



Sense-Less Brachos

Many Halachic issues are impacted by disturbances of any of the five senses – vision, hearing, taste, smell, and touch. Impaired vision or hearing raises fundamental questions about the Mitzva obligations of the blind, deaf, and mute, and the nature of “*Da’as*” – the requisite intellect to perform Halachically significant and binding acts and to be *Motzi* others in Mitzvos. This essay – and the several that will follow – will focus on some of the practical issues that arise in the context of various sensory deficits. We will also discuss impaired taste and smell, which was a prominent feature of the original strain of COVID-19 (but some affected people continue to experience chronic impairments).

The first question is a simple one: If a person cannot taste his food should he recite *Birchos haNehenin* – both *Bracha Rishona* and *Acharona*?

Inability to taste food can be the result of several things:

1. Temporary or permanent damage to the sense of taste.
2. Patients who are unable to meet their nutritional requirements through normal eating may require formula feeding via nasogastric tube (a tube through the nasal cavity into the stomach or small bowel) or gastrostomy, duodenostomy, or jejunostomy (a direct portal into the gastrointestinal tract through the abdominal wall). Obviously, food ingested this way does not generate taste.
3. The food is wrapped in a capsule.

Birchas haMazon, as is well-known, is only a *Mitzva Min haTorah* when a person is satiated (*Brachos* 20b). However, there is a *Mitzva mi’d’Rabbanan* if he ingests a *Kezayis* (this is the view of R’ Meir¹) within the time of *k’Dei Achilas Pras*. According to the *Magen Avraham* (*O.C.* 210:1), if a person reaches satiety with less than a *Kezayis* (or more a *Kezayis* in more than *k’Dei Achilas Pras*) thus fulfilling the *d’Oraisa* requirement of “*Sevi’a*” but not the *d’Rabbanan* criterion of “*Achila*”², he may not *Bentch*. Many Poskim disagree with the *Magen Avraham*.

A similar question is discussed by the *Panim Me’iros* 2:27 (cited by the *Birkei Yosef* 208). If a person ate a *Kezayis* but then vomited, should he *Bentch*? On the one hand, he clearly fulfilled the requirement of eating a *Kezayis*, but, on the other hand, he was certainly not satiated. The *Panim Me’iros* ruled that since the Torah only obligates a person in *Birchas haMazon* if he is satiated, it is unlikely that the *Chachamim* would institute its recitation when he is not satiated at all (as they wouldn’t completely

¹ R’ Yehuda holds the minimum *Shiur* is a *k’Beitza* (see *Brachos* 49b).

² As it is not considered *Achila* if it takes longer than *k’Dei Achilas Pras*

abandon the parameters of the Torah obligation). Therefore, although if he ate as little as a *Kezayis* he does say *Birchas haMazon* (as there is a small amount of satiation from that), he cannot do so if he vomited as he has no satiation at all.

The *Panim Me'iros* would also dispute the *Magen Avraham's* ruling. Since the *Chachamim* did not completely abandon the Torah's parameters for *Birchas haMazon*, they would certainly say that somebody should *Bentch* if he was satiated.

In a previous essay³, we discussed an important ramification of this question. If a person is satiated after eating less than a *Kezayis* should he *Bentch*? Of course, it is highly unusual that a person would be satiated from such a small amount but in recent years this question has become relevant in cases of bariatric surgery. For a period of time following the surgery, the person usually finds that his appetite is greatly affected, and a very small amount of food makes him feel satiated. Would we say that according to the *Poskim* who disagreed with the *Magen Avraham*, he should *Bentch* on less than a *Kezayis*?

A similar question is discussed by the *Sha'arei Teshuva* (O.C. 193:8). He cites a ruling of the *Radva"z* that sick people or the elderly who feel satiated after eating merely a *Kezayis* are obligated in *Birchas haMazon* by Torah law (and not merely *mi'd'Rabbanan*). Though the majority of people would not be satiated by such a small amount, a person's obligation to recite *Birchas haMazon* depends on the amount that makes him satiated.

At first glance, the same reasoning could be applied to a person who is satiated by less than a *Kezayis* – his obligation to say *Birchas haMazon* should depend on what makes him satiated. However, it is noticeable that the *Poskim* only discussed cases where a person ate a full *Kezayis* (but vomited it or ate it in longer than *k'Dei Achilas Pras*) or if he was satiated by only a *Kezayis*. They did not rule on a case of a person who was satiated by less than a *Kezayis*.

Rav Moshe Feinstein *zt"l* (*Igros Moshe*, O.C. 72) explains that while the Gemara does say that one is not obligated *Min haTorah* to say *Birchas haMazon* unless one is satiated (as the Pasuk says "and you will be **satisfied**"), the Torah does also say "and you will **eat**". This means that one must have permitted an "act of eating" to be obligated in *Birchas haMazon* (just that the act of eating has to bring a person to satiation). The *Poskim* did not entertain the possibility that one would need to say *Birchas haMazon* on less than a *Kezayis*, as eating less than a *Kezayis* is not considered an act of eating. It follows that a patient recovering from bariatric surgery would not be obligated in *Birchas haMazon* for eating less than a *Kezayis* – even if he feels satiated.

³ Ekev 5779

Returning to the person who has lost the sense of taste, his ability to feel satiated is surely unaffected. Does his inability to taste food mean that he cannot perform a *Ma'ase Achila* (an act of eating)? As explained above, according to Rav Moshe Feinstein, the obligation *Min haTorah* requires a *Ma'ase Achila*, not just satiation.

An even more pertinent question is whether he should recite a *Bracha Rishona*. Reciting a Bracha before eating does not just depend on whether it is a *Ma'ase Achila*, but perhaps it also requires *Hana'ah* (benefit). If a person cannot taste his food, maybe he should not be considered to have derived *Hana'ah*.

We have previously discussed a similar question.⁴ As mentioned above, patients who are unable to meet their nutritional requirements through normal eating often require tube feeding. Does ingesting food in this manner require a Bracha Rishona or Acharona?

Birchos haNehenin, as their name suggests, are recited on the benefit and enjoyment (*Hana'ah*) man has from food or drink. If he has no *Hana'ah*, he recites no Bracha. If he eats something that is damaging to his health but which he nonetheless enjoys, he recites a Bracha (see *Brachos* 35b-36a and *Shulchan Aruch, O.C.* 202:4-8).

However, we must clarify which *Hana'ah* we are referring to – the enjoyment felt when the food passes through the palate or throat (*Hana'as haCheich* or *Hana'as Grono*) or the satisfaction of the intestines (*Hana'as Mei'av*)? With regard to *Isurei Hana'ah* (items from which the Torah forbade any benefit), this question is subject to a dispute between *R' Yochanan* and *Resh Lakish* (*Chulin* 103b). The Halacha is that even *Hana'as Grono* is forbidden (see *Rambam, Hilchos Ma'achalos Asuros* 14:3). Therefore, if a person eats half a *Kezayis* of a prohibited item and then vomits and eats that same half-*Kezayis* again, he is liable. Since he experienced *Hana'as Grono* of a full *Kezayis* – even though his stomach did not experience the satiation of a *Kezayis* (and it cannot be considered *Hana'as Mei'av*) – he is liable for transgressing a prohibition.

Regarding *Birchos haNehenin*, this is a matter of dispute among the Poskim. According to the *Panim Meiros* (2:27), since the *Chachamim* based the parameters of *Birchos haNehenin* on the Pasuk of *v'Achalta v'Savata* – “and you shall eat and be satisfied”, there must be *Hana'as Mei'av* in order to be obligated to recite a Bracha.

The *Beis Yosef* (*O.C.* 210) cites the *Sefer Ohel Moed* (*Sha'ar haBrachos* 1:4) who as ruling that if a woman tastes food she is cooking and then spits it out, she needn't recite a Bracha. However, if she tastes as much as a *Revi'is* then she must recite a Bracha even if she doesn't swallow any of it, because when she tastes this volume of food, **she**

⁴ See *Ekev* 5780.

would certainly have experienced *Hana'as haCheich*. The *Beis Yosef*, who holds like the *Panim Meiros*, disagrees.

The *Chelkas Yaakov* (3:52) rules like the *Sefer Ohel Moed*. He cites proof from *Tosfos* in *Brachos* (36a) who contend that if a person drinks liquids that are good for him and quench his thirst or if he eats certain foods for medical reasons but he doesn't enjoy them,⁵ he needn't recite a Bracha. The *Minchas Chinuch* (313) and *Maharam Shik* (O.C. 250) hold that both *Hana'as Grono* and *Hana'as Mei'av* are required in order to recite a Bracha.⁶

A practical Halacha that depends on whether the obligation stems from *Hana'as Grono* or *Hana'as Mei'av* is whether a person must recite a Bracha if he swallows food that is encapsulated in a wrapper that will dissolve in his stomach or intestines (i.e. he will not taste the food). He certainly has no *Hana'as Grono*, but since he does enjoy the nutritional benefit of the food, there is *Hana'as Mei'av*. The Poskim maintain that since the matter is subject to dispute, he should not recite a Bracha in this case ("*Safek Brachos l'Hakel*") but he should make a Bracha⁷ on another item in order to cover this food too.⁸

Returning to our original question, at first glance, tube feeding would seem to be a classic example of *Hana'as Mei'av* without *Hana'as Grono*. However, there is a significant difference in that it does not comprise a normal act of eating as the food bypasses the mouth entirely. Perhaps, given that this form of satiation is completely divorced from eating in a regular sense, it wouldn't require a Bracha at all.⁹ This is the *Psak* of the *Chelkas Yaakov* (3:52), who argues that it is no different than intravenous fluids for which one certainly does not recite a Bracha. (In truth, one could argue that there is more reason to make a Bracha in a case where food is introduced to the stomach and does produce a feeling of satisfaction, than in a case of intravenous fluids which do not.) This was also the conclusion of Rav Elyashiv *zt"l* (cited in *Vezos haBracha* p113). The *Chelkas Yaakov* adds that even if one would not make a Bracha, if one wishes to thank Hashem he should recite a Tefila or some Tehilim.

The *Minchas Yitzchak* (3:18) cites the *Levushei Mordechai* who disagreed. He ruled that a *Y'rei Shamayim* who is being fed by tube should try to find somebody who

⁵ In other words, he doesn't have *Hana'as haCheich* or *Hana'as Grono*.

⁶ Regarding *Birchas haMazon*, everyone would likely agree that *Hana'as Mei'av* is the deciding factor as the Mitzva is clearly derived from the words "*v'Achalta v'Savata uVeirachta*" (*Eglei Tal, Tochen* 62). See also the *Aruch haShulchan* (Y.D. 85:9-13) regarding *Birchas haMazon*.

⁷ He should choose an item that requires the Bracha of *Shehakol* even if the food inside its wrapping usually requires a different Bracha because it is being eaten in an unusual manner which relegates its Bracha to *Shehakol*.

⁸ The same applies if a person drinks an alcoholic beverage solely to become intoxicated and not because he likes its taste (see *Ben Ish Chai, Parshas Naso* 6).

⁹In fact, according to the *Achiezer* (3:61), eating in this fashion is not a violation of Yom Kippur.

is eating at that time to be *Motzi* him with his own *Birchas haNehenin*. Though we are no longer accustomed to being *Motzi* others with *Bracha Rishona*, in this case, which is clearly *Sha'as haDechak*, it is permitted.

Compared to tube feeding, a person who eats in a regular manner but does not taste his food would appear to have a greater obligation to recite *Birchas haNehenin*. Those who hold that the obligation is triggered by *Hana'as Mei'ayim* would certainly rule that he is obligated. Those who hold that it is dependent upon *Hana'as Grono* would likely agree that since he is eating food that has taste (as opposed to a "*Ma'achal Pagum*" – a food that has been rendered inedible) in a normal manner, he is obligated to recite a Bracha despite the fact that another factor prevents him from tasting it.

HaGaon Rav Asher Weiss *Shlit"a* asserts in several places (e.g., *Minchas Asher* - Corona p274) that this question in fact has nothing to do with the *Machlokes* of *Hana'as Mei'ayim* versus *Hana'as Grono*. He explains that a *Ma'ase Achila* has three components:

1. *Ma'ase Achila*, defined as swallowing the food normally, which does not occur with tube feeding but does when a person who has lost his sense of taste eats or drinks.
2. *Hana'as Achila* (the benefit derived from eating), which is, as stated, subject to a *Machlokes Amora'im*. This does not refer to the pleasure of tasting the food, but to a feeling of satiation, either that of the stomach or that of the palate (which exists even if somebody cannot taste the food).
3. *Derech Achila* (the manner of eating), defined as eating in a manner that allows a person to experience and enjoy the taste of the food. If a person wraps his food in a capsule (that prevents him from tasting it), it is not considered a normal *Derech Achila*. However, if he eats normally but cannot taste his food due to a medical condition, it does constitute *Derech Achila*.

Rav Asher added:

Truthfully, It would be extremely astonishing to say that a person who cannot taste his food due to illness would never recite a Bracha on his food all the days of his life. This righteous person who eats to satisfy himself¹⁰ should not thank Hashem for the food?!

¹⁰ c.f. *Mishlei* 13:25