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HALACHA

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Reciting 'Shehecheyanu' When Seeing Friends

As restrictions begin to ease here in the State of Israel, should one recite the blessing of Shehecheyanu when seeing a friend or family member he/she has not seen in some time?

The Talmud (Berachot 58b) instructs: One who sees a friend following a lapse of thirty days recites the blessing of 'Shehecheyanu.' After twelve months, one recites 'Mechaye Meitim.'

But just who is this blessing reserved for?

Tosafot (ad loc., s.v. Haro'eh Chaveiro) quotes the Ri, who limits making the blessing of 'Shehecheyanu' to seeing a very close friend. This is also the position of the Rashbah, Rosh, and Rabbeinu Yonah.

According to the Vilna Gaon, this is illustrated by an incident that the Talmud itself relates: "Rav Papa and Rav Hunah son of Rav Yehohshua were walking along the road together. They met Rav

Chanina the son of Rav Ika. They said to him: 'Since we saw you, we will recite two blessings over you: Blessed is He who gave of His wisdom to those who fear him, and Shehecheyanu'" (Ibid.). According to the Vilna Gaon, they made the second blessing of 'Shehecheyanu' upon seeing Rav Chanina, as he was their close confidant (See Bi'ur Hagra to Orach Chayim 225:1).

The Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chayim 225:1) rules: "One who sees a friend after thirty days says 'Shehecheyanu.' After twelve months he blesses, 'Mechaye Meitim.' And this is [only] when he is very beloved to him, and he is happy upon seeing him."

As the blessing of 'Shehecheyanu' is reserved for moments of great joy, it is reserved for close friends.

But with modern means of communication - phones, email, Whatsapp, Facetime, Zoom, etc. - it's very possible that one will have 'seen' or at least heard from his/her friend within thirty days. According to the Mishnah Berurah, one who was in written contact with his friend or was informed of his friend's welfare by others, would not make the blessing of 'Shehecheyanu,' as we apply the principle of "Safeik Berachot L'hakel" and are lenient when

there is a doubt whether to make a blessing or not (Orach Chayim 225:2). While the Aruch Hashulchan admits the blessing of 'Mechaye Meitim' would not be made by those who were in contact, he explains that the blessing of 'Shehecheyanu' is not about knowledge of the wellbeing of one's friend, but rather the joy upon seeing a close friend "face to face" (Orach Chayim 225:2).

Rav Ovadiah Yosef rules that even if they were in contact over the telephone, one may still make the blessing of 'Shehecheyanu' upon seeing his/her friend after thirty days have elapsed (Yechave Da'at 4:17). (However, in a footnote he writes that he is in doubt whether one who sees his/her friend on television would make the blessing.)

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But many have the custom not to recite the blessing at all today.

Reciting ‘Shehecheyanu’ when seeing a friend after thirty days is not a formal requirement (Chova) but instead optional (Reshut). In addition, the very nature of the blessing of ‘Shehecheyanu’ is subjective. When one is happy, he recites the blessing (See Bach, Orach Chayim 29). For some, that subjectivity is a concern.

As there may exist a doubt whether the individual is indeed a close friend or not, or whether one really feels a true sense of joy when seeing the individual, the custom developed not to make the blessing at all, as we are lenient when in doubt concerning blessings (See Yosef Ometz 1:451; Chessed La’alafim, Orach Chayim 225:15; Ben Ish Chai, Vol. 1, Ekev 14; Halichot Shlomo 23:12).

The story is told that Rav Refael Kook, rabbi of Tiveria for many years, once visited Rav Velvel, the Brisker Rav of Jerusalem. Rav Refael asked if he can make a ‘Shehecheyanu’ upon seeing his friend, Rav Velvel. Rav Velvel answered that the custom is not to make the blessing. But Rav Refael asked, “If I can make a blessing on a new fruit, why not on seeing a friend?”

Rav Velvel explained that there is an inherent joy when eating a new fruit. It’s objective. But when seeing a friend, it’s subjective; nonspecific; imprecise. Therefore, Rav Velvel explained, the custom today is not to make the blessing of ‘Shehecheyanu’ when seeing a friend

after thirty days.

Many other acharonim - among them Yosef Ometz, the Pele Yo’etz, Eshel Avraham, Ben Ish Chai, and Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach - agree and rule that the custom today is not to make the blessing. Or at the very least, not with ‘Shem u’Malchut,’ Hashem’s name. Some, however, allow for special exceptions, like seeing family or an especially close friend, which objectively creates joy.

While the Aruch Hashulchan acknowledges that “nowadays we are very lenient with this blessing,” he concludes that one “who has pleasure when seeing [his friend] and is very happy - and all the more so if it’s a son and father or father and son or brothers and the like - must make the blessing” (Orach Chayim 225:3).

Following months of being in lockdown, self-isolation, and quarantine, one who feels a sincere sense of joy when seeing a family member or close friend may indeed make the blessing of ‘Shehecheyanu,’ expressing gratitude and giving thanks to Hashem for the gift of being able to be together in person once again.

Should one see many friends together at once, according to Rav Yitzchak Zilbershtein, he would make the blessing only once (Chashukei Chemed to Berachot 58b). Rav Zilbershtein invokes a ruling of Rav Moshe Feinstein (Igrot Moshe, Orach Chayim 1:87), who ruled that one blessing of ‘Shehecheyanu’ exempts many new fruits. ■