

Shiur Nonsense: Does One Who Can't Taste or Smell Recite Birchos Hanehenin?

*Adapted from a shiur by Dayan Yosef Greenwald*

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One of the lesser symptoms experienced by many COVID-19 patients, *lo aleinu*, is the loss of taste and smell. Would a person so afflicted be required to recite a *bracha rishonah* upon eating if he cannot detect the taste of the food? May he recite the *bracha* of *borei minei vesamim* if he cannot smell the spices?

The Gemara (Berachos 35a) famously states that *sevara* (logic) dictates that it is forbidden to derive benefit from this world without reciting a *bracha*. Rashi explains that it is logical that one must express gratitude to Hashem upon receiving *hana'ah* (benefit) from eating. One might argue that if a person does not derive any pleasure from the act of eating because he doesn't experience taste, he should not recite a *bracha*. But this is clearly not the case, as all agree that anyone who eats food must recite a *bracha*, whether he enjoys it or not. A person with an aversion to spinach who eats it for health reasons still recites the *bracha*. If so, we must explain what *bracha*-compelling *hana'ah* one derives from an eating experience devoid of pleasure.

The Gemara (Chulin 103b) says that food offers two types of *hana'ah*: *hana'as garon*, the benefit experienced in the mouth (taste), and *hana'as meiyayim*, the benefit experienced in the stomach (satiety). Which of these two benefits is the cause of the obligation to recite a *bracha rishonah* on food?

The Eglei Tal (*Tochen* 62) writes that it's clear that *hana'as meiyayim* creates the obligation. He adduces support for this from the fact that although the Gemara (Berachos 35b) says that one who drinks olive oil does not recite a *bracha*, the Rambam (*Hilchos Brachos* 8:2) states that he is only exempted from *ha'eitz* but would still recite *shehakol*. The reason, presumably, is that he has benefited in that he is full, i.e., *hana'as meiyayim*.

Another point in support of *bracha rishonah* being about *hana'as meiyayim* is the fact that the Gemara earlier suggested deriving the obligation of *bracha rishonah* from *birkas*

*hamazon*, where the obligation clearly hinges on satiation. But this creates a problem. If *hana'as meiayim* is determinative, why do spoiled foods and bad-tasting foods not require a *bracha*? Is there not still some *hana'as meiayim*? We must perforce qualify that the obligation does not stem solely from *hana'as meiayim*, but rather from *hana'as meiayim* that results from a *ma'asei achilah*, a normal act of eating. But if the food is inherently unpleasant to humans, like drinking olive oil, that is a lesser form of *ma'asei achilah* that would not, according to many opinions, require the regular specialized *bracha*, only the general *shehakol*. Swallowing medicine or an extremely bitter food would not warrant any *bracha rishonah*, because that is not considered a *ma'asei achilah* at all.

Conversely, one who adds an excessive amount of salt to his food such that he doesn't taste the food itself, would still recite a *bracha*, because this is considered a *ma'asei achilah*; the food is fine, he's just preventing himself from enjoying its taste.

This explains why most *poskim* say that intravenous feeding of a patient on Yom Kippur would not violate the prohibition of *achilah*, since the prohibition involves only an act that is classified as a *ma'asei achilah*, which IV feeding is not.

Thus it is clear that people who have lost their sense of taste must still recite a *bracha* when eating, because it is still a *ma'asei achilah* and *hana'as meiayim* is still received.

With regard to *borei minei vesamim*, though, it seems clear that one cannot make a *bracha* on a smell he cannot sense. For this reason, such a person should not recite *borei minei vesamim* on behalf of his family during *havdalah* on *motza'ei Shabbos*, as he cannot satisfy others' obligations when he cannot fulfill his own. Rather, another household member should recite it. (See Shulchan Aruch O.C. 297:5 and Mishnah Berurah there.)

Strangely, the Gemara (Berachos 43b) offers a separate source for the requirement of *brachos* on fragrances. The Tzlach and R' Elazar Moshe Horowitz ask: Given that the Gemara already sourced the prohibition to derive benefit from this world without a *bracha*, wouldn't that encompass

smells, too?

They answer that the Gemara (Pesachim 26a) says that *me'ilah* (misappropriation of items consecrated to the *Bais Hamikdash*) by means of hearing, seeing, or smelling is not included in the prohibition. Although people might pay a lot of money to see a great painting or hear a great singer, *me'ilah* doesn't enjoin *hana'ah* from intangibles; one must actually take and benefit from an object in order to violate *me'ilah*. Similarly, the prohibition to benefit from this world without reciting a *bracha* applies only to taking a physical object and benefiting from it, and smelling an item is not "taking" it from Hashem.

May we merit to experience the *bracha* of the *pasuk*, "Taste and see that Hashem is good (Tehillim 34:9)."