

Mai Mevarech: A Berakha for Testosterone Gel

Written by Laynie Soloman

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She'eilah

What is the blessing that one should say over administering testosterone gel daily?

Introduction

I have been asked this question and others related to sanctifying HRT more broadly by trans folks seeking to honor the sacredness of their transition for some time now. It was not until I had the experience myself that I felt a new clarity and curiosity about the *berakha* that felt most appropriate, as our tradition teaches: שְׁעִינִיּוּ רֹאוֹת, “a judge has only what his eyes see,” (Bava Batra 131a) that a teacher, a *dayan*, or *posek* must bring their own experience to their halakhic analysis.¹ Our sages demand that we learn, teach, and shape *halakha* that is authentically rooted in what we ourselves have perceived and encountered, understanding that our experiences are real, authoritative material out of which *halakha* is (re)formed.

The Talmud names three central attributes that grant someone the ability to adjudicate cases independently that would otherwise require a *bet din* of three and to respond when a halakhic question emerges: *gemara* (having learned the received tradition from a teacher), *kabbalah* (having been accepted or chosen by those seeking an answer), and *sevara*.² Informed by Menachem Elon’s *Ha-Mishpat Ha-Ivri*, my teacher and *chevruta* R’ Benay Lappe describes *sevara* most often as one’s moral intuition informed by deep learning and understanding of the tradition and the human condition.³ Commenting on a sugya in Sotah 20a, Rashi describes the process of honing and using one’s *sevara*, in the following way:

¹ See also Sanhedrin 6a, Niddah 20a; for a careful treatment of this principle see Joel Roth, *The Halakhic Process: A Systemic Analysis* (1986). For references to this principle as it applies to trans folks examining and exploring *halakha*, see Jericho Vincent’s teshuva “Genderqueer Torah on Niddah: Jewish Practices of Sacred Sexuality for Nonbinary Folks & People of All Genders” published by *Trans Halakha Project* (2023).

² See Sanhedrin 6a, specifically Yad Ramah’s comment on “איבעיא להו”

³ See this meditation on *sevara* as a concept that drives our tradition by R’ Benay Lappe’s essay “The Word that Changed the World” (2021) <https://svara.org/hot-off-the-shtender-the-word-that-changed-the-world/>. Menachem Elon describes *sevara* as “Legal reasoning as a creative source of halakhic rules involves a deep and discerning probe into the essence of halakhic and legal principles, an appreciation of the characteristics of human beings in their social relationships, and a careful study of the real word and its manifestations” *Jewish Law: History, Sources, Principles (Ha-mishpat Ha-Ivri)*, Vol. 2, p. 987-989.

והדר אתא לקמיה דר"ע למיסבר סברא - לעמוד על עיקר טעמי המשנה מפני מה זה טמא וזה טהור זה אסור וזה מותר ועל מה כל דבר נסמך ועל איזה מקרא וזה תלמוד שהיה בימי התנאים ולהבין דבר מתוך דבר כשהיה דבר חדש נשאל בבית המדרש מהיכן ילמדוהו ולא יזה משנה ידמוהו:

(Paraphrased translation:) One who uses their “svara”...has first learned what the tanna'im would call “talmud”: knowing the foundational teachings of the Mishnah, with an understanding of the reasons behind each law—not only what is permitted or forbidden, pure or impure, but also why the law is that way and what source it has [of the five sources of Jewish law].

They then are able to apply their learning, so that when a new question is asked in the *beit midrash*, they know which cases it is analogous to and which cases it is similar to so that they can learn this thing by analogy and reason; they know how to use the existing teachings to answer the new question.

Rashi makes this clear: *sevara* is our tradition's mechanism for ensuring that seemingly new emergent realities and the questions they bring with them are not shunned from the *beit midrash* but instead find their home in our *mesorah*, our tradition, through deep learning and understanding. This is how our tradition grows, how the Torah expands, and how halakha moves.

Our power as trans teshuva-writers and teachers lies in our ability to find the places where—G!d willing—our *gemara* and *sevara* meet and to synthesize them in ways that help us all understand our seemingly unprecedented realities so fully that we see the ways in which they are so deeply precedented. As Rashi says, this is a process of exploration and analogy—not about “Can we...?” but “How can we...?” and “In what way...?” Or, in Rashi's language, מהיכן ילמדוהו ולא יזה משנה ידמוהו, “What is this like and where can I learn it from?”

Instead of asking for permission to exist, we ask what the frameworks are that we might uncover to ground, to compare, and to learn/teach the new things of our lives (which we know are not new, only new to this moment in these iterations!). We visibilize the questions that are asked in *our* learning spaces. Recovering these questions is, for me, what lies at the heart of creating space for halakhic euphoria⁴ which honors and elevates the ways in which we fit and unearths the principles in our tradition that enable us to express ourselves authentically and joyfully through the language of *halakha*.

With G!d's help, I offer this teshuva from my own experience, rooted in what I humbly hope is *sevara*. I know it will not reflect the experiences of all trans men or transmasculine people

⁴ For more on my relationship to “euphoria” in halakhic thinking and practice, see “Towards Halakhic Euphoria” (2020) <https://svara.org/hot-off-the-shtender-towards-halakhic-euphoria/>.

(and *kal va'chomer* all trans an non-binary people)—I offer it in the spirit of Rava who teaches the following:

אמר להו רבא לרב פפא ולרב הונא בריה דרב יהושע כי אתי פסקא דדינא דידי לקמייתו וחזיתו
ביה פירכא לא תקרעוהו עד דאתיתו לקמאי אי אית לי טעמא אמינא לכו ואי לא הדרנא בי

Rava said to Rav Pappa and to Rav Huna, son of Rav Yehoshua: If a conclusion of mine comes before you and you see in it a reason to challenge, a fault, or a issue, do not simply tear it up, but come to me. I may have a response to your challenge, which I will share with you. Or, I will change or retract my conclusion.

If you find a *pircha*, an error or a challenge in my words, please share it with me so that I can learn from it! Only HaShem is perfect, after all...

Teshuva

Rabbi Meir would say, חייב אדם לברך מאה ברכות בכל יום, that a person that a person is obligated to recite 100 blessings a day (Menachot 43b). *Berakhot* are our language for responding to the moments of everyday life—both the painful and the joyful, and everything in between. Famously in *Fiddler on the Roof*, community members ask the local rabbi to bless everything from the Tzar to a new sewing machine. To bless something is to give it a home in *halakha*. And while, “May G!d bless and keep the Tzar far away from us,” (amen) is indeed a blessing, I aimed to locate my experience of taking testosterone in the formulation of existing Talmudic *berakhot*, from which we are cautioned against deviating,⁵ and so this *teshuva* will attempt to locate my experience blessing T within the existing lexicon of *berakhot*.

Our tradition teaches, אסור לו לאדם שיהנה מן העולם הזה בלא ברכה וכל הנהנה מן העולם הזה בלא מעל, that one should not receive benefit from something without first acknowledging the Source by reciting a *berakha*, and that if we fail to do so it is as though we have misappropriated a sacred object (Berakhot 35a). While the benefit I receive from HRT is hard to precisely and fully describe in my own words, *berakhot* carry intertextual meanings that have been poured into them throughout our unfolding tradition that help me—and each of us—convey that which is beyond our individual and particular experience. And so, we must clarify which blessing one should say in this particular case of taking hormones.

⁵ See Tosefta Berakhot 4:5; Berakhot 40b; Mishneh Torah Hilkhot Berakhot 1:5; for a robust exploration of this principle see Ruth Langer, *To Worship God Properly: Tensions Between Liturgical Custom and Halakhah in Judaism* (1998), especially the first chapter.

It has become a common practice among many trans Jews to bless HRT with *shehechyanu*.⁶ My teacher Joy Ladin describes her experience marking taking progesterone with this *berakha* in a stunning essay. She writes:

And so, every day, when I take the medication that is making this possible, I say the blessing that registers the wonder and privilege of being, the awe and responsibility of becoming: *Baruch atah Adoshem, Elokeinu melech ha-olam, shehechyanu, v'kiyemanu, v'higeyanu, la-zman ha-zeh.*

Ladin's use of *shehechyanu* is deeply radical: combating transphobic tropes that pathologize and demonize our transitions, she notes that this *berakha* is "never said over a disease," and is similarly "not said over medication."⁷ By naming these attributes and saying this blessing as she takes progesterone, Ladin affirms herself, and all of us along with her, within and through our tradition. She confirms that our transitions and our trans-ness itself are both sacred, holy, and deserving of blessing. Our sages teach מנהג ישראל תורה היא, that the customs of our people are beautiful, valid, and authoritative. This *minhag* is a beautiful one, and I do not intend to invalidate it, but instead to add to it.

HRT comes in many forms: pills, patches, injections, and creams, to name a few. I (currently) take testosterone administered in the form of a daily gel, which is applied in the morning after showering. The first time I administered T gel, I felt ecstatic, nervous, anticipatory, and magical. And as I began administering the gel each morning, it became a more regular, ordinary daily moment—much like the other sacredly ordinary moments of my morning routine—and it lacked the spectacularity and infrequency that I associate with *shehechyanu*.⁸ Ladin, too, addresses this complexity in her essay, stating that "it is specifically *not* to be said over daily events, for which there are different blessings..." As Ladin remarks, this *berakha* is not for the ordinary, daily behaviors of life. I honor and learn from Ladin's experience of taking progesterone as a daily miracle, one that helps her settle into "the wonder and privilege of being, the awe and responsibility of becoming," and inspired by her exploration of *shehechyanu* I sought a *berakha* that would feel as aligned for me as *shehechyanu* felt for her.

Like putting on *tzitzit*, washing my hands, getting dressed, or saying *birkhot hashachar*, administering testosterone is a regular embodied practice in my life, and I sought to more

⁶ See Joy Ladin, "A Blessing over Progesterone" (<https://zeek.forward.com/articles/117507/>).

⁷ Those who see their HRT as a form of medicine for whatever reason will likely not resonate with what is contained within this *teshuvah*, and may consider exploring an alternate approach of blessing בראי רופא חולים (SA OH 230:4).

⁸ See Berakhot 60b and subsequent halakhic discourse for a conversation about whether, how, and to what extent *shehechyanu* can be repeated for multiple similar actions.

precisely discern *dvar mitoch dvar*, as Rashi says, what thing in our tradition this might be more analogous to my experience in order to locate a *berakha* for taking testosterone in this form that I might say each day.

Generally speaking, our tradition has three main forms of blessings: 1) *birkot shevach ve'hoda'ah*, which are said over praiseworthy events like experiencing thunder, 2) *birkot nehenin*, which are said in relation to a pleasurable sensation that one experiences, particularly from which one derives benefit (*hana'ah*⁹), and 3) *birkot mitzvah*, which are said upon fulfilling one's obligation to do a *mitzvah*.

I experience some dimensions of *each* of these forms when I take testosterone, and therefore I yearned to find a *berakha* that would reflect the inherent fluidity of these categorizations. What follows is my exploration of *ha'tov ve'ha'meitiv*—a *berakha* that is said over good news, transformative states, and variations—as a *berakha* that can be said over taking testosterone daily. In the subsequent appendix, I offer the *seder* of my current practice, which incorporates administering testosterone into *birkot ha'shachar's seder* of embodied blessings as one wakes in the morning, as outlined in the Talmud and by later *poskim*.

Nehenin & Shevach: Examples of Ha'Tov Ve'Ha'Meitiv

Birkot ha'nehenin are blessings recited over that which causes pleasure and enjoyment, including foods, fragrances, and other physical sensations. One common feature they share is the connection between the blessing and the immediate benefit derived; the principle that stands behind these *berakhot* is the aforementioned notion that אסור לו לאדם לראות ברכה בלא ברנה, and therefore immediately before deriving benefit from something, one must make a *berakha*.

"*Nehenin*" has the Hebrew root נהנ, which translates to "to be handsome," "to be becoming," "to adorn oneself," "to be pleased," and "to enjoy." These definitions beautifully capture

⁹ The word *hana'ah* holds both a general and specific meaning: generally, it functions as the noun of *ne'henin*, which may be translated as "enjoyment" or "benefit, and specifically it is used to describe a precise category of benefits that include financial benefits as opposed to eating. For example, there are categories of foods that are prohibited to consume but permitted to receive *hana'ah*, which one may sell to others, and consumption as opposed to deriving benefit is made distinct in this way. Throughout this teshuva I will use the term *hana'ah* in its general meaning, as the noun expressing benefit generally rather than the specific category of permitted items *be'hana'ah*.

what it has meant for me to take testosterone, to benefit deeply from a pleasurable process of transition and self-actualization that is possible through HRT.

When eating an apple, the *berakha* of *borei p'ri ha'eitz* is recited to acknowledge—and in some perspectives to permit me to access—the physical pleasure that I derive from tasting and eating the apple. The *hana'ah* that I am blessing over is not the nutrients, vitamins, and sustenance. (The *berakha achrona*, which is a *de'oraita* obligation based on the *pasuk* וְאֵכֶלְתָּ וְשָׂבַעְתָּ וּבֵרַכְתָּ¹⁰ is, on the other hand, an appreciation for and acknowledgement of the sustenance.) This is why one blesses over candy that has no nutritional value, but one does *not* make such a *berakha* over a multivitamin that carries that same nutritional value and impact as an apple without the pleasure of consumption.¹¹ In order to merit or require a *birkat ha'nehe'nin*, the object over which one is blessing must cause immediate pleasure and benefit through some felt physical sensation (like an apple, a fragrance, or candy), rather than a long-term positive impact that will eventually lead to some benefit in the future (like a multivitamin).

In the case of testosterone and HRT more broadly, it is not clear that the *consumption* or *imbibing* of hormones itself is the object of the blessing.¹² In fact, the physical sensation of applying testosterone gel is more like applying Purell and less like eating delicious fruit. The impact is pleasurable,¹³ but the experience of absorbing it is not. And so, an analogous *berakha* is not simply something that is said over *hana'ah* gained from pleasurable sensory consumption.

Instead, I turned to a *berakha* that is associated with a more nuanced notion of benefit: *ha'tov ve'hameitiv*, the blessing made over good news.

Ha'tov ve'hameitiv is described in the mishnah in the following way:¹⁴

על הזיקין, ועל הזועות, ועל הברקים, ועל הרעמים, ועל הרוחות, אומר ברוך שכחו וגבורתו מלא
עולם. על ההרים, ועל הגבעות, ועל הימים, ועל הנהרות, ועל המדברות, אומר ברוך עושה
מעשה בראשית. רבי יהודה אומר, הרואה את הים הגדול אומר ברוך שעשה את הים הגדול,

¹⁰ Devarim 9:1; see Rambam MT Hilkhhot Berakhot 1:1.

¹¹ Though the lack of blessing over a multivitamin is also related to its size. For blessings recited over healing endeavors, see SA OH 230:4, Mishnah Berurah SA OH 230:4, 7).

¹² For those who hold that a *berakha* serves as a *matir*, i.e., something that gives an individual permission to derive benefit from the object, this ambiguity is equally significant.

¹³ For a resource that outlines some of the long term benefit and impact of testosterone, see *The Testosterone Survey Zine: A Community Health Art Project* by Rena Yehuda Newman.

¹⁴ Mishnah Berakhot 9:2

בזמן שרואה אותו לפרקים. על הגשמים ועל הבשורות הטובות אומר ברוך הטוב והמטיב, ועל שמועות רעות אומר ברוך דין האמת:

Over shooting stars, earthquakes, lightning, thunder and storms one recites, "Blessed is He whose strength fills the world". Over mountains, hills, seas, rivers and deserts one recites, "Blessed is He who performs the deed of creation". Rabbi Yehuda says: one who sees the great sea recites, "Blessed is He who made the great sea" - so long as he sees it only on occasion. Over the rains and over good news one recites, "Blessed is the One who is good and does good." Over bad news one recites, "Blessed is the true judge".

This mishnah appears in the ninth chapter of Masechet Berakhot, which here describes—for the most part—blessings that are in the category of *shevach*, like with thunder, lightning, and shooting stars. *Ha'tov ve'ha'meitiv*, at least in some way, falls within this category of praise-inducing *berakhot*. As the blessing "over rain and over good news," על הגשמים ועל הבשורות הטובות, *ha'tov ve'ha'meitiv* is a *berakha* of improvement and elevation: G'd who is good and causes Goodness.

The Rambam describes this *berakha* in the following way:¹⁵

הגיעה אליו טובה או ששמע שמועה טובה אף על פי שהדברים מראין שטובה זו תגרום לו רעה מברך הטוב והמטיב

When a desirable event occurred to a person or they heard good news, even if it appears that this good will ultimately cause them difficulty, they should recite the blessing *hatov v'hameitiv*.

Good news, good tidings, a desirable event—these are all fairly ambiguous terms. What events and moments warrant this *berakha*? The Rashba explains the forms of benefit that merit *ha'tov ve'ha'meitiv*:¹⁶

תשובה: לא בכל דבר שנהנה הוא ואחרים עמו, מברך הטוב והמטיב. שאם כן, אפי' אקרא חדתא יברך הטוב והמטיב. אלא בדבר שיש לו תועלת והנאה בו, ולאחריו עמו...

Not in every kind of benefit that is to a person and others warrants the blessing *ha'tov ve'ha'meitiv*. For if this were the case, one would bless *hatov ve'ha'meitiv* on a new gourd.¹⁷ Rather, [it is said] in regards to a thing in which there is real substantial use (תועלת = "profit," or "use") and *hana'ah* to an individual, and to others along with them...

¹⁵ Mishneh Torah Hilkhhot Berakhot 10:4

¹⁶ Teshuvot HaRashba 4:77

¹⁷ Referencing Eruvin 40b.

According to this, *ha'tov ve'ha'meitiv* is not said on things of ordinary benefit: it is recited over things that have substantial—or perhaps *material*—impact and benefit. (A more robust discussion of “others along with them” will follow.)

Ha'tov ve'ha'meitiv is precisely said on transitions that are *not* those of nature, but are beyond nature. In the case of testosterone, the majesty of HRT is in its delightful non-natural—and therefore not inevitable—intervention that creates a process of transformation and transition.¹⁸ It is holy and sacred to acknowledge that my body has not grown and shifted in this way of its own accord; I am moved by the fact that *ha'tov ve'ha'meitiv* contains that acknowledgement within it.¹⁹

This *berakha* holds a particular creative place in the lexicon of blessings: the gemara notes that unlike other blessings featured in *birkat ha'amazon* that have an *asmachta*²⁰ to connect them back to the Torah, *ha'tov ve'ha'meitiv* was established by the sages of Yavneh—יהטוב ביבנה תקנוה²¹ as a liminal, special addition. We're taught that in the world-to-come, this *berakha* will remain, for there will be so much *tov* to bless that it will warrant saying this *berakha* all of the time.²² In its liturgical history, it reflects the liminality of not fully *hand'ah*, but not fully *shevach*; it is said in moments of goodness and anticipation, in moments of potential transformation, and in moments of communal joy. (It also is an amazing aural pun on “T” which, every time it leaves my mouth, adds a layer of delicious and delightful queer wordplay to this practice.) In these ways I have been moved by this *berakha* as a border-crossing blessing that honors the material transformation that T creates along with the personal—and communal—pleasure that transition creates more broadly.

All of these dimensions of this *berakha* have informed my suggestion—and personal practice—of reciting *ha'tov ve'ha'meitiv* over the daily embodied practice of applying testosterone gel. There are two particular moments in which this *berakha* has evolved that provide language for how and why *ha'tov ve'ha'meitiv* serves as a *berakha* for testosterone

¹⁸ See Sanhedrin 42a & Chochmat Shlomo's comment.

¹⁹ This parallels conversations among trans folks who see milah as a powerful corollary experience to transition. See T4Torah, *Mitzvah #2: Circumcision | Every Single Mitzvah*, available on YouTube; see the appendix to Willemina Davidson's *teshuva* “Caring For & Removing Body Parts Related to Gender-Affirming Care” (2023) published by the *Trans Halakha Project*.

²⁰ An *asmachta* / אסמכתא, literally “something to lean on,” is described by Menachem Elon: “The term *asmachta* is used to distinguish between a law developed through interpretation and a law derived from one of the other legal sources (such as tradition or legislation), for which interpretation merely provides a link to a Scriptural verse” (*Jewish Law: History, Sources, Principles* Vol. II, p. 305).

²¹ Berakhot 48b

²² See Pesachim 50b and Rashi's comment there.

administered in this way: 1) upon introducing a new wine to a *shabbos* table, and 2) upon hearing about *geshem*, rain, in a time of need. We turn now to each of these analogous examples as they help us understand more deeply what it might mean to bless testosterone in this way.

Shinui Yayin: On New Varieties of Wine

Le'ma'aseh—in practical application—this blessing is most commonly associated with the addition of a new additional bottle of wine to a *shabbos* table. When a meal is in progress and *kiddush* has already been made, if a new bottle of wine is brought to the table, *ha'tov ve'hameitiv* is recited. This is a fairly unique practice and, generally speaking, is not applied to other foods, as we will explain. R' Eliezer Melamed explains in his popular *Peninei Halakha* that “only for wine did the sages institute a special blessing for variety,” recognizing that it is the *variation* itself that merits the blessing.²³

Tosafot outline why this *berakha* is applicable to wine specifically and not any food item, like bread or meat. According to their analysis, wine has two unique qualities of wine that merit this special *berakha*: (1) טַיַב, it satiates, and (2) וְנִשְׂמְחָה, it causes happiness.²⁴ Unlike bread and meat which only satiate and do not bring joy (*simcha*), wine holds these multiple attributes, making it worthy of this multi-dimensional *berakha*.

Given that bread and meat do not possess these attributes, we can imagine what constitutes these qualities.²⁵ At the root level, טַיַב is “to support” and “to strengthen,” beyond a typical sense of sustenance that is achieved through consuming food. These unique qualities—particularly when reading *se'id* more closely—are equally unique to HRT, a product and a process that engenders support and *simcha*.

Ha'tov ve'ha'meitiv is recited when a new wine is introduced in the middle of a meal. Rishonim debate whether the wine must be new *and* better, but all agree that it must be different in some manner. In this way, the Rishonim understand the emphasis of *ha'tov*

²³ R' Melamed's analysis: *This law is unique to wine. If people were eating one type of bread and then began eating another type of bread, the original "Hamotzi" blessing covers the second bread as well. The same is true of different types of meat; one blessing is enough for them all. Only for wine did the sages institute a special blessing for variety.*

This is because wine is unique in that not only does it satiate, it also gladdens the heart. In addition, each type of wine has its own unique character, and when additional types of wine are consumed in company there is greater joy. This is why the sages instituted a special blessing over the consumption of additional types of wine (Berachot 59b; Tosafot and Rosh ad loc.).

²⁴ See also the Rosh for a further elaboration about the unique quality of wine.

²⁵ The Ran points out that this is a French custom and that some do, in fact, say *ha'tov ve'ha'meitiv* on bread.

ve'ha'meitiv on the newness itself, rather than the wine. It is fundamentally the variation—the *shinui*—that is blessed.²⁶ This is further exemplified by the approach of R' Kalonymos Ha'zaken who teaches that one can bless *ha'tov ve'ha'meitiv* even *after* drinking the wine in appreciation of the change that happened.

Rashi, Rashbam, and the Rosh argue that to merit this blessing, the wine must be not only new, but new and better.²⁷ To merit this berakha, there must be a change and an improvement; Rashi comments that the new wine must be טוב מן הראשון, more *tov* than before. For them, *ha'tov ve'hameitiv* is about positive, new change and a transformation for the better. What constitutes “better” among commentators is up for exploration, including the Nachalat Tzvi who suggests that something that is better for our bodies would certainly be elevated and improved (משובח) enough to warrant a blessing,²⁸ and the Terumat HaDeshen who claims that as long as there is a felt sense of *simcha*, the wine can be blessed.²⁹

Rabeinu Tam,³⁰ on the other hand, argues that simply the newness of the wine is enough to merit this blessing. In this perspective, it is newness and change itself that is *tov*. The transformation does not need to be a “positive change,” change is positive enough to warrant this blessing.

Supporting this is the notion that even if one said *borei perei hagafen* and had both types of wine in mind, they still—according to some—say *hatov ve'ha'meitiv*.³¹

This position for positive or neutral changes in the wine aligns with another principle we find in the gemara and later codified throughout halakhic discourse: the notion that one need not be *entirely* or *exclusively* full of joy or happiness about the action or activity in order to bless *ha'tov ve'ha'meitiv*. As we learn in the gemara (Berakhot 60a):

²⁶ See the Meiri *Beit HaBechirah* Berakhot 59b and R' Kalonymos Ha'Zaken as quoted in *Beit HaLevi, Inyanim Shonim, Be'Inyan Birkat Ha'tov Ve'ha'meitiv Be'emtzta Seuda*.

²⁷ Rashi's comment to Berakhot 59b: שינוי יין - שתה יין בסעודה והביאו לו יין אחר טוב מן הראשון אין צריך לברך בורא פרי הגפן. It is worth noting, however, that Rashi does not include this sense of improvement in his comment in a parallel conversation in Pesachim 101a, and simply says שהביאו לו יין מחבית אחרת. See also Rashbam on Pesachim 101a, and Rosh on Berakhot 59b.

²⁸ See Nachalat Tzvi OH 165:1-2 and Bach 165:2.

²⁹ Terumat HaDeshen Siman 34

³⁰ See also the Mordechai Pesachim 35b and Nachalat Tzvi OH 165:1-2.

³¹ Nachalat Tzvi OH 165:1

ועל הטובה כו'. היכי דמי? כגון דאשכח מציאה, אף על גב דרעה היא לדידיה, דאי שמע בה מלכא שקיל לה מיניה, השתא מיהא טובה היא.

[The Mishnah teaches that one must bless for the good just as one blesses for the bad.] What are the circumstances [of this injunction]? In a case where one found a lost object, despite the fact that it is [potentially ultimately] bad for him because if the king heard about it, he would certainly take it from him. It is favorable now in this moment.

When one finds a lost object *even though* they are fearful that a king will hear about it and seize the object, they should bless *ha'atov ve'ha'meitiv*, for in that moment they feel the joy and benefit of being united with this object.

This is codified by all major *poskim*, who agree that one should bless *hatov ve'hametiv* even if they are fearful or worried about the eventual outcome of an event.³² One need not feel only jubilation or excitement; if one feels worry, anxiety, fear—none of these prevents an individual from reciting this *berakha*. If something positive happens and we are afraid a king or a cop or a transphobic doctor will take it away, we still bless! The mishnah is read as though to say: bless the bad that is part of the good.

To bring this analysis back to our case, we know that transition is a complex, beautiful process: by participating in co-creating ourselves and authentically embodying who we are, we receive the benefit of alignment, of freedom, and of wholeness. We simultaneously may be fearful of the outcomes. What will happen? What will we lose? And, as in this cautionary moment codified in *halakha*, we open ourselves up to danger from the “kings” around us who seek to suppress us. This *berakha* can hold this, and it recognizes the ways in which the joy of subjugated people *always* opens us up to harm, retaliation, or persecution.

Our first example of *ha'tov ve'ha'meitiv* in practice being the introduction of new wine to a Shabbat table helps us understand the power of this blessing to honor a specific moment of change and variety, honoring transformation and blessing not specifically the wine itself but the very fact that we might encounter a new flavor and sensation as we anticipate it. This aspect of variety (Rabeinu Tam) and improvement (Rashi et al) gives voice to a significant aspect of what I experience through taking hormones, and conveys part of what I am seeking to bless. This analogy helps get at my sense of *hana'ah* here in this case: the benefit that comes with improvement and enhancement, but also that acknowledges variety, distinction and change. It is, in some ways, *yoter min ha'rishonin* to use Rashi's language of elevation as a deeper approximation of myself that I co-create through HRT. And in some ways it is simply *shinui*—a change, neither superior nor inferior, but just

³² See, for example, Tur OH 222: שירא שמא יבא לו רעה ממנה כגון שמצא מציאה אע"פ: מברך על הטובה הטוב והמטיב אע"פ שירא שמא יבא לו רעה ממנה כגון שמצא מציאה אע"פ: שירא שמא ישמע למלך ויקח כל אשר לו

different. This *berakha* contains and conveys all of that, and when it is used it helps me articulate more deeply what is happening when I take testosterone daily.

Al Ha'Geshamim: On Rain

We turn now to our second example in which this blessing is said: *al ha'geshamim*. As we saw, this moment is named specifically in the Mishnah alongside “hearing of good news” more generally. Rain is good news, but it carries particular associations and conditions that make it worthy of being mentioned in and of itself.

The gemara (Ta’anit 6b) describes the particular moment in which this *berakha* is to be said: משיצא חתן לקראת כלה, “from when the groom goes out to meet the bride.” Responding to the ambiguous language of the gemara, Rabeinu Gershom explains that this metaphor of loving partners is used to describe “moment at which the rain falls in such a way that the water from above comes to meet the waters from below as beloveds meet each other.”³³ The gemara highlights the ways in which the rain and the land are in deep partnership: the land requires the rain in order to produce that which it is intended to produce. Together they are co-creators of harvest, and *ha'tov ve'ha'meitiv* is recited over this collaborative creation process.

The sensation of rain itself is possibly unpleasant and does not itself cause *hana'ah*. Here the rain is appreciated in its representation of relief. This is highlighted in the debate upon the precise moment one should recite *ha'tov ve'ha'meitiv* on the rains: is it upon hearing *that* rain has fallen, upon hearing the rain that *is* falling?³⁴ Which is the good news? Hearing *that* the rain is falling and hearing the rain *that* is falling are two distinct emotional experiences: the latter being an expression of gratitude that is matched with a felt sense of physicality (hearing, in this case), and the latter being an expression of appreciation that is not coupled with a physical sensation.³⁵ In both cases, though, the rain represents a sign of goodness to come, and both *is* and *is not* about a blessing-worthy physical experience.

It—or news of its presence—comes to correct, heal, or offer relief after a period of distress over lack of rain, צער מחמת עצירת גשמים. In the language of the Shulkhan Aruch (OH 221:1):

אם היו בצער מחמת עצירת גשמים וירדו גשמים מברכים עליהם אע"פ שלא ירדו עדיין כדי
רביעה

³³ See Rabeinu Gershom on Ta’anit 6b.

³⁴ See Rema's gloss to S"A OH 221:2.

³⁵ See Meiri *Beit HaBechirah* Berakhot 59b.

If there is distress (*tza'ar*) caused by a delay in rains and the rains fall, bless upon them even if there has not been enough rain yet to cause fructification (i.e. heavy rainfall)

There has not yet been enough rain to materially relieve one from the distress that would be caused by a lack of rain. But the *tza'ar* that the drought causes is relieved, at least in some part, by the falling rain.

Here it is worth noting that the Rambam—seemingly uniquely—does not emphasize suffering as a prerequisite of reciting this blessing over rain.³⁶ For almost others (and even potentially for the Rambam, see Bi'ur Halakha on OH 221:1), *tza'ar* that is caused by a period of delay is a necessary component of reciting this blessing over *geshem*.

And this is, in part, what has led to the limited use of this *berakha* throughout the diaspora, in places where rain patterns are distinct from those of *eretz yisrael*.³⁷ As the Rema (OH 221:1) notes:

הגה ומה שאין אנו נוהגים בזמן הזה בברכת הגשמים משום דמדינות אלו תדירים בגשמים ואין נעצרין כל כך (סמ"ג ואגור וכל בו):

And we do not have this practice now to bless the rains, because in our lands the rain falls and it does not stop in this manner.

If there is *tza'ar* without the rain, then one blesses its arrival. However, it is not the *tza'ar* itself that enables the blessing, but the *simcha* that follows when the source of the *tza'ar* is addressed. In explaining the Rema's comment, the Mishnah Berura clarifies (OH 221:1, 1-2):

(א) אם היו בצער - אפשר דבא"י שמצוי שם יובש גדול וכשבא עת הגשמים והגשם יורד בזמנו כל אחד שמח בו ...

"If there is distress" - this is possible in *eretz yisrael*, where it is very dry, and when the season of rain comes and the rain falls in the proper time, every person is joyful (*sameach*) from it...

(ב) ואין נעצרין כ"כ - ר"ל ואין להם שמחה בירידת הגשמים ואה"נ אפילו באותן ארצות שרגילין במטר אם נעצרו הגשמים והיה העולם בצער ואח"כ ירדו גשמים שצריך לברך:

"And [the rain] does not stop in this manner" - this is to say that people don't experience joy (*simcha*) when the rain falls. And granted that if in these lands where there is regular rainfall the rain stopped and there was *tza'ar* and then the rain fell, it would be necessary to bless.

³⁶ See Bi'ur Halakha OH 221:1 for an analysis of *tza'ar* in this instance, and Arukh haShulkhan OH 221:1.

³⁷ See Mishnah Berurah OH 221.

The *tza'ar* is relevant inasmuch as joy follows when it is alleviated. If the rain will cause *simcha*, it is worthy of a blessing. This centrality of *tza'ar* and its antithesis, *simcha*, is important to uplift in our exploration of HRT: I believe there are potentially powerful conclusions and analogies to be drawn between *tza'ar* and dysphoria that enhance this *berakha* as a statement of relief from dysphoria (here analogized to *tza'ar* that emerges without the falling of rains). As in the case of rain, taking testosterone does not *immediately* bring material relief, but just as *tza'ar* is alleviated as the rain falls, so dysphoria can be relieved and broader anticipation of euphoria can arrive as one takes HRT in its various forms.

In this case, *hatov ve'hameitiv* is recited to honor the relief caused by something that will, over time, lead to a material transformation that will be of benefit. This is a complex spiritual distinction. This is not to say that the blessing is made on the future outcome itself, which would subvert the norms of *berakhot*, as expressed by the Rambam³⁸:

שאינ מברכין על העתיד להיות אלא על מה שארע עתה:

Blessings are not recited in consideration of future possibilities, but rather on what happens at present.

In some sense, it is recited over a moment of indirect benefit that symbolizes a future outcome; we bless to express gratitude for the symbol itself alongside our anticipation of the future. This is profoundly different from an appreciation of the experience of rain itself. Unlike the apple which is blessed for its pleasurable experience, the rain in this case is blessed for what will come *from* it, for what it will cause, and for how the land is transformed by its presence.

As with our previous cases, in the case of *geshem*, the benefit must be felt in a real, substantive way. This is expressed most clearly in the gemara's (Berakhot 59b) instruction that specifically those who own land—those who have a direct stake in the fact of the rain falling—should recite this blessing. The common understanding and plain meaning of this text is the following: upon hearing of rainfall, one who co-owns land with another should say *ha'tov ve'ha'meitiv*, and one who owns land entirely on their own should say *shehechyanu*.³⁹ This distinction is used to articulate a principle about the distinction between *ha'tov ve'hameitiv* and *shehechyanu*: the former is said in moments in which others share in the *hana'ah* in some meaningful way, the latter is said when the

³⁸ Rambam Mishneh Torah 10:4

³⁹ See Berakhot 59b, the Rif (paraphrased below), Ritva, Rashba for examples.

individual alone is impacted by the news or the action.⁴⁰ In the case of rain as with the case of the introduction of new wine, *ha'tov ve'ha'meitiv* is recited on things that will bring others into our joy.

When the benefit of something is exclusively mine, I should recite *shehechyanu*; when the *hana'ah* is *shelo ve'al shel chaveiro* I should recite *hatov ve'hameitiv*. This may seem to pose a potential challenge to readers who see their particular acts of transition, and specifically taking HRT, as singularly beneficial acts akin to purchasing a new piece of clothing that they alone will wear. However, there is nuance to be explored here, regarding both this *berakha* and the experience of HRT.

This sense of connection to others and acknowledgement of who is intimately involved in one's *hana'ah* and pleasure is why *ha'tov ve'hameitiv* is recited upon receiving a gift, rather than *shehechyanu*—the blessing most commonly said upon acquiring a new item for oneself—because the gift-giver will experience joy (*simcha*) from having given me the gift.⁴¹ The benefit is mine exclusively, but there is joy to be had in this shared experience. *Simcha* that is shared—even if the *hana'ah* is individual—warrants *ha'tov ve'ha'meitiv*.

The Rosh argues—holding a minority opinion—that even if one *does not* have partners in owning the land, they should *still* recite *hatov ve'ha'meitiv* (rather than *shehechyanu*). This is because there is collective benefit derived from the rain, paraphrased below:⁴²

The Ri"ף says that if one co-owns the land, they should say *ha'tov ve'ha'meitiv*, and if they own the land singularly, they should say *shehechyanu*. And this is not how I perceive this case—such a requirement that a person must have a partner in owning the land is unnecessary, for when an individual owns land, all of his neighbors are joined together with him. [He does not need a co-owner of the land, because owning the land makes one a co-owner with all other land-owners.]

...

In order to make this *berakha* it is not necessary that there should be another partner with him in the goodness and benefit, just that it will be good news for others along with him.

Therefore in this case [of rain] even if there are not others with him in owning this land, there are others together in the good news with him, for the good news of rain is for all those who own land, and so he should bless *hatov ve'ha'meitiv*.

⁴⁰ See Tur OH 222: על שמעות שהן טובות לו ולאחרים מברך הטוב והמטיב; and SA OH 222: אין לברך הטוב והמטיב אלא אם כן יש אחר עמו דהכי משמע הטוב לו והמטיב לחבירו והוא הדין אם אשתו ובניו עמו אבל אם הוא יחידי לא

⁴¹ SA OH 223:5

⁴² See also the Meiri *Beit HaBechirah* Berakhot 59b, who similarly argues: אבל הגשמים הרי התועלת מגיע לכל העולם שעל כל פנים איכא אחריני בהדיה.

The Rosh brings this *sevara* to wine as well. After introducing the notion that one should not say this blessing if they are not dining with others, he concludes that one *can* bless *ha'tov ve'ha'meitiv* if there are others in their household, *even if* they are not partaking in the meal itself. It is good for them, too, he says.⁴³

This *sevara* from the Rosh articulated something for me that I had felt and experienced in my own transition, which is perhaps, at least in part, what may have called me to this *berakha* in the first place. I have not felt like the exclusive beneficiary of HRT, even though it is in just my body alone when I take and bless it. Like the Rosh's assessment of *geshem*, I feel connected to all others who are depending on this transformation-enabling substance. And like the Rosh's assessment of wine in a household in which there are others present who are not partaking of the meal itself—it is a good for those in our households, in both the most limited and expansive sense.

Perhaps this is why the *pasuk*-turned-maxim-turned-principle לב יודע מרת נפשו, “the heart knows its own bitterness”⁴⁴—or more commonly understood “we know our own experiences”—ends with ובשמחתו לא יתערב זר “and a זר does not join in their happiness.” A זר / *zar* is an “other,” one who places themselves on the outside, defined by Jastrow as an “oppressor” or “enemy” from the root זור, “to go around” or “to turn away.” According to this *pasuk*, a *zar* doesn't join in our *simcha*, but a beloved comrade *does*. The Rosh helped me see the second half of this *pasuk* as a warning, not a description. A *zar* will not join in our euphoric expressions, and they will not find *simcha* with and through our joy. The *acheirim* who love us, however, will. Therefore the joys of our transition are טובות לנו ולאחרים *tovot lanu u'le'acheirim*,⁴⁵ and merit this blessing.

Here we see a thread that weaves together each of these cases: *simcha*. The capacity to create *simcha* is what makes wine most unique, and worthy of this specific *berakha* when a new bottle is opened on Shabbat. *Simcha* is what is brought by rainfall to alleviate distress and concern over a dry spell, catalyzing our recitation of *ha'tov va'ha'meitiv*. *Simcha* is felt by one who gives a gift, making the experience of receiving a gift an experience of collaboration that warrants *ha'tov ve'ha'meitiv*. And in our case of testosterone and HRT more broadly, we acknowledge the ways in which others—our beloveds, G!d-willing—find

⁴³ Later Rishonim and Achronim continue to debate the degree to which one must be in *shutafut* with others in order to say this blessing as opposed to *shehechyanu*. Many argue that the presence of one's family counts as *shutafut*; see, for example, S"A OC 223:1.

⁴⁴ See “Towards Halakhic Euphoria” (fn. 4); R' Xava de Cordova's *teshuva* “Are Trans Women Obligated in Niddah? How Can That Obligation be Fulfilled?” (fn. 1) & Ariel Ya'akov Berry's *teshuva* “Milah & Hatafat Dam Brit in a Case of Sakanah (Danger)” published by the *Trans Halakha Project* (2023).

⁴⁵ See the Tur's language OH 222: על שמועות שהן טובות לו ולאחרים מברך הטוב והמטיב

simcha in our transitions through their solidarity and love. This solidarity is one that makes this moment, too, worthy of this *berakha*. As the Arukh HaShukchan writes about *ha'tov ve'ha'meitiv*:⁴⁶

ואינו מבורר מה נקרא שמועה טובה, והנראה שצריך להיות טובה חשובה שמח בזה הרבה, הן שמחה של ממון והן מין שמחה אחרת, ובממון תלוי לפי עשירותו ועניותו, דמה שלעני הוא דבר גדול הוה לעשיר דבר קטן, והכל לפי העניין, וברכות אלו הם בשם ומלכות.

And it is not clear what is called “good news,” and it appears that it needs to be significantly good that it would bring someone much joy, for example the joy brought by resources (*mamon*) and others like this. And regarding *mamon* this depends on their wealth and positionality, that something for a person who is lacking resources would be a significant event might not be so significant for someone who is positioned differently. This is how we understand *simcha* here, [that it shifts based on someone’s positionality and experience]. And these blessings necessitate *shem u'malkhut*.

Simcha is a uniquely felt sensation, and in these cases is brought on by a sense of renewed variation, of improvement, of transformation, of anticipation, and of solidarity. Each of these is contained and expressed in *ha'tov ve'ha'meitiv* in a powerful way, as *simcha* unites and undergirds them all. It is this *simcha* for me—perhaps best translated as “euphoria”—that makes this *berakha* a most powerful one to recite on the application of testosterone.

Those for Whom Transitioning is a Mitzvah

Our discussion thus far has addressed the first two categories of blessings: *hana'ah* and *shevach*. We now turn to the third category: *birkat mitzvah*, a blessing said upon the fulfillment of a *mitzvah*.

There are those who argue that to transition is—in and of itself (*begufo*)—a *mitzvah de'oraita*. Notably, Lexi Kohanski wrote in her *shita* published as part of the Teshuva-Writing Collective:

Gender transition is a mitzvah for trans Jews. The positive, d'Oraita commandment “Be whole with Hashem your god” (Dvarim 18:13) obligates us, among other things, to remove any belief we may harbor that our signs of gender have the power to determine our gender for ill. A trans Jew, for whom any given sign of gender influences their gender to be not as they desire, is halakhically obligated in any concretely achievable acts of transition that will be effective to remove that belief.

⁴⁶ Arukh HaShulchan OH 222

Because transitioning is a mitzvah, our Torah and tradition acknowledge and guide us through this core life journey.

For those aligned with this *shitah*, achievable actions towards transition are part of fulfilling the mitzvah of *temimut*, making ourselves whole with HaShem based on the *pasuk* תָּמִים תְּהִיָּה עִם ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ ("Be whole with Hashem your God").

So, if taking testosterone—or hormones in general—are a behavior that enables the fulfillment of this mitzvah, does the action of taking testosterone in daily gel necessitate a *berakha shel mitzvah*? In order to answer this, we must understand 1) whether taking HRT is a direct fulfillment of a *mitzvah* in some way, and 1a) whether the fulfillment of such a *mitzvah* would require a blessing within the category of *birkot mitzvah* and 1b) what would the precise formula for this blessing be.

Birkot mitzvah are said on the action of doing a *mitzvah*, and are recited immediately upon the action itself: אמר רב יהודה אמר שמואל כל המצות מברך עליהן עובר לעשייתן / "Rav Yehuda said that Shmuel said: With regard to all the mitzvot, one recites a blessing over them prior to [over] their performance" (Pesachim 7b). There are two main approaches among the Rishonim as to what these blessings are intending to do. The first is that of the Rambam, who sees *birkot mitzvah* as akin to that of *hana'ah*: וכשם שמברכין על ההניה כך מברכין על כל מצוה ומצוה ואחר כך יעשה אותה (Mishneh Torah Berakhot 1:3). The second is that of the Ritva, arguing that *birkot mitzvah* are for the purpose of sanctifying oneself before G!d prior to doing the *mitzvah* לברך על המצות עובר לעשייתן כדי שיתקדש תחלה בברכה ויגלה ויודיע שהוא עושה *mitzvah* (Ritva on Pesachim 7a).

Not all mitzvot or *mitzvah*-related behaviors necessitate the recitation of a *berakha*. said in moments in which a particular *mitzvah* is fulfilled through a behavior or action, such as taking the lulav over which we recite אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ עַל נְטִילַת לִילָב בְּרוּךְ ... אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ לְהַדְלִיק נֵר שֶׁל חֲנוּכָה over which we recite אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ לְהַדְלִיק נֵר שֶׁל חֲנוּכָה. In order to bless over a mitzvah, one must be *yoztei* in the mitzvah through that particular act. In other words, *birkot mitzvah* bless one's state of commandedness, but are evoked particularly and specifically to acknowledge the fulfillment of a mitzvah that immediately occurs after the blessing's recitation.

Unlike these examples, the *mitzvah* of *temimut* is never fully complete; one cannot point to one specific action that indicates that they have fulfilled it entirely. In this way, transition is more like *tzedakah*, a *mitzvah* over which there is no *berakha*, than *lulav*.

The Rashba (Teshuvot HaRashba 1:8)⁴⁷ explains why various *mitzvot* are done without a recitation of a *berakha*:

⁴⁷ This is an excerpt from his larger *teshuva*; I have included only the relevant sections for our cases.

ואין הענין תלוי בטעם אחד שאתן לך כלל אחד בהם. אלא כל מצוה שאין בה מעשה אין מברכין עליה כגון השמטת כספים וכיוצא בהן.

וכן אין מברכין על מצוה שאינה תלויה כולה ביד העושה. מפני שאפשר שלא יתרצה בה חברו ונמצא מעשה מתבטל. כגון מתנות עניים והלוואת הדלים ונתינת צדקה והענקה וכיוצא בהם.

וכן על דבר שהוא מסור לבית דין כגון עשיית הדינין שמא לא יקבלו בעלי דין את דעתו. וכן כל מצוה שהיא באה מתוך עברה כגון השבת הגולה וחזרת הרבית שלא צונו לגזול כדי להשיב וליקח את האם כדי שנחזור ונשלח אותה ועל כיוצא באלו...

ואין מברכין על מצוה שעיקרה אינה מצוה כגון חליצה ויבום שהעיקר משום פריה ורביה והיא אינה מצוה על פריה ורביה.

וכן על ביקור חולים ותנחומי אבלים והבאת שלום בין אדם לחברו מפני שהן תלויות ביד אחרים דדילמא לא מקבלי מיניה ובידם לעקור ממנו מצוה זו.

[The fact that there are multiple *mitzvot* over which a *berakha* is not recited] is not dependent on one reason that I can offer, and they do not have one singular principle that unites them. Rather, we do not bless on *mitzvot* that do not have a *ma'aseh* (עליה) (כל מצוה שאין בה מעשה אין מברכין עליה), for example *shemitat kesafim* and *mitzvot* like this.

And further we don't bless on any *mitzvah* that is not entirely dependent on the behaviors of the individual. Because it is possible that the other person is not desirous of doing the *mitzvah*, and we'd find that the action is nullified. Like giving to those who are in poverty, and loaning to those who are in need of a loan, and giving *tzedakah*, and other *mitzvot* like these.

And further, on things that would be done in a *bet din*, like adjudicating cases, we don't bless those lest the people of the court do not accept the opinion of the judge. And further all *mitzvot* that come through an *aveira* (transgression) like returning something that has been stolen, for we were not commanded to steal in order to return lost objects, and similar cases like this do not necessitate a *berakha*...

And we don't bless on any *mitzvah* that the behavior itself is not the *mitzvah*, but instead it is fulfilling a larger *mitzvah*, like *halitzah* and *yibum*, for they are actually done for the sake of *periyah u'reviyah* (procreation)...

And so with visiting the sick and comforting mourners and bringing peace between people, because all of these are dependent on others, and perhaps a person's actions will not be accepted by them, and they will subsequently have uprooted a *mitzvah*.

He argues on two fronts that are particularly relevant to our case: we do not bless *mitzvot* for which there is no specific action (כל מצוה שאין בה מעשה אין מברכין עליה); we don't bless *mitzvot* that are done in order to fulfill another *mitzvah* (מצוה שעיקרה אינה מצוה).

In our case of *temimut*, there is no specific *ma'aseh* that is done over which the blessing would be appropriate (like *shemitat kesafim* and other obligations that require multiple actions and behaviors over time), similarly taking HRT is taken not as a specific *mitzvah* but as the fulfillment of a larger *mitzvah*. Like *yibum* aims to fulfill the *mitzvah* of procreation, HRT aims to fulfill the *mitzvah* of *temimut*.⁴⁸

Additionally, because the outcomes of HRT are unknown and fluid as one transitions, taking HRT may not lead to one fulfilling the *mitzvah* of *temimut* entirely. Also, because transitions are varied and unique and may not include HRT at all, the fulfillment of *temimut* does universally hinge on this particular action. Therefore, it is the case that here, too, no blessing should be said.

It might be that our case of taking HRT might be more similar to an individual behavior that is done on Shabbat in order to contribute to the overall sense of Shabbat observance. On Shabbat we do not make a *berakha shel mitzvah* over every one of the behaviors we do that are associated with *oneg Shabbat*, like eating delicious foods, for example. Instead, we bless the food as is typical, using a *berakha shel hana'ah*. We do not recite a blessing while eating delicious foods, "...who has commanded me to observe Shabbat." In this view, transitioning is a *mitzvah*, but the individual behaviors associated with one's transition and medical self-realization through various means do not necessitate a *berakha shel mitzvah*.⁴⁹ (Here we see another connection to *ha'tov ve'hameitiv*, which is the enhancement of Shabbat through the introduction of a new wine.)

It is again clear here that a *mitzvah* that requires many actions—like *shemitat kesafim*, *tzedakah*, Shabbat—and that itself is only one part of the *mitzvah* does not require a *berakha shel mitzvah*.

While this does not require a *berakha shel mitzvah*, our tradition has an additional way to acknowledge that an action is being done for the sake of a *mitzvah*: the recitation of a short *kavanah* prior to recitation of a *berakha* that helps one cultivate presence and awareness. This is in the spirit of the Ritva's approach to *birkat mitzvah*, which is designed In this case,

⁴⁸ See also R' Elazar of Worms in Sefer HaRokeach Chapter 366 who argues that the chachamim did not establish a blessing for mitzvot that are generally logical and common sense and are therefore performed by non-Jews as well, as the declaration "*asher kidshanu be'mitzvotav*" implies a particularism to the Jewish people. Given that transition & temimut are rooted in 'svara,' no berakha would be said for this blessing, as in the case of tzedakah.

⁴⁹ And here it is important to note that there are those (Rambam & HaRav Soloveitchik) who argue that *birkot mitzvah* are parallel to *birkot hana'ah*, and their purpose is to acknowledge the benefit we are to receive from performing this *mitzvah*.

one might say לְשֵׁם מִצְוֹת תְּמִימֵי תְהִיָּה / *leshem mitzvat temim tihyeh*, “for the sake of the *mitzvah* of being whole with G!d” daily prior to making the blessing *ha’tov ve’ha’meitiv*.⁵⁰

Psak

One who administers testosterone daily may recite *barukh ha-tov ve’hameitiv* with *shem u’malchut*:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם הַטוֹב וְהַמְּטִיב

In my experience and analysis, the benefits derived from our transitions are not individual *hana’ah*, but are part of a broader collective experience in which *simcha* is experienced by others. This practice acknowledges the ways in which the impact of taking hormones both does *and* does not reflect a collective benefit (as described by the Rosh).⁵¹

However, at times when a *berakha* does not not unambiguously fulfill all necessary conditions and when there are those who are particularly concerned about making a *berakha levatalah*, many adopt the practice of saying the blessing without *shem u’malchut*—without acknowledging G!d’s name and royalty. This absence is our tradition’s way of acknowledging that much but not all of the criteria for the blessing has been fulfilled. And so, because this *berakha* is used in moments that honor an experience that is both individual and collective, and out of concern for reciting a *berakha* in which not all of the conditions are fulfilled, those who feel ambivalence about the collective benefit of taking hormones and are *choshesh* about reciting a *berakha levatalah* could consider reciting the blessing without *shem u’malchut*:

בְּרוּךְ הַטוֹב וְהַמְּטִיב

One who holds by the *shitah* that transition is a *mitzvah* and sees this action as part of their fulfillment of the *mitzvah* of *temimut*, may recite a short *kavanah* beforehand, such as:

לְשֵׁם מִצְוֹת תְּמִימֵי תְהִיָּה or לְשֵׁם מִצְוֹת תְּמִימוֹת

⁵⁰ This formulation is described by Lexi Kohanski in *Tefillat Trans*, “intention-setting upon undertaking a step towards gender transition” and is based on similar kavanot made while doing *mitzvot* that require intention like tying *tzitzit*.

⁵¹ Prior to writing this *teshuva*, my practice was to recite this *berakha* without *shem u’malchut*. After opening myself to these sources and preparing this *teshuva*, I have begun reciting the full blessing with *shem u’malchut*. As Jamie Weisbach recently taught (“Day of Learning with the Trans Halakha Project,” 2023), the process of writing a *teshuva*—if we do it right—should teach us something as writers.

It is recommended that this *berakha* be incorporated into the regular daily morning embodied *seder* of blessings referred to as *birkot hashachar*. A *seder* that incorporates *hatov ve'hameitiv* can be found in the attached Appendix.

Appendix

The following *sugya* details a *seder* of embodied practices and their proper blessings that should be said as one rises in the morning that is later described as "*birkot ha'shachar*." According to this *sugya* (and later *poskim*), these blessings should be said with their accompanying actions.⁵²

Berakhot 60b⁵³

כי שמע קול תרנגולא, לימא: "ברוך ... אשר נתן לשכוי בינה להבחין בין יום ובין לילה". כי פתח עיניה, לימא: "ברוך ... פוקח עורים". כי תריץ ויתב, לימא: "ברוך ... מתיר אסורים". כי לביש, לימא: "ברוך ... מלביש ערומים". כי זקיף, לימא: "ברוך ... זוקף כפופים". כי נחית לארעא, לימא: "ברוך ... רוקע הארץ על המים". כי מסגי, לימא: "ברוך ... המכין מצעדי גבר". כי סיים מסאניה, לימא: "ברוך ... שעשה לי כל צרכי". כי אסר המייניה, לימא: "ברוך ... אוזר ישראל בגבורה". כי פריס סודרא על רישיה, לימא: "ברוך ... עוטר ישראל בתפארה".

Upon hearing the sound of the rooster, one should recite: Blessed...Who gave the heart/rooster [*sekhvi*] understanding to distinguish between day and night. Upon opening his eyes, one should recite: Blessed...Who opens closed eyes. Upon sitting up straight, one should recite: Blessed...Who sets releases the bound. Upon dressing, one should recite: Blessed...Who clothes the naked. Upon standing up straight, one should recite: Blessed...Who raises those bowed down. Upon descending from one's bed to the ground, one should recite: Blessed...Who spreads the earth above the waters, in thanksgiving for the creation of solid ground upon which to walk. Upon walking, one should recite: Blessed...Who prepares our steps. Upon putting on his shoes, one should recite: Blessed...Who has provided me with all I need. Upon putting on his belt, one should recite: Blessed...Who girds Israel with strength. Upon spreading a shawl upon his head, one should recite: Blessed...Who crowns Israel with glory.

⁵² See Rambam Mishneh Torah Hilkhot Tefillah 7:1-9. Rambam notes that it is common in synagogues and minyanim to recite these as part of a *matbeah* of *tefillah*, recited together in order as separate from those actions, but that this should not be done:

נהגו העם ברב ערינו לברך ברכות אלו זו אחר זו בבית הכנסת בין נתחיבו בהן בין לא נתחיבו בהן, וטעות הוא ואין ראוי לעשות כן ולא יברך ברכה אלא אם כן נתחיב בה:

See also Arukh HaShulchan OH 46:3 for an explanation of why these *berakhot* should be said along with their particular actions. See S"A OH 42:2 who describes the practice of reciting these *berakhot* in a *seder* together:

עכשיו מפני שאין הידים נקיות וגם מפני עמי הארצו' שאינם יודעים אותם נהגו לסדרם בבה"כ ועונין אמן אחריהם ויוצאים ידי חובתן:

⁵³ Translation from Sefaria, *The William Davidson Edition*.

כי מעטף בציצית, לימא: "ברוך ... אשר קדשנו במצותיו וצונו להתעטף בציצית". כי מנח תפילין אדרעיה, לימא: "ברוך ... אשר קדשנו במצותיו וצונו להניח תפילין", ארישיה, לימא: "ברוך ... אשר קדשנו במצותיו וצונו על מצות תפילין". כי משי ידיה, לימא: "ברוך ... אשר קדשנו במצותיו וצונו על נטילת ידים". כי משי אפיה, לימא: ברוך ... המעביר חבלי שינה מעיני ותנומה מעפעפי.

Upon wrapping himself in ritual fringes, one should recite: Blessed...Who has made us holy through His commandments and has commanded us to wrap ourselves in a garment with ritual fringes. Upon donning his phylacteries on his arm, one should recite: Blessed...Who has made us holy through His commandments and has commanded us to don phylacteries. Upon donning phylacteries on his head one should recite: Blessed...Who has made us holy through His commandments and has commanded us to wrap *tefillin*. Upon ritually washing his hands: Blessed...Who has made us holy through His commandments and has commanded us with regard to the washing of the hands. Upon washing his face, one recites: Blessed...Who removes the bands of sleep from my eyes and slumber from my eyelids.

ויהי רצון מלפניך ה' אלהי, שתרגילני בתורתך, ודבקני במצותיך, ואל תביאני לא לידי חטא, ולא לידי עון, ולא לידי נסיון, ולא לידי בזיון. וכף את יצרי להשתעבד לך. ורחקני מאדם רע, ומחבר רע. ודבקני ביצר טוב ובחבר טוב בעולמך. ותנני היום ובכל יום לחן ולחסד ולרחמים בעיניך ובעיני כל רואי, ותגמלני חסדים טובים. ברוך אתה ה' גומל חסדים טובים לעמו ישראל".

And may it be Your will, O Lord my God, to accustom me in Your Torah, attach me to Your mitzvot, and lead me not into transgression, nor into error, nor into iniquity, nor into temptation nor into disgrace. Bend my evil inclination to be subservient to You, and distance me from an evil person and an evil acquaintance. Help me attach myself to the good inclination and to a good friend in Your world. Grant me, today and every day, grace, loving-kindness, and compassion in Your eyes and the eyes of all who see me, and bestow loving-kindness upon me. Blessed are You, O Lord, Who bestows loving-kindness on His people, Israel.

Seder Including Testosterone

Upon waking up, one should recite:

ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם אשר נתן לשכוי בינה להבחין בין יום ובין לילה:
Blessed are You, Adonai our G'd, Eternal Royal, who gives the rooster understanding to distinguish between day and night.

Upon opening their eyes, one should recite:

ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם פוקח עורים:
Blessed are You, Adonai our G'd, Eternal Royal, who opens closed eyes.

Upon sitting up straight, one should recite:

ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם מתיר אסורים:
Blessed are You, Adonai our G'd, Eternal Royal, who releases the bound.

Upon putting one's feet on the ground, one should recite:

ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם רוקע הארץ על המים:
Blessed are You, Adonai our G'd, Eternal Royal, who spreads the earth above the waters.

Upon standing straight, one should recite:

ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם זוקף כפופים:
Blessed are You, Adonai our G'd, Eternal Royal, who straightens the bent.

Upon taking several steps, one should recite:

ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם המכין מצעדי נגבר:
Blessed are You, Adonai our G'd, Eternal Royal, who prepares our steps.

Upon washing one's hands, one should recite:

ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם, אשר קדשנו במצוותיו וצונו על נטילת ידים
Blessed are You, Adonai our G'd, Eternal Royal, who sanctifies us with *mitzvot* and commands us to wash our hands.

Upon washing one's face, one should recite:

ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם המעביר שנה מעיני ותנומה מעפעפי:
Blessed are You, Adonoy our God, King of the Universe, Who removes sleep from my eyes and slumber from my eyelids.

Upon administering testosterone, one should recite:

לשם מצות תמים תהיה
ברוך אתה ה' אלקינו מלך העולם הטוב והמטיב
Blessed are You, Adonai our G'd, Eternal Royal, who is good and increases goodness.

Upon donning tzitzit, one should recite:

ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם אשר קדשנו במצוותיו וצונו על מצות ציצת
Blessed are You, Adonai our G'd, Eternal Royal, who sanctifies us with *mitzvot* and commands us to wear *tzitzit*.

Upon putting on clothing, one should recite:

ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם מלביש ערומים:
Blessed are You, Adonai our G'd, Eternal Royal, who clothes the naked.

Upon putting on shoes, one should recite:

ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם שעשה לי כל צרכי:
Blessed are You, Adonai our G'd, Eternal Royal, who provided me with all my needs.

Upon buckling or tying a belt, buttoning pants, or the equivalent, one should recite:

ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם אוזר ישראל בגבורה:
Blessed are You, Adonai our G'd, Eternal Royal, who girds Israel with strength.

Upon putting on a kippah, a hat, a headband, or a tichel, one should recite:

ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם עוטר ישראל בתפארה:
Blessed are You, Adonai our G'd, Eternal Royal, who crowns Israel with glory.

Once fully dressed, one should recite:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם שֶׁעָשִׂינִי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

Blessed are You, Adonai our G!d, Eternal Royal, who made me a Jew.

וְיִהְיֶה רְצוֹן מִלְּפָנֶיךָ ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ שֶׁתְּרַגְּלֵנוּ בְּתוֹרַתְךָ וְדַבְּרֵנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתֶיךָ, וְאַל תִּבְיָאֵנוּ לֹא לַיְדֵי חֶטָּא וְלֹא לַיְדֵי עֲבָרָה וְעוֹן וְלֹא לַיְדֵי נִסְיוֹן וְלֹא לַיְדֵי בְּזִיּוֹן וְאַל יִשְׁלַט בְּנוּ יִצְרָר הָרַע וְהִרְחִיקֵנוּ מֵאָדָם רָע וּמִחֶבֶר רָע וְדַבְּרֵנוּ בְּיִצְרָר הַטּוֹב וּבְמַעֲשֵׂים טוֹבִים וְכוּף אֶת־יָרְכּוּ לְהַשְׁתַּעֲבֵד־לְךָ וְתִגְּנוּ הַיּוֹם וּבְכָל־יוֹם לַחַן וְלִחְסֵד וּלְרַחֲמִים בְּעֵינֶיךָ וּבְעֵינֵי כָּל־רֹאֲיָיו וְתִגְּמַלְנוּ חֲסֵדִים טוֹבִים: בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' גּוֹמֵל חֲסֵדִים טוֹבִים לַעֲמּוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל:

And may it be Your will Adonai, our G!d and G!d of our ancestors, that we habituate ourselves in Torah and that we cleave to your *mizvot*. Do not bring us into the hands of transgression or harm, do not cause us to be tested or disgraced. Let us not be ruled over by the harmful inclinations, and keep us far from people—especially companions—who seek harm. Help us cleave to good instincts, and to do good deeds, and compel our instincts towards harm to fall. Grant us this day and every day grace, kindness, compassion in your eyes and the eyes of all who perceive us, and bestow upon us abundant goodness. Blessed are You Adonai, who bestowed bountiful kindness to the collective of Israel.