



# *A Spring Blessing*

## *The Berachah on Blossoming Trees*

By Moshe Bleich and Chaya Devora Hammer

One of the loveliest but least observed *mitzvot* of the springtime is *birkat ilanot*, the blessing on the trees.<sup>1</sup> The source for the *mitzvah* is a *gemara* in *Masechet Berachot* 43b, which states: “A person who goes out during the days of Nisan and sees trees in bloom, says, *Blessed are you Lord our God, King of the Universe, Who did not leave anything lacking in His universe, and created in it good creatures and good trees, to give pleasure to humankind with them.*”

**T**he Gemara raises a number of intriguing questions. Does the *mitzvah* only apply in Nisan, or can you say it anytime you see trees in bloom? Is it enough to see merely one tree in bloom or must you see many

---

*Rabbi Bleich, a graduate of Beth Medrash Gavoha, Lakewood, and the Mir Yeshivas of both New York and Jerusalem, is on the editorial board of Machon Mishnat Rav Aharon. Chaya Devora Hammer is a tax attorney. They are married and live in Silver Spring, Maryland.*

trees? What types of trees are worthy of the blessing? Why does the blessing mention good creatures as well as good trees? And how is the statement, “Who did not leave anything lacking in His universe,” connected to the other themes of the blessing?

### *When Do We Say the Blessing?*

The Gemara states that a person says the blessing when seeing blooming trees during the month of Nisan. But say you live in Vermont, and the trees

only begin to bloom much later in the year? Or what if you live in Australia when the trees bloom at exactly the opposite time of year, when it is autumn in the Northern Hemisphere?

The *acharonim* disagree over whether the blessing may only be said during Nisan. The *Mishnah Berurah*<sup>2</sup> notes that in warm climates, trees tend to bloom during Nisan, but that the blessing is not intrinsically related to Nisan. Consequently, he maintains that a person should say the blessing whenever the blooming occurs.

In contrast to the *Mishnah*

*Berurah*, the *Kaf HaChaim*<sup>3</sup> decides that the Gemara's use of the word Nisan *does* have halachic significance. Basing his opinion on the language of the Gemara and conflicting prior authorities, the *Kaf HaChaim* rules that the full blessing should be said only if one sees a blooming tree in Nisan. He adds that if one can only find a blooming tree after Nisan is over, the words of the blessing should be recited without mentioning the Divine name.<sup>4</sup>

A novel intermediary position is held by the *Chatam Sofer*<sup>5</sup> who states that he has a tradition from his teacher that the Gemara's phrase "the days of Nisan" (*yemei Nisan*) actually refers to the Nisan season (*tekufat Nisan*), which extends into part of the month of Iyar. While this opinion might allow people to say the *birkat ilanot* in Vermont, for example, it wouldn't permit the *berachah* to be said in Australia, where the spring begins around Tishrei time!

Contemporary authorities, such as Dayan Weiss<sup>6</sup> and Rabbi Eliezer Waldenberg,<sup>7</sup> who have written extensively on this issue, conclude that it is permissible to recite the blessing during the spring in Australia. This is also the opinion of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef.<sup>8</sup> Rabbi Waldenberg points out that the general rule is that the *birkat ilanot* should only be said once a year.<sup>9</sup> He emphasizes that the rule applies even if a person happens to be in both the Northern and Southern Hemispheres during their successive springs in one year.<sup>10</sup>

The *Birkei Yosef*,<sup>11</sup> on the other hand, says that according to the "*derech haemet* [the kabbalistic tradition] the blessing belongs only in the days of Nisan." Indeed, there is something special about springtime in the Northern Hemisphere. Have you ever wondered why such a large proportion of Orthodox weddings take place in the summer? After all, unlike other people, most *frum* couples do not lengthen their engagements in order to get married during the summer months. If you assume that people start dating on a random basis throughout the year, how

is it possible that so many people manage their affairs of the heart so that they get engaged in the spring and married in the summer?

Perhaps it is because of the effect the change of seasons has on human physiology. In the springtime, the increasing amount of light and warmth—when both were severely rationed for many months—has a miraculous effect on the whole human being. This is experienced especially by those who live in places where spring follows a long, hard winter. In contrast,



people who dwell in the more temperate climates in the Southern Hemisphere do not necessarily undergo this annual transformation.

Relationships, like living organisms, enjoy the transformation that takes place in spring. What seemed distant and difficult to achieve during the winter months is, in the spring, more readily attainable. Perhaps this is why there are proportionately more Orthodox weddings in the summer in the Northern Hemisphere than in the Southern Hemisphere. In the same vein, while according to most authorities it is permissible to recite the *birkat ilanot* in Tishrei in Australia or South Africa, there is certainly *emet* to the kabbalistic tradition that the blessing belongs in Nisan. Only in those places where there has been a freezing, dark Shevat can a person truly appreciate the warmth and light of Nisan.

## How Many Trees Are Required?

The rabbis discuss whether it is significant that the plural form (*trees*) is used in the Gemara. While Rambam doesn't discuss the question directly, in describing the *mitzvah*,<sup>12</sup> he states that one should make a blessing when going out to the fields or gardens, and seeing blossoming *trees*. The *Halachot Ketanot*<sup>13</sup> infers from the language of the Rambam that in order to be obligated in the blessing, there must be "*ribui ilanot*," a multitude of trees.

The *Kaf HaChaim*<sup>14</sup> requires that, at a minimum, a person needs to see two trees in order to say the blessing, but *lechatchila* (a priori) it is better to go to a place that has *ribui ilanot*. However, other authorities maintain that it is enough to see one tree to make the blessing.<sup>15</sup> Rabbi Sternbuch states that one should go into a field to say the blessing to inspire within oneself feelings of thanksgiving to Hashem, as a field full of newly blossoming trees tends to have a special effect on the observer. He adds that although it is not necessary to go to a place with a profusion of trees to recite the blessing, it is the ideal way to perform the obligation (*mitzvah min hamuvchar*). Rabbi Sternbuch describes seeing school children in Jerusalem visiting gardens in order to make the blessing together. He finds this custom—which teaches young people that all of creation is the handiwork of Hashem—very beautiful.<sup>16,17</sup> Educators should take Rabbi Sternbuch's words to heart and take their students to orchards or similar places during Nisan, thereby integrating lessons about nature with an appreciation of the Creator.

## What Kind of Tree?

According to Rabbi Yaakov Emden, all blossoming trees are worthy of the *birkat ilanot* even if they bear no fruit and are not sweet smelling. This is because a person is joyous upon seeing

any kind of blossoming tree.<sup>18</sup>

However, the consensus of the authorities is that only productive fruit trees warrant a blessing because only they are called “good trees,” which is the language in the blessing.<sup>19</sup>

## “Good Trees and Good Creatures”

Why does the blessing praise creatures as well as trees? Drawing upon the well-known phrase, “*Ki ha’adam eitz hasadeh*, Man is the tree of the field,”<sup>20</sup> the *Ben Ish Chai* provides the following answer: Similar to the tree, which was once dry and withered and has now come into full bloom, even the hopeless person can be rejuvenated. Watching the transformation of nature can provide us with the courage and inspiration to lift us out of our despair, and remind us that Hashem has given us the tools to revitalize ourselves.<sup>21</sup>

In the spirit of the *Ben Ish Chai*, the *Ehya Rabba*<sup>22</sup> states that those who are careful to make this blessing merit receiving the *berachah* of Yitzchak to Yaakov. In *Parashat Toledot*, the giving of the *berachah* is described as follows: *And his father Yitzchak said to him, “Come near, and kiss me, my son.” And he stepped near and kissed him and he smelled the scent of his garments, and blessed him and said, “Behold the scent of my son is like the scent of the field which God has blessed.”*<sup>23</sup>

Rashi comments on this *pasuk*, “Surely there is no more offensive smell than that of washed goat skins! But this teaches us that the perfume of Gan Eden entered [the room with Yaakov].”<sup>24</sup> Rashi further explains that the “scent of the field” which Yitzchak sensed on Yaakov was the scent of a field of apple trees.<sup>25, 26</sup>

From here we see Hashem’s power of transformation: Just as a terrible stench is turned into a Divine fragrance, and a dry and barren tree in Kislev gives forth an abundance of flowers in Nisan, humans, full of shame and guilt, can become, through their efforts, “white like snow.”<sup>27</sup>

## “Who Left Nothing Lacking in His World”

Finally, there are various questions surrounding the first phrase of the blessing: “*Shelo chisar b’olamo kelum*,<sup>28</sup> Who left nothing lacking in His world.” Why is it used as a preface to the blessing? And how is it connected to the other themes of the blessing?

The word “*chisar*” can be translated as “to subtract, cause loss or lessen.” The phrase can therefore be translated as “Who did not subtract from or cause loss of anything from His world.” It is hard to tell whether the phrase is referring to the acts of Creation, where nothing was omitted, or whether it is describing the world as it unfolds daily. Of course, the blessing may be speaking of both. When the world was created it was perfect and lacked nothing. Additionally, Hashem “*mechadeish betuvo bechol yom tamid ma’aseih bereishit*, renews in His goodness every day, eternally, the acts of Creation.” Both at the conclusion of the Creation, and at every moment since then, the blessing tells us, God has caused nothing to be lost from the world.<sup>29</sup>

For the Jewish people, whose scars from losses are continually reopened, this is a very difficult phrase to understand. Is it true that after every mass murder and atrocity against the Jewish people and the Torah, the world is not lessened in any way?

And yet, even as we bear the burdens of our people’s and our own losses, when we go out into the fields and see the first blossoming trees, we are filled with spontaneous awe and gratitude. God has sent us spring again, the earth has completed its full cycle, “...*lo chisar b’olamo kelum*.” With the gifts of the springtime, we are able to believe that this world is lacking nothing, and that this is as true today as it was at Creation. God shows us through the medium of the seasons that life springs up over all deaths, and after every destruction there is a renewal—in the individual, in the community and in the world which sustains us. 

*This article is written in memory of Michoel ben Yaakov Yitzhak, HY”D (1924-1944), and in honor of the opsheren of Menahem Tsvi Mikhael, the authors’ son, shelo chisar b’olamo kelum.*

### Notes

1. The *Aruch HaShulchan* laments that people in his time were lax in the performance of this *mitzvah* and notes that God-fearing people are meticulous in its performance. OC 226:2.
2. OC 226:1.
3. Ibid.
4. This is because of the principle of *safek berachah l’kula*, that is, when a person is in doubt as to whether a blessing should be recited, the blessing should not be recited to prevent the Divine name from being uttered in vain.
5. *Hagahot Chatam Sofer*, OC 226. See also Rabbi Yechiel A. Zilber, *Birur Halachah*, vol. 2 (B’nai Brak, 5736), 208.
6. *Minchat Yitzchak*, vol. 10:16.
7. *Tzitz Eliezer*, vol. 12:20.
8. *Yechave Da’at* 1:1. See also *Birur Halachah* op. cit. fn 4 pp. 207-208.
9. *Shulchan Aruch*, OC 226:1. The *Mishnah Berurah*, OC 226:5, notes that the blessing can be recited even in the event that a person has previously seen blooming trees but failed to recite the blessing. However, there are authorities who maintain that the blessing must be recited the first time blossoming trees are seen. For an extensive discussion, see *Birur Halachah* op. cit. fn. 4 pp. 208-209.
10. See also Rav Shlomo Zalman Braun, *Shearim Metzuyananim B’Halachah* 60:1.
11. OC 226:2. Cf., Rabbi Eliezer Waldenberg, *Tzitz Eliezer*, vol. 12 no. 20:3 notes that there is controversy even amongst kabbalists whether or not the blessing is intrinsically related to Nisan.
12. Rambam, *Hilchot Berachot* 10:13.
13. *Teshuvot Halachot Ketanot* 2:28.
14. OC 226:2, see also Maharsham, *Da’at Torah*, OC 226:1 and *Tzitz Eliezer*, vol. 20 no. 20:7.
15. Rabbi Avraham Chaim Naeh, *K’zot HaShulchan* 66, *Badei*