sincerity and understanding.

Over the years, reciting the *asher yatzar* has become for me an opportunity to offer thanks not just for the proper functioning of my excretory organs, but for my overall good health. The text, after all, refers to catastrophic consequences of the rupture or obstruction of any bodily structure, not only those of the urinary or gastrointestinal tract. Could Abayei, for example, have foreseen that "blockage" of the "cavity," or lumen, of the coronary artery would lead to the commonest cause of death in industrialized countries some 16 centuries later?

I have often wondered if other people also yearn for some way to express gratitude for their good health. Physicians especially, who are exposed daily to the ravages that illness can wreak, must sometimes feel the need to express thanks for being well and thus well-being. Perhaps a generic, nondenominational *asher yatzar* could be composed for those who want to verbalize their gratitude for being blessed with good health.

There was one unforgettable patient whose story reinforced the truth and beauty of the *asher yatzar* for me forever. Josh was a 20-year-old student who sustained an unstable fracture of his third and fourth cervical vertebrae in a motor vehicle crash. He nearly died from his injury and required emergency intubation and ventilatory support. He was initially totally quadriplegic but for weak flexion of his right biceps.

A long and difficult period of stabilization and rehabilitation followed. There were promising signs of neurological recovery over the first few months that came suddenly and unexpectedly: movement of a finger here, flexion of a toe there, return of sensation here, adduction of a muscle group there. With incredible courage, hard work, and an excellent physical therapist, Josh improved day by day. In time, and after what seemed like a miracle, he was able to walk slowly with a leg brace and a cane.

But Josh continued to require intermittent catheterization. I know only too well the problems and perils this young man would face for the rest of his life because of a neurogenic bladder. The urologists were very pessimistic about his chances for not requiring catheterization. They had not seen this occur after a spinal cord injury of this severity.

Then the impossible happened. I was there the day Josh no longer required a urinary catheter. I thought of Abayei's *asher yatzar* prayer. Pointing out that I could not imagine a more meaningful scenario for its recitation, I suggested to Josh, who was also a yeshiva graduate, that he say the prayer. He agreed. As he recited the ancient *bracha*, tears welled in my eyes.

Josh is my son.