

BIRKAS HAGOMEL: BENEDICTION AFTER AFFLICTION

Should a recovered COVID-19 patient *bentch gomel*?

Adapted from the writings of Dayan Yitzhak Grossman

The Gemara states: "Four must offer thanks to Hashem." One of these is "one who was ill and recovered." [1]

These thanks take the form of a *korban todah*, but in the absence of the *Bais Hamikdash*, Chazal instituted *birkas hagomel* in lieu of the *korban*. [2]

There are three opinions among the *Rishonim* as to what level of illness is sufficient to trigger the obligation:

1. Even a mere headache or stomachache is sufficient. [3] (Later *poskim* do not accept this view.)
2. Only a more serious illness that causes one to take to his bed triggers the obligation. [4] This opinion is codified by the Mechaber [5] and is endorsed by a number of Ashkenazi *Acharonim* [6] and the Kaf Hachaim, who asserts that the (Sephardi) custom follows this view. [7]
3. Only a potentially fatal illness triggers the obligation. [8] The Rama cites this opinion and apparently endorses it, [9] and the Aruch Hashulchan asserts that the (Ashkenazi) custom follows this view. [10]

Many *Acharonim* rule that even according to the third view, one recites the bracha over any illness during which he took to his bed for more than three days. [11] Conversely, some apparently rule that even according to the second view, one does not recite the bracha unless he was bedridden for at least three days. [12] Others disagree. [13]

The *Acharonim* cite a ruling of the Maharil that one who suffered from *kadachas* (fever or ague) must *bentch gomel*. [14] But the Biur Halacha says that although according to the second view an ordinary fever is sufficient, according to the third view a life-threatening fever is required. [15]

In light of the above, it is obvious that one who recovers from a severe, life-threatening case of COVID-19 would recite the bracha. The halacha is less clear regarding one who recovers from a mild case: On the one hand, the patient was not in any actual danger, and some *Acharonim* rule that one who avoided a thrown stone or evaded enemy pursuit does not recite the bracha, as it is only recited upon the experience of actual danger and salvation and not when the danger was avoided. [16] Other *Acharonim*, however, apparently disagree, ruling that *hagomel* is indeed recited by one who escapes potentially lethal injury when a falling rock narrowly misses him. [17] Similarly, some *poskim* assert that walking under a dangerously leaning wall would have obligated one in the bracha were it not for the fact that the event is transient and brief. [18] Moreover, in our case the patient actually did suffer from COVID-19, an inherently deadly disease, and his condition could have deteriorated, so perhaps he does recite the bracha [19].

If a relatively mild case of COVID-19 is not considered a potentially fatal illness, then if the patient was bedridden for more than three days, he

would nevertheless recite the bracha according to the second view above—and according to many *Acharonim* even according to the third. If he was bedridden for less than three days, he would definitely not recite it according to the third view, and *poskim* debate whether he would recite it according to the second view.[20] If he was not bedridden, all would agree that he would not *bentch gomel* (assuming we do not automatically consider any COVID-19 infection to be potentially lethal).[21]
 May Hashem send *refu'os veeshu'os* to all *cholei amo Yisrael*.

[1] *Berachos* 54b.

[2] See *Piskei HaRosh* *ibid.* 9:3

[3] *Sefer Ha'aruch*, as understood by *Rosh* *ibid.* and *Tur Orach Chaim* end of *siman* 219; *Ramban* in *Toras Ha'adam Sha'ar Hahoda'ah*; and possibly *Rambam*, as understood by *Tur* *ibid.* (but see *Bais Yosef* and *Bach* *ibid.*).

[4] *R' Yosef*, cited by *Rosh* and *Tur* *ibid.* (and cf. *Eliyah Rabbah* *ibid.* s.k. 13; *Ma'amar Mordechai* *ibid.* s.k. 9).

[5] *Shulchan Aruch* *ibid.* 219:8.

[6] *Shu"t Radvaz cheilek 3 siman* 1001 (572); *Bach* at the very end of *siman* 219 (and see *Magen Avraham* s.k. 8); *Eliyah Rabbah* *ibid.*; *Magen Giborim* *ibid.* s.k. 14. Cf. *Mishnah Berurah* *ibid.* s.k. 28.

[7] *Kaf Hachaim* *ibid.* s.k. 44

[8] *Ra'avad*, cited by *Toras Ha'adam* and *Tur* *ibid.*

[9] *Shulchan Aruch* *ibid.*

[10] *Aruch Ha'Shulchan* *ibid.* 219:11

[11] *Taz* *ibid.* s.k. 5, cited by *Eliyah Rabbah*, *Magen Giborim*, and *Aruch Hashulchan* *ibid.* *Biur Halacha* s.v. *k'gon*, however, is uncertain about this.

[12] *Chayei Adam Klal* 65 *se'if* 6, cited by *Mishnah Berurah* *ibid.*; *Ben Ish Chai*, *Shanah 1 Eikev* os 7; and cf. *Biur Halacha* *ibid.*

[13] *Kaf Hachaim* *ibid.* s.k. 46; *Or L'Tzion cheilek 2 perek* 14 *teshuvah* 44; *Yalkut Yosef* 219:23.

[14] *Sefer Maharil, Hilchos Krias HaTorah*, cited by *Eliyah Rabbah* and *Magen Giborim* *ibid.*

[15] *Biur Halacha* *ibid.*

[16] *Maharal* in *Nesivos Olam, Nesiv Ha'avodah* ch. 13, and cf. *R' Doniel Neustadt, The Blessing Of Ha-Gomel, The Daily Halachah Discussion*, pp. 106-107. I do not

understand the distinctions that they make. Cf. *Radvaz* *ibid.* (citing *R' Avraham Av Beis Din*).

[17] *Chayei Adam* *ibid.* *Se'if* 4. Cf. *Shu"t Divrei Nechemia Orach Chaim siman* 14, mentioned (briefly) by *S'dei Chemed* (Vol. 5) *Asifas Dinim, Ma'areches Berachos siman* 2 os 14 and *Kaf Hachaim* *ibid.* s.k. 10.

[18] *Abudraham, Hilchos Berachos Sha'ar* 9, cited in *Eliyah Rabbah* *ibid.* Cf. *Shu"t Sheivet HaLevi cheilek 9 siman* 45.

[19] In a personal communication, *R' Doniel Neustadt* wrote: "It's poshut to

me that one who has a mild case does not recite hagomel, since the vast majority of people who contract Covid recover easily and without any danger. So in most cases it's merely a nuisance...in which there is a clear minhag that we do not recite hagomel."

The halacha may ultimately hinge on the infection fatality rate (IFR), as opposed to the case fatality rate (CFR), of the disease, a figure that has not yet been established with confidence. For a detailed exploration of this issue,

see <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus#what-do-we-know-about-the-risk-of-dying-from-covid-19>.

[20]The strict view is the position of Halacha Yomit - Halacha *L'Yom Sheini* 5 Nissan [5]780 (retrieved 21:36, Apr 20, 2020). Cf. R' Noam Dvir Meisels, *Ha'im Choleh Corona Shehechelim Tzarich L'varech Hagomel*.

[21] R' Chaim Kanievsky was reported to have ruled that a survivor of COVID-19 should recite the bracha only if his life was in danger. (I am indebted to my wife for bringing this to my attention.)