

Is There a Blessing for God?

DANIEL REISEL

The Tractate of Brachot, the first tractate in the Babylonian Talmud, deals with blessings. There are blessings for everything in Judaism. For different types of food, for wine and bread, for significant moments in life, for festivals.

Brachot 7a asks the following, intriguing question: Is there a blessing for God? And if so, what kind of blessing would that be? What would it say? It's an odd question: After all, God is the *bestower* of blessings. But the Talmud does what it often does: it couches the question in the form of a story.

And so the story is told of Rabbi Yishmael ben Elisha. He was one of the last High Priests of the Second Temple, around the first century of the Common Era. Once a year, on Yom Kippur, the High Priest would enter into the Holy of Holies, into the very innermost chamber of the Temple, to offer the incense offering that only he could offer.

How must Rabbi Yishmael have felt? Uneasy? Worried? In awe? Perhaps the best way to think about it is to think how we all feel on Yom Kippur. When the singing is carrying us along. When we sing Avinu Malkeinu, at the end of the Neilah service, when the doors of Heaven are about to close, and we feel a sense of reverence as we stand in the presence of God.

So this is perhaps how Rabbi Yishmael felt as he entered the Holy of Holies. This is the story that the Talmud tells:

Talmud – Brachot 7a

It was taught: Rabbi Yishmael ben Elisha related, One time I entered the Holy of Holies to place incense in the innermost place and I saw God, the Lord of Hosts, sitting on a throne exalted and high. And God said: 'Yishmael, My son, bless Me.' And I responded, 'May it be Your will that Your capacity for mercy overwhelm Your capacity for anger, that Your capacity for mercy overshadow Your attributes, that You behave mercifully toward all Your children, and that, for their benefit, You go beyond the boundaries of judgment.' And God responded by nodding his head in assent.

תלמוד - ברכות דף ז.א.

תניא, אמר רבי ישמעאל בן אלישע: פעם אחת נכנסתי להקטיר קטורת לפני ולפנים, וראיתי אכתריאל יהוה צבאות שהוא יושב על כסא רם ונשא ואמר לי: ישמעאל בני, ברכני. אמרתי לו: יהי רצון מלפניך שיכבשו רחמיך את כעסך ויגולו רחמיך על מדותיך ותתנהג עם בניך במדת הרחמים ותכנס להם לפני משורת הדין, ונענע לי בראשו.

Now there are some texts that we read and that's it: we get it. This text I find that I go back to again and again, and I find it equally astonishing every time. It's a short piece, but it's very packed. It really consists of three parts. First God speaks to Rabbi Yishmael. Then there is Rabbi Yishmael's blessing. Finally there is God's response. Let's look at each part in turn.

God says: '*Yishmael, bni, borscheini* - Yishmael, my son, bless Me.' God is here asking a human being to bless Him. Why? Does God need our blessing? Does God need anything? Is there anything that we can provide that God lacks? The God we meet here does not seem like the God we know from elsewhere in the Bible or the Talmud. This doesn't seem like the God of the Ten Commandments, the God of 'thou shalt' and 'thou shalt not'. This is a different kind of God.

And what is Rabbi Yishmael's response? The blessing that Rabbi Yishmael composes is unexpected. It speaks about how God should let His capacity for mercy win over His capacity for anger. This word: *yichbosh* – to conquer: this is the language of conquest, of inner psychological struggle. What does it mean to live in a world with a God who is susceptible to inner psychological turmoil? This is not like Aristotelian theology. This is not God, unchanging and distant. This is a God with *kishkes*. And they are in turmoil.

And then, what to make of God's response? God nods His head, which Rashi says means that God is saying *Amen* to Rabbi Ishmael's prayer. There is no evidence here of the thunder that God shows when He rebukes Job from the Whirlwind. There is no '*Where were you* when I created the heavens and the earth?'. Instead there is just this silence, this acceptance. A silence that seems to tell us something important about God's character and also about the character of the relationship between Rabbi Yishmael and God. But what exactly does it tell us?

In preparation for today, reading and re-reading this story, I realised that, although I love it very much, I really have no idea what it means. I realised that what I loved about it was not so much the content but its form. Its gentleness. The gentleness of the exchange. The intimacy of the relationship between God and Rabbi Yishmael and what that means for our relationship to God. There is a vulnerability to God in this story. You just want to go over and give Him a hug.

What kind of God asks a human being to bless him? It's a God that has needs and isn't afraid to show it. And, conversely, what kind of religion conceives of man as having the power to bless God? It's a kind of religion that conceives of man as having reached a certain kind of maturity, of moral maturity.

And it is this maturity I would like to focus on. The relationship between Rabbi Yishmael and God in the story is a mature relationship. There is a mutual respect, an affection. This is a far cry from the theology of Sin and Submission. This is a different kind of theology. It's a different kind of anthropology. Of mutuality, of vulnerability, and of maturity.

When we're young, our parents are all-knowing and all-powerful. When we're young, our parents are in fact a bit like God in Aristotelian philosophy. Except that when we grow up that we realise that it isn't always like that, in fact, it was never really like that in the first place.

When is it that we realise that our parents have needs? Some people realise it when their parents fall ill. Some people realise it when they themselves become parents. Some people never realise it. The truth is that we realise that our parents have needs when we become mature enough to see it and recognise it. And it's the same with our relationship to God.

And so we can be proud to belong to a tradition is able to conceive of God in this way. A tradition that is able to conceive of a God as *Avinu Malkeinu* – both as King... and as Father. A tradition that places so much trust, and so much faith, not only in God, but in man. A tradition that is able to conceive of man as being mature enough to compose a blessing for God. A tradition that that isn't afraid to recognise that we all have emotional and spiritual needs, and that we all feel vulnerable sometimes. Even God.