

## *Do You Smell That?*

Continuing our exploration of *Hilchos Brachos* in the setting of sensory deficits or disturbances, this week's essay will discuss whether a person with an impaired or absent sense of smell may recite *Birchos haRei'ach*. This question occurs most frequently in the context of the *Bracha* on *Besamim* in *Havdala*.

This is a surprisingly common issue. As many as one to two percent of North Americans suffer from impaired or complete loss of the sense of smell. Many people with smell disorders also have problems with their sense of taste. These disorders range from parosmia (a distortion of normal smell, such as when something with a pleasant odor smells foul) to hypo- or anosmia (a reduced ability or complete inability to detect odors) to phantosmia (smelling odors that aren't present).<sup>1</sup>

There are many causes of smell disorders, although the most common etiologies include nasal congestion, aging, sinus and other upper respiratory infections, smoking, and head injuries. Other causes include medications, neurologic disorders (e.g., Parkinson's or Alzheimer's disease), head and neck cancer (or radiation for treatment of these cancers), and COVID-19 infection, of course.

The *Terumos haDeshen* (*Pesakim* 204) discusses *Birchos haRei'ach* for a person with an impaired sense of smell:

*[Regarding] the Minhag that the Shliach Tzibur recites the Bracha on the Besamim in Shul and then recites the Bracha again for his household; [you asked] why is it any different than a person who cannot smell who may not be Motzi his household, according to Rabbenu Ephraim?*

*You did not examine this question carefully at all. The Shliach Tzibur, though he recites the Bracha on the Besamim in the Shul, may [nevertheless] recite it for himself again in his house **because it is a Birchas haNehenin. Who can prevent him [even] from reciting a Bracha on Besamim during the week if he wishes?** Therefore, he can also be Motzi others.*

*This is not the case with a person who cannot smell. **He may not recite a Bracha for himself at all because he derives no Hana'ah.** Nevertheless, if this Bracha was a Mitzva and an obligation upon his household like Kiddush and Havdala, he could be Motzi them...*

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/smell-disorders>.

In other words, a person whose sense of smell is not impaired may repeat the Bracha on *Besamim* at home because it is a *Birchas haNehenin* and is recited each time he derives *Hana'ah*. This is even true on a weekday. However, a person who cannot smell cannot recite the Bracha at all because he derives no *Hana'ah*. This Halacha is codified by the *Shulchan Aruch* (O.C. 297:5).

This does not only apply to somebody with permanent anosmia (loss of smell) but also to a person with a temporary condition, perhaps from a common cold or coronavirus (*Kaf haChaim*). Since, as stated above, *Birchos haRei'ach* are *Birchos haNehenin*, one simply cannot recite a Bracha without deriving *Hana'ah*. It would be akin to reciting *Birchos haR'iya* with one's eyes closed!

As noted above, people can also suffer from partial loss of smell. A person in this condition may be unsure whether he will be able to smell the *Besamim* and concerned about making a *Bracha Levatala*.

The Poskim state that a person may sniff the *Besamim* before the *Bracha* to determine whether he can smell them.<sup>2</sup> Though it is generally forbidden to derive *Hana'ah* before reciting a Bracha, smelling something momentarily is akin to a small taste of food to see whether it is tasty, which does not necessitate a Bracha (R' Chaim Pinchas Scheinberg *zt"l*, based on *Shulchan Aruch*, 210:2).

The Halacha is clear: a person may **not** recite *Birchos haRei'ach* for himself if he cannot smell. However, the Halacha is more complex when it comes to being *Motzi* others.

The *Terumos haDeshen* quoted above stated that although a person who cannot smell may not recite a *Birchas haRei'ach* for himself, "nevertheless, if this Bracha was a *Mitzva* and an obligation upon his household like *Kiddush* and *Havdala*, he could be *Motzi* them..." This assertion (as the *Terumos haDeshen* himself notes) is disputed by *Rabbenu Ephraim*, also cited by the *Tur*:

*Rabbenu Ephraim also [rules] that a person who cannot smell [yet] recites a Bracha on Besamim has made a Bracha Levatala; he cannot even be Motzi his household. It cannot be compared to Kiddush, Havdala and the Bracha of Hamotzi of a Mitzva, which are obligatory, for this is merely a Minhag.*

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<sup>2</sup> see *Kaf haChaim* 216:3

The *Tur* (in the name of his father, the *Rosh*) sides with the *Terumos haDeshen*. This is also the position of the *Shulchan Aruch* (*ibid.*):

*A person who cannot smell does not recite a Bracha on the Besamim unless he intends to be Motzi the young members of his household who have reached the age of Chinuch or those who do not know [how to recite a blessing].*

The *Mishna Berura* points out that those who are being *Yotzei* the *Bracha* must smell the *Besamim* since the person reciting the *Bracha* cannot. If they fail to do so it will be a *Bracha Levatala*.<sup>3</sup> (Even if the person reciting the *Bracha* can smell the *Besamim* those being *Yotzei* with him should also smell them. However, if they fail to do so, it will not be a *Bracha Levatala*.)

Let us examine the *Terumos haDeshen's* ruling more closely. At first glance, his conclusion is puzzling. It is a *Birchas haNehenin*, so how can a person be *Motzi* others if he will not derive any *Hana'ah* himself? If a person is not eating, he cannot be *Motzi* others in the *Bracha* of *haMotzi* (*Shulchan Aruch*, 167:19)<sup>4</sup> – why should *Birchos haRei'ach* be any different?

The answer can be found in the words of the *Terumos haDeshen* himself. While he states explicitly that the *Bracha* on the *Besamim* of *Havdala* is a *Birchas haNehenin* (which is why the *Shliach Tzibur* is allowed to recite the *Bracha* a second time when he returns home and why a person who cannot smell cannot recite it for himself), nevertheless, since it is a "*Chova*" (an obligation) he can be *Motzi* others even though he does not derive any *Hana'ah*.

This is a *Chidush* in an important principle in Halacha. Generally, if something is a *Chova* a person can be *Motzi* others even if he has already fulfilled his obligation. The *Terumos haDeshen's* ruling adds that if the *Chova* in question is a *Birchas haNehenin* a person can be *Motzi* others even if he derives no *Hana'ah*.

The basis for this principle is a concept called "*Arvus*" – responsibility for the *Mitzvos* of another Jew. If another Jew is yet to fulfill a *Mitzva*, every other Jew shares that responsibility, such that he can be *Motzi* him, even if he has already discharged or *can never have* his own obligation.

This is the point of contention between the *Terumos haDeshen* and *Rabbenu Ephraim*. According to *Rabbenu Ephraim*, since the *Bracha* on *Besamim* at *Havdala* is only a *Minhag* (and not a *Chova*) it is not included in the responsibility of *Arvus*.

<sup>3</sup> The *Poskim* discuss why the *Bracha* on the *Besamim* does not constitute a *Hefsek* between *Borei Pri haGafen* and drinking the wine, given that the *Bracha* serves no purpose for the person reciting it.

<sup>4</sup> As the *Mishna Berura* *ibid.* points out.

However, this is far from clear. Several Brachos are essentially a *Minhag*, but a person can be *Motzi* others in their recital, such as the Bracha at a *Bris Mila* (see *Y.D.* 261:1) and the Bracha on the *Karpas* at the Seder (see *O.C.* 484:4). Why should the Bracha of *Besamim* at Havdala be any different?

Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach *zt"l* answered that there is a difference between these various Brachos. The Brachos on a *Bris Mila* and *Karpas* were instituted as "Mitzvos". Therefore, though they are essentially *Minhagim*, they have a status of *Birchos haMitzvos*, thus one may be *Motzi* others due to *Arvus*. However, the *Besamim* at Havdala were instituted to relieve a person of distress over the departure of his *Neshama Yeseira* with the close of Shabbos. In other words, it was instituted specifically to grant a person *Hana'ah* to relieve him of his discomfort. If a person derives no *Hana'ah*, he has no connection to the Bracha at all.

R' Akiva Eiger makes an additional point. He contends that a person who cannot smell is *entirely not obligated in this Bracha*. Therefore, even if it would be considered an absolute *Chova*, he would not be able to be *Motzi* others. *Arvus* only applies in the case of a *Bracha* that he is obligated to recite, even if he is not currently obligated to recite it (i.e., as he has already fulfilled the Mitzva).

For this reason, the Poskim conclude that a person who cannot smell cannot be *Motzi* anyone other than his young children. Since he is obligated in their *Chinuch*, he does have a *Chova* in this Bracha. However, he should not be *Motzi* an adult since he is not considered a *Mechuyav baDavar* in any sense.