



# Halakhic Questions

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### Making a Blessing on Receiving the Coronavirus Vaccine

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#### QUESTION

Is a person who receives the Coronavirus vaccine required to make the blessing *HaTov veHaMetiv* (Who is good and does good)? Or perhaps, the blessing *Shehecheyanu* (Who has given us life)?

#### RESPONSE

The Mishna (*Berakhot 54b*) says:

עַל הַגְּשָׁמִים, וְעַל בְּשׂוּרוֹת טוֹבוֹת אוֹמֵר: בְּרוּךְ הַטּוֹב וְהַמְטִיב. עַל בְּשׂוּרוֹת רָעוֹת אוֹמֵר: בְּרוּךְ דֵּיין הָאֱמֶת. בְּנֵה בַּיִת חֲדָשׁ, וְקִנָּה כְּלִים חֲדָשִׁים, אוֹמֵר: בְּרוּךְ... שֶׁהִחְיֵינוּ וְקִיָּמְנוּ וְהִגִּיעְנוּ לְזִמְנוּ הַזֶּה.

**For rain and other good tidings, one recites the blessing: Blessed... Who is good and Who does good (*HaTov veHaMetiv*). For bad tidings, one recites the blessing: Blessed... the true Judge (*Dayan HaEmet*). If one built a new house or purchased new vessels, he recites: Blessed... Who has given us life, sustained us, and brought us to this time (*Shehecheyanu*).**

From here, we learn that when one hears good tidings or receives something new, it is incumbent upon them to recite *Shehecheyanu* or *HaTov veHaMetiv* (we will discuss below when it is appropriate to recite each one respectively). However, at first glance, from the fact that all the examples in the Mishna and Gemara (*ibid.*) describe instances of receiving something tangible – rainfall, the birth of a child, receiving an inheritance, etc., we could raise some doubt. In our case, we are talking about preventing a negative outcome – due to receiving the vaccine one will not become ill, and therefore it is not clear whether a blessing should be made in such a case. More specifically, we are not accustomed to making a blessing upon receiving medical treatment in general, so why should this case be any different?

## Blessing on preventing a negative outcome

The Gemara (*Pesachim* 50a) says that in this world one should bless *HaTov veHaMetiv* for good tidings and *Dayan HaEmet* for bad tidings, but in the World to Come *HaTov veHaMetiv* would be said even for bad tidings. The reason is that in the World to Come it is understood that even those things that seem bad to us actually result in good, for Hashem is wholly good (see *Tziyun LeNefesh Haya* *ibid.*, and others).

From here, it is evident that the reason we do not bless *HaTov veHaMetiv* on bad tidings is not because of their nature per se, but rather because we do not see the definitive good that will come from them. Therefore, it could be said that if we would perceive the good that will result from the bad, it would warrant a blessing, even though bad tidings often come in the form of loss, damage or mishap. If this is so, it is intrinsically warranted to make a blessing on **preventing the bad**, not just the **tangible good**.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, as we will see, it is likely that the vaccine is a tangible good, not just a prevention of a negative outcome.

## Blessing on medical treatment

Regarding making a blessing on receiving medical treatment, we find that the Gemara (*Berakhot* 60b) specifies the blessing "Who heals the sick," for bloodletting (see *Shulhan Arukh Oraḥ Hayim* 230:4). The poskim dispute whether this blessing should be recited for any type of medical treatment (see *Eliya Rabba* *ibid.* 10, *Mishna Berura* 7 and *Shaar HaTziyun* *ibid.*) and Rav Kook's opinion (*Olat Re'iya*, Vol. 1, p. 390) is that for any treatment or operation that involves a life-threatening element, one should recite the full blessing with Hashem's name. Nevertheless, the Gemara does not mention the possibility of reciting *Sheheḥeyanu* or *HaTov veHaMetiv* for medical treatment.

Indeed, there is no connection between the two. Medical treatments have nothing to do with either blessing. Likewise, even when one receives a salary payment, one does not bless *Sheheḥeyanu* or *HaTov veHaMetiv*. These blessings are made for something new, that causes excitement and joy. Medical treatment is not a joyful event, rather one of stress and anxiety. Therefore, even upon recovery, the blessing of *HaGomel* (Who Bestows) is appropriate, not *Sheheḥeyanu*.

However, our current situation is inherently different. We are talking about a global pandemic, where a solution has suddenly been found. Therefore, even though we normally do not bless *Sheheḥeyanu* on medical treatments, there is certainly reason to bless *Sheheḥeyanu* or *HaTov veHaMetiv* on receiving the vaccine, as it fulfils the criterion of something new that is suddenly available.

Additionally, the elation and joy are not just from being saved from the pandemic, but from **the ability to return to normal life**. People are not able to participate in joyous occasions or even funerals in the normal way; they cannot open their businesses or go to work as normal, they cannot shop normally, and they cannot visit their family as usual. The joy in receiving the vaccine is not just joy for a medical remedy, but rather for the **return to routine life**. This is an all-inclusive joy, for the individual and the public. It is a joy associated with real and significant material benefit, although a complete return to normal, routine life will only be felt after the majority of people are vaccinated. (Nevertheless, each person who receives the vaccine brings everyone closer to returning to their work cycle and routine living.) In this sense, the joy is not just about receiving the

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<sup>1</sup> This would seemingly also be the case from the words of the Gemara (*Gittin* 34a), which are also codified by Rambam (*Hilkhot Geirushin* 6:25). However, it could be that there the blessing was not recited with Hashem's name, rather just by saying *Barukh HaTov veHaMetiv* (Blessed is the One Who is good and Who does good). In practice, the poskim are divided in ruling on this matter – see the various opinions in *Responsa Avnei Derekh* (Vol. 8, 185), where he writes in the name of Rav Karelitz not to make the full blessing. On the other hand, the opinion of Rav Haim Kanievsky is that a woman who receives a *Get* or *Halitza* may recite the *Sheheḥeyanu* blessing (and so too, a person who is released from prison), i.e., in his opinion it is also appropriate to bless upon being saved from harm.

vaccine on an individual level, but also for the tidings themselves, that a vaccine for Coronavirus has arrived in Israel.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, there seems to be a good reason to bless *Sheheḥeyanu* or *HaTov veHaMetiv*, if not for the medical aspect, then for the material and even economic aspects.

### ***Sheheḥeyanu* or *HaTov veHaMetiv*?**

The Gemara (*Berakhot* 59b) explains that one must bless *Sheheḥeyanu* for benefit to the individual, whereas for something that benefits an individual and someone else, one must bless *HaTov veHaMetiv*. According to this, it would seem that one should make the blessing *HaTov veHaMetiv* on the Coronavirus vaccine, since it is saving many people.

From this simple analysis, *HaTov veHaMetiv* would seem preferable, as stated, since the benefit is for the general public. However, in practice it seems that one should bless *Sheheḥeyanu*, for several reasons.

1. The *Beur Halakha* (221:2, s.v. *mevarech Sheheḥeyanu*) writes that when an individual receives personal benefit from that which benefits the whole community (for example when the community experiences rainfall and the individual's own field also benefits from the rain) – the individual should bless *Sheheḥeyanu*. Thus, in our situation it would also be more appropriate to bless *Sheheḥeyanu*, since each individual also receives personal benefit from the vaccine.
2. According to many *poskim*, although we usually say, “be lenient on doubts regarding blessings,” when an individual experiences personal joy, he or she can bless *Sheheḥeyanu* even if there is a doubt whether or not the blessing should apply, since the blessing is for heartfelt joy, and when one feels heartfelt joy – it is permitted to bless (*Bayit Ḥadash, Oraḥ Ḥayim* 29).<sup>3</sup>
3. The blessing *Sheheḥeyanu* exempts one from the obligation to say *HaTov veHaMetiv*, but the blessing *HaTov veHaMetiv* does not exempt one from the obligation to say *Sheheḥeyanu*. Therefore, if there is a doubt which blessing to recite, it is preferable to recite *Sheheḥeyanu* and not *HaTov veHaMetiv* (*Beur Halakha* 223:5, s.v. *shehi tova*).

From the above, it seems that if an individual is joyful upon receiving the vaccine, they may bless *HaTov veHaMetiv*, since it is beneficial for them and also for others. However, in practice it is more correct to bless *Sheheḥeyanu*, as we will detail.

### **Conclusion and Practical Halakha**

In practice, one may choose between several options with regards to making a *berakha* when receiving the Coronavirus vaccine:

1. **One may bless *HaTov veHaMetiv*** when receiving the vaccine and should have intention that the blessing is for the discovery of the vaccine and its arrival into the State of Israel, for the relief to Am Yisrael and the world, and for economic recovery and the return to routine life. This is a good tiding, not just in the medical sphere but essentially on the return to routine – a communal joy that includes significant
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2. Perhaps this is even included in the Mishna's statement, “for good tidings.” And even though it would seem most appropriate to make this blessing on the day the vaccine was approved for distribution or the day the vaccines themselves arrived in Israel, it is possible to attach the blessing to the time at which the individual receives the vaccine, and at that point to give thanks to Hashem for these good tidings for everyone.
  3. Even though according to many *poskim* we also apply the principle “be lenient for doubts regarding blessings” to the blessing *Sheheḥeyanu* (see Rav Ovadia Yosef, *Responsa Yabia Omer* 4:50), quite a few *poskim* rule like the *Bayit Ḥadash*, and therefore we can employ his position in a case where there are additional reasons to recite the blessing.

material benefit (in essence, one would already be able to make this blessing now, but it is possible to attach the blessing to actually receiving the vaccine).

2. **Better yet is to bless *Sheheḥeyanu***, thereby adding the opinions of the *poskim* that rule this blessing may be recited for heartfelt joy (provided the individual is indeed joyful). With this blessing, the emphasis is more for the personal good that each vaccinated individual receives, and therefore the blessing is only recited upon receiving the vaccine.
3. Another approach, instead of a blessing, is to recite the following words before receiving the vaccine (based on *Berakhot* 60a, *Shulḥan Arukh* OC 230:4. It is also good for one who recites *Sheheḥeyanu* or *HaTov veHaMetiv* to say these words as well):<sup>4</sup>

יְהִי רָצוֹן מִלְּפָנֶיךָ ה' אֱלֹהֵי, שְׂיֵהָא עֵסֶק זֶה לִי וּלְכָל בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל וּלְכָל בְּרִיּוֹתֶיךָ לְרַפּוּאָה שְׁלֵמָה וּלְמַגּוּר הַמְּגִיחָה, כִּי אֵל מֶלֶךְ  
רוֹפֵא נְאֻמָּן וְרַחֲמָן אַתָּה.

**May it be Your will, O Lord my God, that this enterprise be for me and all of Israel and all your creatures, a complete healing and an eradication of this pandemic, as You are God and King, the faithful and merciful healer.**

In any event, it is appropriate to say *מְזִמּוֹר לְתוֹדָה* (Psalm 100), *מְזִמּוֹר שִׁיר חֲנֻכַּת הַבַּיִת לְדָוִד* (Psalm 30) or *נְשִׁמַּת כָּל חַי* (The soul of every living being).

## Seeing the Hand of Hashem

The great importance of blessing, or at least reciting psalms, upon receiving the Coronavirus vaccine, is not just part of thanking Hashem, but also flows from the need to understand that our lives are dependent on the grace of Hashem even after the vaccine.

The world has undergone a great upheaval. In this upheaval, the powerful Western world feels just how reliant it is upon Hashem's blessing. How its might is suspended over emptiness – "*For He is angry but a moment, and when He is pleased there is life*" (*Tehillim* 30:6). The vaccine, man-made, is a wonderful thing, that with God's assistance will help end the pandemic. We are very happy of course that Hashem has given doctors the wisdom to invent this vaccine, but we also know it is not enough. Even the vaccine cannot guarantee the end to the pandemic, for we don't know what mutations are still likely to develop. We are happy about human inventions, but we must be mindful every moment of who is really running the world. The blessing, or recitation of psalms, elevates human invention and enhances it with the name of Heaven.

The vaccine also raises another point. In our generation, there has never been a global cooperative effort against a single crisis or pandemic, and now the whole world is unified against Coronavirus, and in an attempt to find a cure.

We have not yet emerged from the danger. However, the signs of emergence can be seen, with Hashem's help. Our job is to contemplate and decide how we can preserve the good things we have learned over this period, from an ethical and humane perspective, from a global unity perspective and from the perspective of the importance of family unity. Most importantly, internalizing the fact that it is Hashem Who leads us and the entire world. We pray to Him, we long for His assistance, and also thank Him for the development of the vaccine that will aid us and the whole world, to continue *לְתַקֵּן עוֹלָם בְּמַלְכוּת שְׁדֵי* (to perfect the world as the kingdom of *Shad-ai*) in good health and abundant joy.

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4 Indeed, the blessing recorded in *Shulḥan Arukh* for blood-letting ends with the words *כִּי רוֹפֵא חֲנָם אַתָּה* (as You are a free healer), nevertheless Rambam (*Hilkhot Tefilla* 6:3) already writes that one who prays for the sick may make requests *לְשׁוֹנוֹ* (in accordance with his ability), and certainly this applies when praying not in the framework of the *Shemona Esrei*. Since we are praying for the removal of a global pandemic and not just for personal healing, it is possible to attach the conclusion from the Blessing of Healing in the *Shemona Esrei*.