

Hashem—Hidden and Revealed

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Many profound and beautiful explanations have traditionally been offered to explain the switch from second-person *nokhach* (present) to third-person *nistar* (hidden) in our prayers.

Rashba¹

Query: Why was the formula for blessings established half *nimtza* (present) and half *nistar* (hidden)?

Response: Although I will not speak here of things that were meant to be hidden, know that the masters of wisdom [who composed the original blessings] were privy to an extremely exalted knowledge. However, I will speak here of the more revealed reason behind the formula for the blessings, and its benefit. I refer to the fact that the blessings were formulated in [such a way that they switch from] *nigleh* (revealed) to *nistar* (hidden). As you already know, there are two principles that are the foundation for everything [that we know about Hashem]. The first is to know that He is ***mechuyav hametziyut*** (the necessary or absolute existence behind everything)[as opposed to the world which is only *efshari hametziyut*, possible or relative existence]. There must be no doubt concerning this, for it is self-evident, as should become clear. The second is that *amitato yitbarakh* (the truth of God's absolute existence) is not knowable/graspable except to Himself. Only *metziyuto* (the fact of His existence) is *nigleh* (revealed) to all, whereas *amitat mahuto* (His true essence) is *nistar* (hidden) and *neelam* (concealed) from all. In order to establish these two principles in our souls, the sages established the *nusach* (formula) of all blessings in *nigleh* (present, second-person) and *nistar* (hidden, third-person). We begin, "*Barukh Atah—blessed are You,*" as if we are speaking face to face with someone who is totally present. In order correct a possible misconception, i.e., to insure that we do not equate Hashem's existence with anything else that exists, or think that there is any relationship at all between His existence and theirs [in other words, in order not to lose sight of the second principle, i.e., that God Himself is beyond anything we can know or grasp], they moved from second-person to third-person, "*asher kidshanu bemitzvotav—who sanctified us with His commandments.*" In this way, they wished to establish in our souls [the certainty] that, although [the fact of] His existence is verifiable, still, *mahut metziyuto* (the essence of His existence) is *neelam* (concealed) and *nistar* (hidden). Ultimately, it is impossible to speak of Him, may He be blessed, except in the third-person, indirectly.

The next source points out the same anomaly. Rather than attempting to explain it, however, he feels it more important to indicate a possible source for the basic idea of switching from You to He.

Kol Bo²

We find that the blessings instituted by the sages begin with a direct address to the Blessed Creator, i.e., "*Barukh Atah—blessed are You,*" whereas they conclude with an indirect address, i.e., "*asher kidshanu bemitzvotav—who has sanctified us with His*

¹ Rashba, *Sheelot U'teshuvot, chelek heh, siman 52.*

² *Kol Bo, Siman Aleph Aleph, din Meah Berakhot.*

commandments,” whereas they should have concluded “*asher kidashtanu bemitzvotekha*—O You who have sanctified us with Your commandments.” The source for this is the flow of the verses in Psalm 145.³ In the 10th verse, it is written, “*Yodukha Hashem kol maasekha vachasidekha yevarekhukhah*—the totality of all Your handiwork thanks/attests to You, Hashem, and Your pious ones bless You.”⁴ The word *יְבָרְכֶךָ* (*yaverukhukhah*, bless You) concludes with an extra letter *heh*, such that the word can now be divided into two, *יְבָרְכוּ כָה* (*yevarekhu kha*), which itself can be transposed and reread as *כָה יְבָרְכוּ* (*kho yevarekhu*, thus shall they bless). “Thus shall they bless” is a directive to bless Hashem in a particular way. What is that way? The next verse provides the answer: “*Kevod malkhutkha yomeru ugevuratkha yedaberu*—they should speak of Your kingship and proclaim Your supernatural wonders” [in *nokhach*, second-person direct].⁵ But then, as the very next verse indicates, they should switch into third-person indirect address, “*Lehodia libnei adam gevurotav ukevod hadar malkhuto*—in order to make known to the children of men His supernatural wonders and the glory of the majesty of His kingship” [in *nistar*, third-person indirect].⁶ [When we then return back to the third verse, we are given a hint as to why.] There it is written, “*Veligdeluto ein cheker*—there is no probing His greatness.”⁷ [That is, besides being a grammatical rule, the third-person also embodies the profound truth that it is simply impossible to know God directly; His existence is hidden. He is beyond anything that we can know. And even if and when we do catch a glimpse, it is just that, and it should clue us to the fact that He is far beyond anything we can directly experience.]

We turn now to Rabbi David Abudraham’s classic work on prayer, in which the author shows the source in the Tanakh for every single word or phrase in our prayers. After a lengthy exposition tracing the source and meaning of each word in the *Matbeah Berakhah* (Formula for the Blessings), he quotes two opinions concerning the possible deeper meaning behind the switch from second to third-person that occurs in all blessings.

Abudraham⁸

[After relieving yourself in the morning,] wash your hands and bless, “Blessed are You, Havayah our God, King of the universe, Who has sanctified us with His commandments and instructed us concerning the elevating [and the washing] of the hands.” The biblical source for the words “**Barukh Atah Havayah**” is “*Barukh Atah Havayah lamdeinu chukeikha*—blessed are You, who have taught me Your statutes.”⁹ [Know that] when we say the word “*Barukh*” in relation to Hashem, we do not mean “Blessed be...” [as if Hashem needs our blessing], but rather “Intrinsically blessed are You!” or “You are the source of blessing.” Similar to “*Rachum Atah*” (You are compassionate or You are the source of compassion) and “*Chanun Atah*” (You are gracious or You are the source of grace), “*Barukh Atah*” means that Hashem is The source of all blessing, and He therefore does not need to receive blessings, or anything else, from us [i.e., His essence is not affected by anything we do].

The Biblical source for “**Elokenu**” is Hashem’s statement to us in the *aseret hadibrot*, “*Anokhi Havayah Elokekha*—I am Hashem your God,”¹⁰ and Israel’s declaration of faith, “*Shma Yisrael Havayah Elokenu Havayah echad*—hear O Israel, Hashem is our God,

³ *Tehillah leDavid*.

⁴ *Ibid.* 145:10.

⁵ *Ibid.* 145:11.

⁶ *Ibid.* 145:12.

⁷ *Ibid.* 145:3.

⁸ *Abudraham HaShalem*, pp. 33-34.

⁹ Psalm 119:12.

¹⁰ Exodus 20:2.

Hashem is one.¹¹ The Biblical source for "**Melekh ha'olam**" is "V'Adonai Elokim emet, hu Elokim chayim u'Melekh olam—Hashem Elokim is the true reality; He is the Living God and the Eternal King [of the world]."¹²

The Biblical source for "**asher kidshanu bemitzvotav**" is "Ki Ani Havayah Elokekhem, vehitkadishtem vehayitem kedoshim, ki kadosh Ani—for I am Hashem your God; you shall therefore sanctify yourselves and become holy, for I Myself am holy,"¹³ and "Ki am kadosh atah l'Adonai Elokekha, ubekha bachar Havayah lihiyot lo le'am—For you are a holy people, [set aside] to Hashem your God; Hashem has chosen you alone to be His nation,"¹⁴ and "V'Adonai he'emirka hayom lihiyot lo le'am segulah kaasher diber lakh, velishmor kol mitzvotav—for Hashem has set you apart today to be His treasured nation, exactly as He had spoken about you [i.e., as He promised your forefathers]; you must therefore safeguard His commandments."¹⁵ [We thus understand from the above sources that the phrase *kidshanu bemitzvotav* (who has sanctified us with His commandments) means that Israel is a holy nation, wholly sanctified and dedicated to God, and set apart from the other nations of the world by virtue of the fact that He, the *metzaveh* (commander), *tzava* (bound) them to Himself by *metzaveh* (commanding) them to fulfill His *mitzvot* (commandments).] [Based on this] others have extended this to include *kidushin*, i.e., that the Holy One sanctified Israel to Himself in holy matrimony with the *mitzvot* [similar to a man who sanctifies his wife to himself with a ring]. This is precisely the sense of the verse [that is said when winding the *tefillin* straps around the fingers], "And I [*Havayah*] have wed you to Me forever; I have wed you to me with righteousness and with justice, with love and with mercy; I have wed you to me with faith. You shall therefore know Hashem intimately [as a wife knows her husband]."¹⁶ This connection between faith and the *mitzvot* is verified in the verse, "*Kol mitzvotekha emunah*—all of Your commandments are faith" (Psalm 119:86). Finally, the Biblical source for the word "**Vetzivanu**" is "*Torah tzivah lanu Moshe morashah kehilat Yaacov*—the Torah that Moshe commanded us is the *morashah* (inheritance) [read also: *meorasah* (fiancé)] of the congregation of Yaacov" (Deuteronomy 33:4).

Ibn Yarchi wrote: I have been asked to explain why we begin each blessing by speaking directly to Hashem, as if we are directly facing Him, whereas we conclude each blessing as if we are not facing Him. Based on the verse, "*Shiviti Havayah l'negdi tamid ki mimini bal emot*—I place Hashem before me at all times, for since He is at my right hand, I shall never stumble,"¹⁷ Rav says in the midrash, "When reciting a blessing, we must say '*Barukh Atah Havayah*'" [i.e., the blessing must be formulated in the second-person to indicate a direct, frontal, head-on relationship].¹⁸ The reason for this is clear: When saying Hashem's name, we must amplify our awareness of His immediate presence—before our very eyes. When, however, we arrive at the words "**Melekh ha'olam**" [which means not only King of the universe, but King who is *neelam* (hidden) in His universe], it is as if we are no longer standing before Him! [The blessing flows imperceptibly from second-person to third-person, for we then turn around, so to speak, and exclaim to our fellows] that the very Hashem Elokenu before whom we were just standing and relating to so directly is truly the hidden King of the world [the hide-n-seek King who conceals Himself in His world] who has sanctified us with His commandments and instructed us to do them.

¹¹ Deuteronomy 6:4.

¹² Jeremiah 10:10.

¹³ Leviticus 11:44.

¹⁴ Deuteronomy 14:2.

¹⁵ Deuteronomy 26:18.

¹⁶ Hoshea 2:21-22.

¹⁷ Psalm 16:8.

¹⁸ *Midrash Shochar Tov, Tehillim 16.*

Riba [one of the Tosafot] wrote, however: Why did the sages formulate the blessings in *nokhach* (present) and *nistar* (hidden)? Because the Holy One Himself is *nigleh* (revealed) and *nistar* (hidden)! He is certainly revealed in terms of His actions [i.e., the universe and everything in it proclaims the existence of an infinite intelligence that created it], but hidden in terms of His essence divinity [i.e., the rational mind knows nothing about the Creator Himself, for He cannot be likened to anything in His creation, for He is beyond space, time, matter, and form]. The *neshamah* (soul), too, is *nirit* (apparent) and *neelemet* (concealed). It is natural, therefore, for the *nefesh* (soul) to bless both in *nokhach* and *nistar*. We see this in two psalms. In one, King David writes, “L’David: *Barkhi nafshi et Adonai*—[A psalm] by David: O my soul, bless Hashem! And all of my inner organs, [you too, bless] His holy name”¹⁹ [in third-person *nistar*]. In another, he writes, “*Barkhi nafshi et Adonai, Adonai Elohai, gadalta meod, Hod vehadar lavashta*—O my soul, bless Hashem! Hashem my God, Your greatness is constantly magnified. [All of creation is] a garment of radiant light and splendor with which You ostensibly cover [and yet subtly reveal] Yourself”²⁰ [in second-person *nokhach*].

[Another parallel:] We articulate each blessing in speech, but intend its meaning with the thoughts of our heart. [Here too, the same dynamic is apparent:] The thoughts of the heart are concealed while the voice of our speech is heard/revealed. Finally, man himself is composed of body and soul. It is therefore fitting that he bond with His Creator and stand directly in His presence from the perspective of his soul, something that is completely impossible from the perspective of his body [as long as the rules of this world hold]. This [built-in duality] is reflected beautifully in our blessings, all of which begin in *nokhach* and end in *nistar*. [Abudraham now adds:] This explanation is more correct than the first.

And if you will ask: What benefit does the Holy One get from our blessings? We can answer that, in truth, our blessings are really only an expression of our desire that He bless us! This is similar to what our sages said in the Talmud, “Only one who blesses will be blessed.”²¹ It is also written, “*Se’u yedekhem kodesh ubarekhu et Adonai*—lift your hands up in holiness and bless Hashem,”²² which is immediately followed by “*Yevarekhekha Adonai m’Tziyon oseh shamayim va’aretz*—Hashem will then bless you from Zion, He who is the maker of heaven and earth.”²³

Nefesh HaChayim²⁴

All that we can grasp of God’s blessed essence is that aspect of it which is *melubash* (immanent, clothed, invested), so to speak, in the system of universes, and through which His blessedness flows...

It is for this reason that the men of the Great Assembly established the formula for all blessings on the commandments in such a way that they contain both *nokhach* (second-person direct address) and *nistar* (third-person indirect address). For all these blessings begin with “*barukh Atah*—blessed are You” in the second-person, and end with “*asher kidshanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu*—who sanctified us with His commandments...” in the third-person.

¹⁹ Psalm 103:1.

²⁰ Psalm 104:1.

²¹ *Sotah* 38b.

²² Psalm 134:2.

²³ *Ibid.* 134:3.

²⁴ Rabbi Chayim of Volozhin, *Nefesh HaChayim* 2:3 (end).

For from the point of view of His will to be immanent in the universes, thanks to which we have some grasp of who He is, we address Him in the second-person, "Blessed are You." For the universes require additional increase of blessing (*tosefet veribuy berakhah*) from His blessed essence that is immanent in them. This is the meaning of "*Melekh ha'olam* (King of the universe," i.e., the King who descends to dwell in His universe] as alluded to in the *Zohar*:²⁵

It is written, "You (Israel) have not seen any image,"²⁶ but it is also written, "He (Moshe) beholds the image of YKVK..."²⁷ [What is the image referred to in this second verse?] It is the image of the four-letter name, YKVK... Even this "image" does not exist in His place [i.e., above the system of universes]. Only when He [*Ein Sof*] **descends to reveal His sovereign rule** over His creations, [only then] is He apprehended in each dimension according to the vision and perception of that dimension... This is why the Holy One says of Himself, "Even though I appear to you [in prophetic vision] in one form or another that you are able to grasp, [do not think that you can compare Me to any image or form; this is the meaning of] 'To whom will you liken Me that I be an equal?' says *Kadosh*, the transcendent Holy One" (Isaiah 40:25).

[*Nefesh HaChayim* concludes:] He Who commands us and sanctifies us is none other than His blessed Essence [that exists above and beyond and apart from any connection or immanence in the universes]. This is *Ein Sof* blessed-be-He, concealed of the concealed. This is why all blessings on commandments end with "who has sanctified us with His commandments..." i.e., in the third person [for His true essence is beyond anything we can relate to directly from within the system of universes]...

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²⁵ *Raya Mehemna Bo*, 2:42b.

²⁶ Deuteronomy 4:15.

²⁷ Numbers 12:8.