

### ***Birkat Ilanot***

*Approved on December 15, 2025, by a vote of 19-0-0. Voting in favor: Rabbis Pamela Barmash, Emily Barton, Chaya Bender, Suzanne Brody, Nate Crane, Aviva Fellman, Joshua Heller, Barry Leff, Amy Levin, Daniel Nevins, Matthew S. Nover, Micah Peltz, Avram Israel Reisner, Karen Reiss Medwed, Rachel Safman, Robert Scheinberg, Miriam T. Spitzer, Stewart Vogel, and Raysh Weiss. Voting Against: None. Abstaining: None.*

#### **שאלה (Question)**

Which trees are appropriate for reciting *birkat ilanot*?

#### **תשובה (Response)**

*Birkat ilanot* is a blessing recited upon seeing trees when they begin to bloom in Spring. A description of the ritual first appears in the sixth chapter of Bavli Berakhot.

אמר רב יהודה האי מאן דנפיק ביומי ניסן וחזי אילני דקא מלבלבי אומר ברוך שלא חיסר בעולמו כלום<sup>1</sup>  
וברא בו בריות טובות ואילנות טובות<sup>2</sup> להתנאות<sup>3</sup> בהן בני אדם

Rav Yehudah would say, the one who goes out during the days of Nissan and sees trees that are blossoming should say, “Blessed...who has withheld nothing from the world and created good creatures and good trees within it so that human beings can enjoy them.”

(Bavli Berakhot 43b)

This chapter of Berakhot describes blessings for before and after eating. The opening passage of the chapter searches for the source of the obligation to recite a blessing before eating food. Ultimately, the Talmud asserts an obligation to recite a blessing before deriving benefit from anything in this world and claims that deriving benefit without a blessing is like stealing from God.<sup>3</sup> The description of *birkat ilanot* appears with descriptions of blessings over fragrances, showing how the rabbis extend the meaning of benefit to include the sense of sight and smell.

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<sup>1</sup> At the end of the *teshuvah*, I provide a handout with the text of the blessing as it appears in Siddur Sim Shalom (p. 710). The slight changes from the *germara*—changing כלום to דבר, treating אילנות as a masculine noun, and changing בהם to בהן—reflect the tendency to use biblical Hebrew instead of rabbinic Hebrew. See the discussion in Rabbi Rob Scheinberg’s dissertation on page 190:

[https://www.academia.edu/74707150/Seligmann\\_Baer\\_s\\_Seder\\_Avodat\\_Yisrael\\_1868\\_Liturgy\\_Ideology\\_and\\_the\\_Standardization\\_of\\_Nusah\\_Ashkenaz](https://www.academia.edu/74707150/Seligmann_Baer_s_Seder_Avodat_Yisrael_1868_Liturgy_Ideology_and_the_Standardization_of_Nusah_Ashkenaz)

<sup>2</sup> Rashi comments ליהנות – להתנאות. This change becomes the standard version of the blessing.

<sup>3</sup> Bavli Berakhot 35a-35b. See also Tosefta Berakhot 4:1.

The Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly provides guidance in matters of *halakhah* for the Conservative movement. Individual rabbis, however, are authorized to interpret and apply *halakhah* for their communities.

The ninth chapter of Mishnah Berakhot contains many blessings to recite on assorted occasions, including seeing special places or natural phenomenon. Chapter six of the Tosefta also includes a list of blessings for assorted situations. Many of these blessings, *birkat ilanot* included, remain part of standard liturgy and appear in *siddurim* and *birkonim*. Together, this genre of blessing instills a sense of gratitude.

While evaluating each of these blessings is beyond the scope of this teshuvah, there is one blessing which also recognizes the beauty of trees. Comparing this blessing to *birkat ilanot* will help us to understand how the rabbis balance priorities when setting the rules for reciting a blessing. The standard text of the blessing appears in the ninth chapter of Bavli Berakhot:

ראה בריות טובות ואילנות טובות אומר ברוך שככה לו בעולמו

One who sees good creatures and good trees should say, “Blessed...that has such a thing in the world.”  
(Bavli Berakhot 58b)<sup>4</sup>

When Rabbi Jacob ben Asher (born 1269 in Cologne, died 1343 in Toledo) codifies this blessing in the Tur, he includes a limitation on reciting this blessing from the Ra’avad:<sup>5</sup> “You recite this blessing specifically on the first sighting, and no more. You do not recite it on another unless you see something that is even more beautiful.”<sup>6</sup> This limitation taps into the rabbinic fear of reciting an unnecessary blessing (*berakhah levatalah*). By limiting the blessing, the later rabbis ensure that the recitation does not become rote. *Birkat ilanot* follows a natural cycle, so the opportunity to recite the blessing reoccurs each year.<sup>7</sup> This natural cycle ensures that the blessing does not become a mundane routine, but each person will get the opportunity to recite it again.

Theology and ritual work hand in hand. Theology imbues ritual with meaning, and ritual helps us to internalize theology. In this *teshuvah*, I address two ambiguities over the recitation of the blessing: the timing of the blessing, and whether the blessing is only over trees that produce edible fruit. In both cases, we see how theology and ritual reinforce each other. While the *halakhah* around this blessing is lenient and flexible, we can use the debates and suggested stringencies to identify general spiritual approaches towards nature. Instead of prescribing the

<sup>4</sup> The Tosefta and Yerushalmi contain slightly different versions of the blessing.

<sup>5</sup> Rabbi Abraham ben David, 12<sup>th</sup> century Provence.

<sup>6</sup> Arba’ah Turim OH 225.

<sup>7</sup> A time limit for the blessing is a natural development but is not a necessary interpretation. In Mishnah Berakhot 9:2, Rabbi Yehudah adds that you only say the blessing over seeing the great sea when you see it לפרקים—periodically. In the *gemara* (59b), Rami bar Abba quotes Rabbi Yitzchak defines this as after 30 days. In the Mishneh Torah (Laws of Blessing 10:15), Rambam says that the time limit only applies to the blessing over the sea. For other blessings over nature, you recite them whenever you see the phenomenon (which could include *birkat ilanot*). Rabbi Karo in the Shulchan Arukh (OH 218:3 and 124:13) applies the 30-day rule to many more blessings of sight. The Mordekhai (13<sup>th</sup> century, Germany, Berakhot 148) limits *birkat ilanot* to once a year upon the first flowering. Rabbi Karo explicitly includes this limitation in the Shulchan Arukh (OH 226). Meir HaKohen (13<sup>th</sup> century Germany) adds this limitation in his commentary on the Mishneh Torah, Hagahot Maimoniyot (Laws of Blessing 10:13). I believe that this limitation is appropriate and enhances the experience of the blessing as it encourages us to create an opportunity to recite the blessing with full intention.

best way to recite this blessing, I hope to outline how different orientations toward the natural world led rabbis to shape the ritual. *Birkat ilanot* becomes an opportunity to reflect on our own theology and to be intentional in our own ritual choices.

## The Days of Nissan

Rabbi Ovadia Yosef (born 1920 in Baghdad, died 2013 in Jerusalem) discusses whether the ritual is limited to the month of Nissan in the first *teshuvah* in his collection *Yechaveh Da'at*.<sup>8</sup> He cites numerous early medieval rabbis who claim that the mention of Nissan is not specific. For example, Rabbi Abraham ben Isaac of Narbonne (Provence c 1080-1158) writes in *Sefer HaEshkol*, "The language of Nissan is not specific. Rather, it means the time when you see the buds on the tree for the first time in the year."<sup>9</sup> This permission is particularly important for residents of the Southern hemisphere. They should recite the blessing during their spring. Even for residents in the Northern hemisphere, their local climate may mean that trees blossom before or after Nissan. Rabbi Ovadia Yosef concludes that there is a strong enough precedent to allow the recitation of the blessing in Adar but concludes that it is better to wait until Nissan to satisfy every opinion.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the permission, there are still a few reasons why someone may want to wait and recite this blessing in Nissan. First, it provides a clear start date for the blessing which is easier than determining whether enough trees are blossoming or if the blossoms have reached sufficient size.<sup>11</sup>

Second, Nissan is the month of Passover. Some rabbis include their description of the ritual in books that discuss Passover. This editorial choice invites us to connect the ritual to our preparation for Passover—highlighting the way that Passover is also *Hag Ha'Aviv*, the festival of Spring.

Third, there is a mystical tradition that reciting the blessing elevates souls that wander through orchards and gardens during the month of Nissan. Rabbi Ovadia Yosef writes:

ויש להביא סמך לדברי מרן החיד"א<sup>12</sup> הנ"ל, ממה שאמרו בזהר הקדוש פרשת בלק (דף קצו ע"ב), שהנשמות בעולם העליון משוטטות בימי ניסן בגנות ובפרדסים, ועל ידי הברכות זוכות לעילוי נשמותיהם, ומתפללים על החיים אשר בעולם הזה. ומשמע שברכה זו נתקנה דוקא בימי ניסן. (ולכן מזכירים בנוסח הברכה וברא בו בריות טובות ואילנות טובות, לרמוז על נשמות הצדיקים).

<sup>8</sup> Yechaveh Da'at 1:1.

<sup>9</sup> Sefer HaEshkol, p. 68, <https://hebrewbooks.org/9063>

<sup>10</sup> This conclusion means that it is permissible to recite the blessing even if you already saw the new blossoms on the tree. See the discussion in Hazon Ovadia, footnote 13 p. 15-16.

<sup>11</sup> As we learn in a popular song for Tu BiShvat, almond trees begin to blossom in Shevat, two months before Nissan: [https://www.nli.org.il/he/items/NNL\\_MUSIC\\_AL990026855320205171/NLI](https://www.nli.org.il/he/items/NNL_MUSIC_AL990026855320205171/NLI)

<sup>12</sup> He cites *Birkei Yosef* by Rabbi Hayim Yosef David Azulai (the Chida) as the main authority that emphasizes how the blessing should happen in Nissan.

There is support for this position from what is written in the holy Zohar on parashat Balak (196b), that the souls of the upper world are wandering around the gardens and orchards during the months of Nissan. By reciting this blessing, we elevate these souls and pray for the life in this world. That is why the blessing was established specifically in the days of Nissan. (That is also why the blessing includes the language that God created “good creatures and good trees,” to hint at the souls of the righteous.)

(Yechaveh Da’at 1:1)

Residents of the Southern Hemisphere could evoke the mystical framing as the passage in the Zohar mentions that the souls will also enter the gardens in Tishrei. Identifying Nissan teaches us that this ritual responds to the new blossoms in spring. One could choose to recite the blessing as soon as there are blossoms on the trees, or one could wait for Nissan (or Tishrei in the Southern Hemisphere) to incorporate the additional interpretations.

### Which Trees?

The description of *birkat ilanot* in the Shulchan Arukh<sup>13</sup> uses language very close to that of the Talmud, but the comments of the Be’er Heteiv<sup>14</sup> and Mishnah Berurah<sup>15</sup> add that this blessing should only be recited over trees that produce edible fruits:

פרח - דוקא פרח הא עלים לחודיה לא ואף בפרח דוקא באילני מאכל שמזה הפרח עתיד להתגדל פרי אבל אילני סרק לא [אחרונים]:

This ritual is specifically on the blossoms and not on the leaves of the tree. Also, the blossom must be on a fruit producing tree since the blossom will one day will grow into fruit, but you do not recite it over barren trees.

(Mishnah Berurah OH 226:2)

This limitation first appears in the 17<sup>th</sup> century in Halakhot Ketanot, the collection of *teshuvot* by Rabbi Jacob ben Shmuel Hagiz.<sup>16</sup> Most rabbis after Halakhot Ketanot adopt this stringency. This is surprising as the rabbis writing before the Halakhot Ketanot do not make that distinction. As the earlier sources do not make the distinction between *ilanei ma’akhal*, fruit producing trees<sup>17</sup>, and *ilanei serak*, barren trees, it becomes a challenge of interpretation. Did the earlier rabbis not make the distinction because they would recite the blessing over every flowering tree, or did they not specify fruit trees because it was obvious that it had to be a tree

<sup>13</sup> Written in 1563 by Rabbi Yosef Karo who was born in 1488 in Spain and died in Tsefat in 1575.

<sup>14</sup> Rabbi Yehudah ben Shimon Ashkenazi, 18<sup>th</sup> century, Poland.

<sup>15</sup> Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan, 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Lithuania.

<sup>16</sup> Rabbi Jacob Hagiz was born in Fez, Morocco in 1620, studied in Italy, and taught in Jerusalem. He died in 1674 in Constantinople, and his son, Rabbi Moses Hagiz published the collection in 1704.

<sup>17</sup> Though the literal translation is “food producing trees,” the sources consistently refer to the fruit that grows from the tree and not other parts that are edible. Therefore, according to the Mishnah Berurah, you would not recite the blessing over a sugar maple even though it was planted to produce syrup.

that produced food? Two prominent rabbis provide explicit evidence that some rabbis explicitly allowed reciting the blessing over barren trees.

Rabbi Jacob Emden (1697-1776, Germany) claimed in passing that it would be appropriate to recite the blessing over barren trees planted for decoration.<sup>18</sup> Rabbi Abraham David Wahrman (1770-1840, Galicia), the author of *Eshel Avraham*, writes after the influence of Halakhot Ketanot took hold. He claims that the rabbis of the Talmud and *Rishonim* use the word “trees” to describe both fruit trees and barren trees. He also laments that the disagreement may have led to his community no longer reciting the blessing.<sup>19</sup>

Even for the rabbis that accept the stringency of the Halakhot Ketanot, there were questions about how we define fruit bearing trees. One way to define it are fruits which require the blessing “*borei peri ha'etz*” before eating. This includes obvious trees like apples and oranges, but it also includes many kinds of nuts and berries. The Talmud defines a tree as any plant where the branch survives once you pick the fruit and that the fruit grows back on the same branch.<sup>20</sup>

Even for the later rabbis who accept the stringency of the Halakhot Ketanot, there are fringe cases that expand “benefit” beyond eating for nourishment. Consider lemons and roses. Lemon trees, even though most people would not eat a lemon on its own, are acceptable.<sup>21</sup> Roses are also woody plants. A fertilized rose does grow into a rose hip which is technically edible, but sources also cite the fragrance as a reason to recite the blessing.<sup>22</sup> In both cases, the benefit expands beyond normal eating. Despite the widespread acceptance of the stringency in the Halakhot Ketanot, we should see it as a late interpretation that is not binding on our practice of the ritual.<sup>23</sup>

Why did this stringency gain such widespread acceptance? The limitation assumes that the benefit we bless over is the benefit of food. Even though trees provide other benefits, the later rabbis assumed that the benefit of food is the primary benefit that requires blessing. While reciting the blessing over fruit trees can deepen our spiritual experience of eating, it also limits our spiritual relationship with God’s wider creation. Emphasizing God’s creation as a source of food fits within an extractive relationship with nature. While gratitude for our food is a noble aim for our rituals, limiting *birkat ilanot* to fruit producing trees reiterates an extractive orientation towards nature.

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<sup>18</sup> Mor Uktzia OH 125. Rabbi Moses Hagiz, the son of Rabbi Jacob, lived in Altona, the same city where Rabbi Jacob Emden lived. Emden and Hagiz also disagree over whether you can recite the blessing over a tree grafted from two species—a forbidden act in the Torah.

<sup>19</sup> See the full translation of these sources in the appendix.

<sup>20</sup> Bavli Berakhot 40a-40b. See <https://oukoshher.org/guide-to-blessings/>. For example, strawberries require the blessing “*borei peri ha'adamah* while blueberries require “*borei peri ha'eitz*.”

<sup>21</sup> Rabbi Pinchas Zevichi, *Ateret Paz*, (Jerusalem: Torah Projects Center Ateret Paz, 2008), Laws of Nissan and Birkat Ilanot, p. 9 and 47. Accessed from <https://hebrewbooks.org/52124>. Quoting from Hayim ben Shlomo Hakohen, *Erev Pesach* (Livorno: 1908), 43. Accessed from <https://hebrewbooks.org/11257>

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> *Ateret Paz* includes the ruling that if you recite the blessing over a barren tree, you do not have to go back to recite it over a fruit producing tree. Ibid. p. 31.

We see this process in action in the disagreement between two 20<sup>th</sup> century Israeli rabbis: Rabbi Moses Dov Welner (1912-2007) and Rabbi Eliezer Waldenberg (1917-2006). Rabbi Welner published his book *Hemdut Tzvi* in 1973.<sup>24</sup> He provides a forceful argument that it is appropriate to recite *birkat ilanot* on all trees.

אמנם י"ל דהטעם שתיקנו ברכה הזאת הוי משום דפריחת האילנות מראה את התחדשות והתעוררות השדות והגנים ובכלל את כל הטבע, ומקרא מלא הוא כי הנה הסתו עבר הגשם חלף הלך לו הנצנים נראו בארץ עת הזמיר הגיע וכו', והתחדשות הזאת ניכרת בעיקר באילנות ולא בעשבים וירקות שכמה מהם נמצאים בשדה גם בחורף בארץ ישראל, והרי זה דומה למה שתקנו ברכת אלקי נשמה בכל בוקר, והתעוררות הזאת אין ניכר ע"י פריחת אילן על יד הבית או במקום שעיקר הוי לישיבת בני אדם מקום רחובות ובתים, אלא דוקא בשדות וגנים ששם נראה ונגרש הגשם והחורף, ובעת שחלף והלך לו הנצנים נראו בארץ הגיע עת הזמיר לברך ולהודות להקב"ה....

והנה לטעם הראשון הנ"ל דהברכה באה כשבח להקב"ה על שנתן לאדם אף דברים שאינם הכרחיים כפירות באמת שאין לברך רק על אילנות של פירות, וי"ל שהלק"ט דקדק כן ממה שמברכים וברא בו בריאות טובות ואילנות טובות להינות בני אדם, אמנם גם באילנות סרק שייך לברך כן דהלא גם אלו לטובות ולהנאות בני אדם נבראו, אבל להטעם של התחדשות טבע הצומח שרואים בפריחת האילן אין לחלק בין אילן סרק לאילן פירות.

Certainly, you can say that the reason for this blessing is that the flowering of the trees shows the renewal and the reawakening of the fields and gardens and all of nature in general... This renewal is best seen with trees instead of grasses and other vegetation since many of them are found in the fields even in winter here in the land of Israel. This blessing is like reciting “My God, the soul you have given me is pure”<sup>25</sup> each morning. This reawakening is not noticeable with the trees that flower next to houses or in places that are fully settled by people as there are many roads and houses. It is best experienced in the fields and gardens as there we can see and feel the rain and the winter, and when it abates and the blossoms appear in the land, the time for song has arrived to bless and give thanks to the Holy Blessed One...<sup>26</sup>

From the first reason mentioned above, the blessing comes as praise to the Holy Blessed One for giving human beings things that are not entirely necessary. Truly, this is not limited to only fruit trees. You can say that when the Halakhot Ketanot was specific about blessing for creating beautiful creations and beautiful trees for humans to enjoy, it is appropriate to recite this blessing also on barren trees because were these not also created to be good and for human beings to enjoy? But the reasoning to recognize the renewal of nature and the growth you see with the flowering of trees would equally apply to barren trees and fruit trees.

<sup>24</sup> Rabbi Moses Dov Welner, *Hemdut Tzvi* (Tel Aviv: Zohar, 1973), 1.18. Accessed from <https://hebrewbooks.org/21588>

<sup>25</sup> A prayer recited upon waking.

<sup>26</sup> Rabbi Welner argues from a close reading of Rambam's Mishneh Torah that it may even be more appropriate to recite the blessing over barren trees. In the Mishneh Torah (Laws of Blessing 10:13), Rambam uses the language of “Going out to the fields and gardens.” Rabbi Welner emphasizes that you must leave the city limits to recite the blessing. The trees that border fields are less likely to be trees cultivated for fruit.

(Hemdat Tzvi 1:18)

Rabbi Welner's framing emphasizes how the renewal of trees is the symbol of the holistic experience of seeing nature come back to life after winter. While Rabbi Welner goes too far in mandating the need to see trees outside of the city limits, his poetic language helps us to internalize a holistic orientation towards nature as we prepare to recite the blessing.

Rabbi Eliezer Waldenberg wrote a *teshuvah* in his collection *Tzitz Eliezer* to disagree with Rabbi Welner's conclusions. When describing the nature of the benefit of trees, the Tzitz Eliezer assumes that our primary benefit is related to food.

ומ"ש כת"ר מדברי השטמ"ק בברכות ד' מ"ג שכותב בשם הריטב"א שקבעו ברכה זו לפי שהוא ענין מחודש שאדם מברך על עצים יבשים שהפריחן הקדוש ברוך הוא, לדעתי אין מזה עוד כל הוכחה שהמכוון גם על אילני סרק, ושפיר י"ל שהכוונה אבל על עצים יבשים של אילני מאכל שנתייבשו בימות החורף והקב"ה חוזר ומפריחן ליהנות בהם בנ"א בהנאת אכילה.

[Rabbi Welner] quoted the Shita Mekubetzet<sup>27</sup> who quoted the Ritva<sup>28</sup> about how the rabbis fixed this blessing since there is a renewal and that humans bless on the dried-out trees that God brings back to flower. For me, this is not a proof that you recite the blessing over barren trees. The better interpretation is that we think of the dried-out fruit trees that dry out in winter, and the Holy Blessed One brings them back to flower so that human beings can enjoy them through the benefit of their fruit.  
(Tzitz Eliezer 12:20)

The difference in tone between Rabbi Welner and the Tzitz Eliezer reflects their preexisting attitudes towards nature which then determines their halakhic rulings. Because of Rabbi Welner's commitment to a holistic experience of nature, the poetic language of renewal applies to any tree. The Tzitz Eliezer perpetuates the assumption that the main benefit of a tree is its production of fruit and ignores the many other benefits that trees provide.

### Experiential and Theological Framings of *Birkat Ilanot*

Before we outline some possible orientations towards nature, we will look at additional sources that add to our understanding of the experience of the ritual and the theology behind the blessing. Rabbi Meir of Rotenberg, the Maharam (1215-1293), includes smell as part of the experience:

האי מאן דנפיק ביומי ניסן פעם ראשונה בשנה וחזי אילני דמלבלי שמוציאין ריח טוב מברך בא"י אמ"ה שלא חיסר בעולמו כלום וברא בו בריות נאות להתנאות מהם וכשכבר גדלו הפירות חותם בריות טובות ואילנות טובות:

One who goes out in the month of Nissan for the first time of the year and sees tress that are flowering and giving off their pleasant fragrance will bless “Blessed are you, Adonai our God, Ruler of the world who has withheld nothing from the world and

<sup>27</sup> Rabbi Bezalel Ashkenazi, 16<sup>th</sup> century Israel.

<sup>28</sup> Rabbi Yom Tov ben Avraham, 13<sup>th</sup> century Seville. See below for the full quote.

created within it pleasant creations to enjoy.” When the fruit has already grown, add “good creatures and good trees” to the blessing.  
(Sefer Haparnas 396)

This source does not shape normative *halakhah* as the text of the blessing is different, and he provides a version for the blessing to recite over fully grown fruit. According to normative *halakhah*, once the blossom becomes fruit, the time to recite the blessing is over. Yet, the Maharam provides language to understand the full experience of the blessing. There is not a clear line between the different senses. Even though there is a different blessing for fragrant flowers, the smell enhances the experience of seeing new blossoms in the spring. The source of *birkat ilanot* appears during the discussion of fragrant trees, so the rabbis already evoked a range of senses.

Rabbi Yom Tov ben Avraham of Seville (13<sup>th</sup> century), the Ritva, provided language that gives thanks for the yearly renewal of nature in spring:

וקבעו ברכה זו לפי שהוא ענין שבא מזמן לזמן והוא ענין מחודש שאדם מברך על עצים יבשים שהפריחן  
והקדוש ברוך הוא. והיא בשם ומלכות

They fixed this blessing since there is a renewal that happens from time to time. Humans then bless on the dried-out trees that God brings back to flower. We recite it with the full formula of blessings.  
(Ritva on Berakhot 43b)

Note that he makes no mention of fruit. Both Rabbi Welner and the Tzitz Eliezer use this source to prove their position.

In the Arukh Hashulchan, Rabbi Yechiel Michel Epstein (1829-1908, Lithuania) adopts the stringency of the Halakhot Ketanot, but he describes how fruit deserves a unique expression of gratitude:

כלומר שנותן שבח והודאה להשי"ת שברא בשביל האדם אפילו דברים שאין בהם הכרחיות לחיי האדם כמו פרי אילנות ולכן אין מברכים ברכה זו על זרעים וירקות דאלו הם כהכרחיות ולא כן הפירות ומברך בשעת הפריחה דאז ניכר שיוציאו פירות...דברכה זו היא ברכה של הודאה כלליות על חסדו וטובו יתברך והנזהר בברכה זו עליו נאמר בראשית כז, כז [ראה ריח בני כריח שדה אשר ברכו ד' "א"ר]:

This is to say that you are giving praise and thanks to God for the creation of things that are not completely necessary for human life such as the fruit of the tree. Therefore, you do not recite this blessing over grains and vegetables since these are primarily for basic human needs, unlike fruit. One makes the blessing at the time of flowering as it shows that the tree will give forth its fruit...This is because the blessing is an expression of general thanks for the generosity and goodness from God. The sense of this blessing come from Genesis 27:27, “The smell of my son is like the smell of the fields that God blessed.”

(Arukh Hashulchan, Orach Hayim 226)



What part of fruit is not completely necessary? It cannot only be the beauty of its flowers as other produce will grow from flowering plants.<sup>29</sup> The unnecessary benefit should also exist in the fruit itself. This would include its sweetness. When compared to the sustenance of grains and other produce, fruit provides an extra sweetness. In fact, the rabbis of the Talmud question whether especially sweet fruit provides sustenance.<sup>30</sup>

By repeating the stringency of the Halakhot Ketanot, the Arukh Hashulchan adopts the assumption that the value of a nature is, still, its ability to provide food, but reciting *Birkat Ilanot* identifies added benefits from fruit trees. Fruit trees add a sweetness and beauty that is not strictly necessary. The Arukh Hashulchan frames the sweetness of fruit as a sort of *hiddur mitzvah* (fulfilling commandments in a most aesthetic way). God will provide sustenance and nutrients to humans, but fruit adds a welcome, special sweetness.

From this selection of writings, we can see a few themes about *birkat ilanot*. First, trees are a powerful image of renewal. The flowers are a beautiful reminder of this renewal. Trees also provide multiple benefits to humans which touches multiple senses. For fruit trees, the benefits are the added beauty, sweetness, and smell of the flowers and fruit. How we prioritize these different themes will affect our intention in reciting the blessing.

### **Our Halakhic Relationship towards Nature**

*Birkat Ilanot* is one of many blessings that instill a sense of gratitude. The specific details of the blessing provide a rich opportunity to meditate on our relationship to trees and to nature more generally.

Despite the widespread acceptance, the stringency of the Halakhot Ketanot is not a necessity. It is permitted to recite *birkat ilanot* over any flower produced by a woody stemmed perennial. The innovation of the Halakhot Ketanot achieved widespread acceptance because it frames the ritual as gratitude towards the way that God provides for human needs. This is not the only way that the Jewish tradition can relate to nature, so we should ensure that our performance of the ritual reflects an intentional choice.

The framing implied by Halakhot Ketanot connects the blessing to the production of food. This highlights our need to extract resources from nature. God provides for human needs through natural processes, and we respond with gratitude. This blessing would be one of many blessings as we watch a flower develop into fruit. You recite *birkat ilanot* when the blossom first appears, you recite *shehecheyanu* upon seeing the fully mature fruit. You recite *borei peri ha'etz* upon eating the fruit and recite the appropriate blessing after eating.<sup>31</sup>

You could deepen the ritual experience by returning to the same tree for every step in the growth of the fruit. The *kavanah* for the blessing, following the Arukh Hashulchan, is that God

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<sup>29</sup> As a reminder—cucumbers and zucchini are biologically fruits.

<sup>30</sup> Bavli Berakhot 44a.

<sup>31</sup> In Orach Chaim 225:3, Rabbi Karo says that the original practice was to recite the blessing over seeing the mature fruit, but the custom is now to wait and recite the blessing on eating that species of fruit for the first time in the season.

provides beauty even in the mundane labour of creating food. Unlike the Tzitz Eliezer, we must recognize that food is not the only benefit we receive from trees.

Reciting this blessing over other flowering trees requires embracing a more holistic relationship to nature. The blessing is a recognition of the natural cycle of spring, and we relate to the flowering trees as brining us benefits beyond food. We can reflect on the indirect benefits that trees bring us, but we also recognize that the aesthetic beauty of the blossoms is sufficient. We should see this as one of the many blessings of enjoyment that we recite over nature.

When reciting the blessing over inedible flowering trees, we should still be intentional about our wider relationship with nature. Rabbi Welner thought that the purpose of the blessing was to leave civilization and receive the benefits of nature on its own terms. You can fulfill that spiritual goal by reciting the blessing on a nature walk.

I live in West Vancouver, British Columbia, and my synagogue is next to a street lined with decorative plum blossoms. By choosing a tree cultivated for its beauty, we can identify an additional framing: our partnership with God to continue the work of creation. Human ingenuity identified how to cultivate more beautiful blossoms over the generations. Reciting the blessing over decorative blossoms celebrates that ongoing process.

As we continue to reckon with the way humans have radically changed our environment, *birkat ilanot* becomes a powerful opportunity to reset our spiritual relationship with nature. While we should be grateful for our sustenance, extracting resources are not the only way we benefit from nature. Trees bring us countless benefits that we experience directly, like beauty, shade, and fresh air, as well as indirectly, like supporting biodiversity and preventing erosion.

Ultimately, this blessing is still anthropocentric—the text explicitly mentions human enjoyment, but expanding the focus of that benefit can lead to a more harmonious balance between our drive to meet human needs and our responsibility to protect God’s creation. Rabbis Nina Beth Cardin and Avram Reisner beautifully describe the anthropocentric vision of creation as a world “where humans are beneficiaries seeking to flourish in an eternally self-regenerating world,” but call on us to renew our responsibility to protect God’s creation.<sup>32</sup> *Birkat ilanot* is an opportunity to celebrate how nature, even as it exists on its own terms, contributes to our flourishing. By recognizing that we can recite *birkat ilanot* over all flowering trees, we celebrate a more expansive view of the way we relate to God’s creation.

#### פסק דין /**Ruling:**

It is permissible to recite *birkat ilanot* over any flowering, perennial plant with a woody stem. This includes grape vines, rose bushes, and flowering trees, whether they produce edible fruit or not.

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<sup>32</sup> P. 7, “On the Mitzvah of Sustainability,” <https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/2023-02/cjls-sustainability-teshuvah-final-updated-feb-2023.pdf>

The blessing is recited once each year during spring—whenever it falls in the calendar year. In the northern hemisphere, this often aligns with the Hebrew month of Nissan, but residents in the southern hemisphere will recite it in Elul or Tishrei.

The choices we make when we recite the blessing, such as waiting until Nissan or reciting the blessing over fruit producing trees, are opportunities to align the ritual according to our theology and orientation towards nature. We should recite the blessing with full kavanah by being intentional with these choices.

## Appendix: Full Texts of Sources

Rabbi Jacob ben Shmuel Hagiz (1620-1674) Halakhot Ketanot, 28<sup>33</sup>

שאלה הא דא"ר יהודה דנפיק ביומי דניסן וחזי אילני דקא מלבלבי אומר ברוך שלא חיסר בעולמו כלום וכו' (ברכות מ"ג:) אי הוי פרח או ציץ:  
תשובה בפ"ה הש"ע הוכחתי דכלל לבלוב הוי הפרחים דהיינו השושנים וגם הניצנים שהם כמו לולבי גפנים (עי' רש"י פר' קרח ע"פ ויצא פרח ויצץ ציץ וברא"ם שם וקה"י ח"ב סי' ש"ג) ושם מוכח דאין לברך אלא על אילני מאכל.  
ומאמרו ויצא בימי ניסן משמע דעל פרחי השקדים שממחרים הרבה קודם ניסן אין לברך גם אין לברך אלא על ריבוי אילנות ודייק שם מדברי הרמב"ם (פ"י דברכות ה"ג) היוצא לשדות ולגנות. עוד דייק שם דמשגדלו הפירות אין מקום לברכה זו. (עי' באה"ט או"ח סי' רכו ושו"ת השיב משה או"ח סי' ח').

Question: When Rav Yehudah would say, “The one who goes out during the days of Nissan and sees trees that are blossoming should say, ‘Blessed...who has withheld nothing from the world,’” that does this refer to a *perach* or *tzitz*?

Answer: From the Shulchan Arukh, I showed that the language of *livlov* refers to the *perachim* which are full flowers and the *nitzanim* are the blossoms like you have on a grape vine. You can see this from the way that Rashi explains the similar language in *Parashat Korach* when Aaron’s staff sprouts almond blossoms. This is proof that you only bless on trees that produce fruit. From the language “One who goes out in the days of Nissan” implies you should not bless over the almond blossoms which are the first to blossom well before Nissan. This is because you should only bless over many blossoms on many trees as we see in the Rambam’s language of “One who goes out to the fields and gardens.” Also, once the blossoms become fruit, there is no chance to recite the blessing.

Rabbi Jacob Emden (1697-1776, Germany) Mor Uktziah 125

כתוב במג"א [ס"ק יד] שנ"ל דמברכין על ריפות שעושין מדגן חדש שניכרין היטב שהן חדשים. עכ"ד. והוא דבר תמוה בעיני, דכי ניכרין במראה מה הוי, הכא ודאי חזותא לאו מילתא היא, דאין מברכין על ראייה חדשה של פירות, אלא מפני טעם או ריח המתחדש שחביב על האדם ביותר (דהא לא מברכין על חדוש ציצין ופרחים הנאים במראה ואינן עשויין אלא לנוי ויפוי הגנות, דודאי ליכא דמברך עליהן ברכת הזמן. אמנם ברכת שלא חסר בעולמו, אולי י"ל שמברכין גם עליהם כשרואה אותן בתחלה ביומי ניסן בעת חדושן, כדרך שמברך אאילני סרק דמלבלבי, אף על גב דלא חזו לאכילה גם לא לריחא, אלא אחזותא הוא דקמברך).

The Magen Avraham wrote that one recites the shehecheyanu blessing on a porridge made from new grain when it is clear that the ingredients are from the new harvest. This is puzzling to me, for even if it is clear what they are by sight, sight is not an important feature for this ritual, since one does not recite the blessing over seeing the new fruit, rather you bless for the renewed taste or smell that the person is drawn to. (You would not recite [the shehecheyanu blessing] on the beautiful new blossoms and flowers when you see them. They are only made for the beauty and pleasantness of the garden. You certainly do not recite the blessing of time [shehecheyanu]. But for the blessing “Who has withheld nothing from the world,” perhaps there are those who would

<sup>33</sup> Rabbi Jacob Hagiz was born in Fez, Morocco in 1620, studied in Italy, and taught in Jerusalem. He died in 1674 in Constantinople, and his son, Rabbi Moses Hagiz published the collection in 1704.

also bless when they see them at the beginning of Nissan at the time of their renewal in the way that you would recite the blessing over the barren trees that flower. Even though they are not fit for eating or for smelling—they are made for looking at—therefore you bless over them.)

Rabbi Abraham David Wahrman (1770-1840, Galicia) Eshel Avraham 226:1

בבאה"ט הובא בשם הלק"ט. שאין לברך אאילנות כי אם על שעושים פירות. וגם שלא ראיתי כעת מי שחולק בזה. מכל מקום נראה דמידי ספיקא לא נפיק. שגם שבלשון חז"ל יש אילני סרק. אין מזה הכרע שאינם נקראים אילני סתם גם כן וחז"ל כללו כל אילנות שבעולם בלשון זה והוה ליה ספק ואולי זהו הטעם שרובא דרובא מעם בתי ישראל אינם מברכים ברכה זו. כי תמיד נראים פרחים באילני סרק כמה ימים קודם מבאילני פירות. ועל אילני סרק אין לברך מספק כנ"ל ואחר כך כשרואים באילני פירות מסופקים אולי כיון שכבר ראו באילני סרק ולא ברכו הוה ליה כשהחיינו אחר ששכח ואכל מהפרי. כי ההנאה דראיה בהפרחים דאילנות הוא כהנאה דאכילה דלגבי שהחיינו וצל"ע בזה:

The Be'er Heiteiv quotes the Halakhot Ketanot that you only recite the blessing over a tree that produces fruit. I have not seen anyone directly contradict this interpretation. In any case, it seems that there is room to doubt this interpretation. The rabbis also spoke about trees that do not produce fruit. Their language does not make a distinction when they discuss trees, so that word would include both fruit-producing and barren trees.

The debate may be the reason that most of the community does not recite this blessing. They would have likely seen the blossoms that do not produce fruit well before the blossoms that will produce fruit. Since they would not bless the blossoms that do not become fruit, when they see the blossoms that will become fruit, they are concerned that they lost the opportunity to bless since they had already seen the other blossoms, just as you do not have a chance to say *shehecheyanu* after you eat a new fruit and forget to say the blessing. You could say that the enjoyment derived from seeing the blossom is analogous to the enjoyment derived from eating the new fruit as it applies to reciting *shehecheyanu*. More analysis is needed.

## Birkat Ilanot, The Blessing over Flowering Trees

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, שֶׁלֹא חָסַר בְּעוֹלָמוֹ כָּלֹם וּבָרָא בּוֹ בְּרִיּוֹת טוֹבוֹת  
וְאֵילָנוֹת טוֹבִים לְהַנּוֹת בָּהֶם בְּנֵי אָדָם.

Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheinu melek ha'olam, shelo hisar ba'olamo kelum uvara bo beri'ot tovot ve'ilanot tovot le'hanot bahen benei adam.

Blessed are you, Adonai, our God, ruler of the universe, who has not left anything out of the world, who has created beautiful creatures and beautiful trees for humans to enjoy.

Rabbi Yechiel Michael Epstein, *Arukh Hashulchan*, 1884

This is to say that you are giving praise and thanks to God for the creation of things that are not completely necessary for human life such as the fruit of the tree.

Therefore, you do not recite this blessing over grains and vegetables since these are primarily for basic human needs, unlike fruit. One makes the blessing at the time of flowering as it shows that the tree will give forth its fruit.

Rabbi Moses Dov Welner, *Hemdat Tzvi*, 1973

You can say that this blessing responds to the way that the trees illustrate the renewal and awakening for all the fields, gardens, and rest of nature...

This is like the way we recite a blessing giving thanks to God for restoring our souls each morning...