

TESHUVAH: RETURN

## Using *Birkat HaGomel* as a Ritual of Reentry and Reconciliation

By Alison J. Link, PhD and Morris Treibitz

AJL: When I met Morris in 2004, he had been incarcerated for almost ten years. I was working as the de facto Jewish chaplain, in addition to my position as Director of Leisure Education at the correctional facility. During the next two years, I planted the seed for him to think about what it might mean for him to recite *Birkat HaGomel* upon his release.

The morning in 2006 when he was released, his rabbi asked him if he wanted to recite *Birkat HaGomel* on that coming Thursday, but he was not yet ready. He wanted to be thoughtful about it.

MT: I knew about a *brachah* for escaping danger, but I didn't know it was called *HaGomel* or that it included being released from prison. My initial thought about it was that of course I would say it when I was released, but I didn't think it would be any different than saying *Birkat HaMazon* after a meal. As I got closer to my release I realized that I could make it more meaningful...

Over a year later, I received a phone message from Morris stating that he received the parole transfer he had sought—from New Jersey to Brooklyn—and had been there, with his sister's family, a couple of weeks. He had decided he was ready for *Birkat HaGomel*. He felt "ripe" and was calling to invite me to come to Shabbat morning services and for Shabbat lunch with his family.

I had decided not to do it until I felt that I was living a life that Hashem had helped me survive for and it wasn't until then... that I felt ready. To me it represents a chance to start over a new

*beginning. It proves Hashem's unconditional love...planning for HaGomel for me didn't take much work. It was preparing for what it represented to me that had the value....*

*It took about 6 months to get [my parole transfer] approved, but until then I was using [heroin] and didn't fit in anywhere as far*

*as I was concerned. I felt distant from my family, my community, my religion and Hashem, and more than anything, I felt distant from myself and the person I wanted to be. All this combined with my reluctance to be seen by some who knew my history was what most likely caused my initial hesitation to recite HaGomel in shul.*

*Ms. Link, I need you to know that I stayed there with [my sister's family] for a couple of months before I moved out into my own apartment. I am 39 years old, and I had never in my life felt so*

*complete, content and at ease...I never used while I was living in that house. It was within the first month of living there when I called you and asked you to come. It felt like the right time. Only family members there would know me at the shul and I felt that I was beginning to come to terms with many of the issues that prevented me from the ritual earlier.*

*Even though the ritual was public, it was still a private event. Only my family knew why I was being called up to the Torah because people recite HaGomel for many reasons.*

*What a day it was Ms. Link. It was beautiful.... I remember feeling nervous when being called up. But proud at the same time....I was wearing a new linen suit. I felt sharp. I was excited.*



Morris Treibitz, photo courtesy of his family.

*I don't remember feeling any guilt or shame or even pain. It left me with a great memory of a day that I wouldn't trade for anything.*

Over Shabbat lunch, back at the house, I asked each member of the family to share how they felt about Morris returning from prison and any additional words they might want to share with Morris and each other. I remember Morris's young nephew shared that when they picked him up, "The gate opened and Morris had a bag over his shoulder...it was like he was leaving Egypt." Morris agreed, and said, "It felt like I was leaving Egypt." The family requested support on how to move forward and I facilitated thoughts around general next steps. Even though, I was there primarily to support Morris' reentry and the *teshuvah* between Morris and his family members, the conversation was spiritually rich for me on a personal level. I left forever transformed.

*I have not thought about that Shabbat lunch in so many years. It was perfect. I was so happy. My family was so happy. I remember that you maintained such control of the conversation that I felt as though we were honored guests at your table instead of you at ours. Nobody was excluded, from my brother-in-law, down to my niece. From that day until the day I moved out of that house and into my own place I guess you can say I was on a "pink cloud". And just like that, the cloud disappeared and I found myself in a tornado that picked me up and dropped me into a pool of quicksand. I think about how things were that day with my sisters and my nephews and niece. I think of how it is today between us and my heart breaks.*

When engaging people who are incarcerated around the idea of *Birkat HaGomel*, I would suggest that this ritual can act as both a process as well as a way to "mark time". Reciting this *brachah* is not just about an isolated event. Even before

release, one can reflect on *Birkat HaGomel* in relation to the other traditional categories of people who say it, either literally or metaphorically: "one who has crossed the sea, traversed the wilderness, recovered from illness, a prisoner who has been set free (or someone who has survived any other dangerous situation)..." (*Brachot* 54b) It starts with simply knowing that the *brachah* exists and contemplating its meaning. One could recite it daily-- for just getting through each day, taking one day at a time. One might mark time upon one's release(s), in stages of prison or parole, or even related to their recovery from drug use. Ultimately, the richness and depth of this ritual is in the planning and the follow-through, and in the reminders of the ongoing role and potential of *teshuvah*. It can function as an opportunity for reflection, for both the individual and the family/community, to express gratitude and to deepen the process and experience of *teshuvah* on multiple levels over time.

Helping Morris learn about, study and understand *Birkat HaGomel* while supporting his own interpretation allowed for him to prepare for the right time and make the expanded ritual conversation relevant to his own desires, circumstance and experience. I also recognize the trust, respect, support, *chesed* and *gevurah* needed in my relationship with Morris that allowed for the fullness of the experience.

*I would also let [other people who are incarcerated and contemplating Birkat HaGomel] know that it can mean anything to them that they want. It could be just between them and Hashem or it can be between them and their family or even the community. The choice is theirs... I would also go so far to suggest to family members or witnesses to keep in mind any blessings they have for their loved one and any thanks they have for Hashem for allowing their loved one to survive.*

Morris is currently incarcerated again, and is back in the process of making it through each day, recovering from a life-threatening coma, thinking about a meaningful way to mark time and how *Birkat HaGomel* fits in. Morris also shared with me that he has discussed *Birkat HaGomel* with other Jews he has met in prison. One of these men, an Ashkenazi Chasid from Williamsburg, was not as interested in expanding the ritual around this *brachab*—though he was going to say it—but was more interested in saying the “prayer that Sephardim say for Shabbat, *Hodu La Hashem*”<sup>497</sup> upon his release. One of the others recites *Tefilat Haderekb*, the traveler’s prayer, each day.

*You have my full permission and consent to use any or all of this letter as you want to or see fit... I have been hiding behind a mask for so long... maybe if I start exposing myself then I will learn to know who I am as well. I do know this, if nothing else: I am Morris Treibetz, son of D. and M. and brother to E. and G*<sup>498</sup>.  
*And I want to learn to be all those things the way I was meant to.*

Thank you, Morris for your candor and openness. May the one who has bestowed upon you enduring kindness, bestow upon you kindness forever.



Alison J. Link, PhD has been working with people who are incarcerated and formerly incarcerated since starting her doctoral work in social welfare, which examined the leisure functioning and rehabilitation of people returning to society from prison. She founded The Leisure Link ([www.howsyourleisurelife.com](http://www.howsyourleisurelife.com)) and is trained as a Spiritual Director through the Yedidya Center. Alison lives in Morrisville, Vermont with her husband David (Rabbi of the Jewish Community of Greater Stowe) and their two young children.

<sup>497</sup> Possibly Psalm 107, which Chasidim say on Friday night before Kabbalat Shabbat and which talks about prisoners going free.

<sup>498</sup> T’ruah has redacted these names out of respect for Morris’s family’s privacy.