

*This edition of the Conservative Yeshiva's E-Shiur is made possible
by a generous grant from Temple Zion Israelite Center, Miami, Florida.*

The Shehehiyanu Blessing and Tu BiShvat E-Shiur

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Life is filled with special moments which, to our detriment, we take for granted. Our lives would be better if we would learn to appreciate the blessings it has to offer. Yerushalmi Kiddushin 4:12 (66b) teaches us that it is wrong to neglect even the simplest of life's blessings:

ר' חזקיה ר' כהן בשם רב עתיך אדם ליתן דין וחשבון על כל מה שראת עינו ולא אכל. רבי לעזר חשש להדא שמועתא ומצמית ליה פריטין ואכיל בהון מכל מילה חדא בשתא.

"Rabbi Hezkiah, Rabbi Kohen in the name of Rav: In the future a person will give an accounting for everything that his eyes saw and he did not eat. Rabbi [E]liezer took this teaching seriously. He saved his coins so that he might eat of everything once a year."

This anecdote has been codified in the Jewish practice of reciting the Shehehiyanu blessing over eating new seasonal fruit but it could equally apply to a number of other opportunities where this blessing should be recited. This shiur will examine three of these opportunities:

1. Eating new fruits and vegetables;
2. Acquiring new purchases;
3. Seeing a friend or relative after a long period of time.

The recitation of Shehehiyanu over new fruits is often associated in people's minds with Tu BiShvat, the New Year of the Trees, which has in recent times been marked by eating special and exotic fruits. However, in truth, the Shehehiyanu blessing is recited whenever new fruits are eaten. When eating new fruits, one recites the appropriate blessing over the fruit along with the special berachah (blessing), the Shehehiyanu (more on the order of the blessings later):

לוהינו מלך העולם, שהחיינו וקיימנו והגיענו לזמן הזה. -ברוך אתה ה', א

"Blessed are You, Lord our God, who has given us life, sustained us and brought us to this time."

By reciting this blessing over new fruit, we express our cognizance of and thankfulness for God's seasonal renewal of His world.

As we shall see in the following passage, the origins of this practice are found in a discussion between two sages in the Babylonian Talmud Eruvin 40b concerning the obligation to recite Shehehiyanu on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. One sage supports the practice of reciting it on Rosh Hashanah by citing his own behavior regarding new fruits:

כי אתאי בי רב יהודה אמר: אנא אקרא חדתא נמי אמינא זמן.

אמר ליה: רשות לא קא מיבעיא לי, כי קא מיבעיא ליהובא.

"When I (Rabbah) came to the home of Rav Yehudah, he (Rav Yehudah) said: I say Shehehiyanu even over new squash. He (Rabbah) responded to him: I am not asking whether it is *permitted* [to recite Shehehiyanu on Rosh Hashanah]; I am asking whether it is *obligatory* [to recite it]."

Rabbah rejects Rav Yehudah's analogy because the two situations are not analogous. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are mandated - they are holidays that will arrive no matter what. This is a "חובה", an obligatory situation. In contrast, seeing or eating new fruit is voluntary (רשות). Furthermore, the recitation of Shehehiyanu over new fruit is itself permitted, not obligatory. In contrast, the Shehehiyanu is mandated on festivals.

Despite the failure of the passage to answer the question concerning Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, this discussion does set a precedent for a new practice. In his commentary on Rav Yosef's practice, Rashi writes:

כשאני רואה דלעת חדשה משנה לשנה אמינא זמן

"When I see new squash from year to year I say Shehehiyanu."

According to Rashi, one recites this blessing over seeing seasonal fruits for the first time each year. The Rambam, in the Mishnah Torah (Blessings 10:2), agrees with Rashi's interpretation and codifies this practice:

הרואה פרי המתחדש משנה לשנה בתחלת ראייתו מברך שהחיינו.

"One who sees fruit which is new from year to year - on first seeing it should recite Shehehiyanu."

The Tosafot, however, disagree and establish what eventually became normative practice for most Jews (Berachot 49b s.v. hatam):

וכן כל פרי חדש כשאכלו מברך שהחיינו.

"And so all new fruit - when he eats it he blesses Shehehiyanu."

Tosafot's reasoning is probably based on the notion that people experience more pleasure in eating fruit than in seeing it, and therefore, the Shehehiyanu, which is a blessing that denotes personal rejoicing, should be recited then.

Here are some simple guidelines for reciting Shehehiyanu over new fruits:

It should be recited over fruits that are seasonal. Fruits and vegetables that are available all year don't merit the berachah. Also, the blessing is tied to seasonality and not the individual - so tasting a fruit that you have never tasted only requires the Shehehiyanu blessing *if it is a seasonal fruit*.

One can say the berachah over different varieties of the same fruit.

Some say the Shehehiyanu first and then the blessing over fruit (many Ashkenazim). Others, the reverse (many Sefardim).

In modern times, due to advances in agricultural technology, most fruits are available all year around. This creates a problem for the recitation of Shehehiyanu for fruit that is seasonal in one place but is available in another place. Some rabbis maintain that this would rule out saying the blessing over these types of produce. Rav Moshe Feinstein, however, maintains that where it is possible to distinguish between produce from the new local harvest (such as watermelon in the summer in the Northern Hemisphere) and old produce (watermelon left from the previous year), the blessing should be recited over the new produce. (Igrot Moshe Orah Hayim 3:34)

The sages of the Mishnah (Berachot 9:3) prescribed the recitation of the Shehehiyanu blessing over the purchase of certain new items which bring joy to the purchaser or receiver:

בנה בית חדש וקנה כלים חדשים אומר ברוך שהחיינו

"One who builds a new house or buys new clothing (things), recites Shehehiyanu."

The Babylonian Talmud debates whether a person should recite this blessing if s/he already owned a similar item or has owned the item before. The decision rendered from this discussion is recorded in the Shulchan Aruch (Orach Hayim 223:3):

בנה בית חדש, או קנה כלים חדשים, אפילו היה לו כיוצא באלו תחלה, או קנה וחזר וקנה, מברך על כל פעם, שהחיינו, ולא דוקא חדשים דהוא הדין לישנים, אם הם חדשים לו, שלא היו אלו שלו מעולם, ולא אמרו חדשים אלא לאפוקי אם מכרך וחזר וקנאן.

"One who builds a new house or buys new clothing (or other things), even if he already has things like them; or he bought them and returned and bought them again, recites the Shehehiyanu blessing each time, and not necessarily [if these items are] new, for it also applies to old (second hand) items, if they are new for him, for they were never his, and the intention when they [the sages] say "new" was to exclude if he sold them and bought them back."

The Mishnah Berurah, (an early 20th century commentary on Shulchan Aruch, Orach Hayim) notes that the essential element here is that the purchaser has a sense of joy (*Iev sameah*) in the purchase. Consequently, he notes, a rich person might not recite the blessing over something upon which a poorer person would. Halakhic authorities disagree as to whether a poor person can say the Shehehiyanu blessing over an item which would be considered insignificant to other people. According to the Shulchan Aruch, it depends upon the happiness of the poor person; she should recite it if the item causes her to be happy. In contrast, the Tosafot rule that the significance of the item depends upon the societal view of the item. Thus, if generally people are not particularly joyous over the purchase of such an item, one does not, according to the Tosafot, recite the Shehehiyanu even if one does have joy over such a purchase.

The Shehehiyanu blessing serves as a means of promulgating a sense of appreciation for material things. It is hard for human beings to maintain a sense of gratefulness in a world full of so much bounty. It is easy to take blessings for granted or worse yet, to develop a sense of entitlement. This blessing gives us the grounding to appreciate the ultimate source of blessings and to gain a little bit of humility in the process.

Here are some general rules as to how and when the berachah should be recited for newly acquired things:

- The blessing is recited over items which were bought, inherited, or received a gift.
- It is recited over important purchases which bring joy. It is not recited over the purchase of shoes. (The fact that rabbis in the past excluded the purchase of shoes is interesting. People in the past did not consider shoes a luxury item, but one wonders if this attitude will change now that the status of shoes has changed.)
- It is generally recited at the time of purchase. However, when it comes to clothing some recite it when it is first worn. (For example, wearing a tallit for the first time under the huppah or at a bar or bat mitzvah.)

The Babylonian Talmud (Berachot 58b) records another often neglected occasion in which to recite Shehehiyanu:

אמר רבי יהושע בן לוי: הרואה את חבירו לאחר שלשים יום אומר: ברוך שהחיינו וקיימנו והגיענו לזמן הזה, לאחר שנים עשר חדש - אומר ברוך מחיה המתים.

"R. Joshua b. Levi said: One who sees a friend after a lapse of thirty days says: Blessed is He who has kept us alive and preserved us and brought us to this season. If after a lapse of twelve months he says: Blessed is He who revives the dead.

We can explain this source in light of the meaning of Shehehiyanu we have seen elsewhere. When one sees a friend after an extended period, the experience brings about a sense of joy, and therefore, this occasion should be marked with the Shehehiyanu blessing or, after an even more extended period, "*tehiyat matim*". In our day, since we have easy communications with people around the world and know their whereabouts, most authorities hold that if we have been in contact with the person then one does not recite the later blessing. However, one does recite the Shehehiyanu if one has not seen the person in a month's time.

In light of this last passage, let me conclude with a hope that all of our former students, colleagues, and friends will take the opportunity to visit the Yeshiva in the near future so that we can become reacquainted, rejoice and recite this wonderful blessing together!