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BIRKAT HA-MAPIL:
THE RABBINIC PRE-SLEEP BLESSING¹
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Sleeping is a regular occurrence for every human being. Sleep is not a sudden occurrence, though; it is an occurrence for which one prepares. It is during this *approach* to sleep that a person experiences an intersection between the waking world of consciousness and the world of unconsciousness, of sleep. With this daily liminal experience, a need was seen by the Rabbis to impart to it religious meaning.² The Rabbis sought to frame the process of lying down to go to sleep by constructing a meaningful liturgy.

A society's particular attitude toward sleep is reflected in the types of activities that occur surrounding sleep. For instance:

Going to sleep means going through a number of culturally defined motions, such as dressing in a certain way, modifying light and sound conditions, assuming one of a limited number of postures, closing one's eyes even in darkness... These motions, together with the perceptions of the actual state of sleep, and motions associated with awakening, constitute the role of the sleeper.³

The Rabbis' representation of the behaviors surrounding sleep then, reveals much about their conception of sleep in general, as well as a great deal about how they saw their daily lives.

The focus in this article will be on the liturgical behavior of the sleeper (or attempted sleeper). Investigating liturgy prescribed to be said while on one's bed can help us understand rabbinic thought regarding sleep,⁴ and how they

¹ I would like to thank Michael Katzman and Benji Shiller of the *Milim Havivin* editorial staff, as well Rabbi Josh Yuter, for all of their comments, notes, and suggestions on this paper. All statements, including any errors herein, remain my own.

² See, especially, the words of Maimonides introducing the chapter in which this blessing is found: "When the Sages instituted the words of these prayers, they also instituted other prayers, and these are they..." (*Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Tefilah* 7:1). After this introduction follows a number of blessings, beginning with our blessing of *Ha-Mapil*.

³ Vilhelm Aubert and Harrison White, "Sleep: A Sociological Interpretation I," *Acta Sociologica* 4, no. 2 (1959), 48.

⁴ For other work on rabbinic thought on sleep, see Joshua Schwartz, "Material Culture and

sought to guide the thought of the one attempting sleep. As the “rabbinic appreciation of the religious significance of the physical world comes through in their theology of blessings,”⁵ we shall see the nature of the rabbinically-constructed role of “sleeper,” as found in the relevant blessings.⁶

Birkat Ha-Mapil: Talmudic Source

The text of the *Ha-Mapil* blessing appears in the context of a *beraita*⁷ which discusses three blessings for three other situations: prior to letting blood, going to the bathhouse, and going to the bathroom (*Berakhot* 60a-b).⁸ Similar to the act of going to sleep, all three of these situations are frequent, and in all three, danger could befall those involved.⁹ Furthermore, these places of potential danger are also places where one undergoes amelioration of their physical condition.¹⁰ At the stage between being outside of these places and being in them, a blessing is a particularly useful psychological tool. It is helpful for one to frame these situations within a religious context, beseeching God to assist in this undertaking.¹¹ The pre-sleep text as found in the Romm edition of the

Rabbinic Literature in the Land of Israel in Late Antiquity: Beds, Bedclothes, and Sleeping Habits,” in ed. Lee I. Levine, *Continuity and Renewal: Jews and Judaism in Byzantine-Christian Palestine* (Jerusalem: Dinur Center for the Study of History, Yad Ben-Zvi and Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2004): 197-209 (Hebrew), as well as my previous article, “Rabbinic Sleep Ethics: Jewish Sleep Conduct in Late Antiquity,” *Milín Havivin* 2 (2006): 83-93.

⁵ Reuven Kimelman, “The Rabbinic Theology of the Physical: Blessings, Body and Soul, Resurrection, and Covenant and Election,” in *The Late Roman-Rabbinic Period*, vol. 4, *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, ed. Steven T. Katz (Cambridge, UK & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 947.

⁶ It seems logical that the Rabbis would have instituted such a blessing, regardless of precedent, as the pre-sleep time seems to call for a religious context. However, the etiology of this blessing is unclear. Professor Lawrence Schiffman has suggested that, originally, one would say the [full] *Shema* upon one’s bed accompanied with its evening blessings, including *Hashkiveinu*; when these were moved to the evening service to be said in the synagogue, a rabbinically-required recitation of the *Shema* accompanied by this new *Ha-Mapil* blessing took their stead (Professor Lawrence Schiffman, “The Other Talmud: The Jerusalem Talmud, Its History and Text,” *Edah Lehrhaus* #3, JCC of Manhattan, New York City, 14 June 2007). Nevertheless, I am not altogether convinced of this particular possibility. Perhaps *Ha-Mapil* is a stand-alone blessing that was created on its own and not simply as a replacement for another blessing.

⁷ The blessing appears in only one place within the entire Talmud (including both the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds). The *beraita* is punctuated by Amoraic and Stamaitic statements; whether or not *Ha-Mapil* is a part of the *beraita* will be discussed later.

⁸ For more information, see Julius Preuss, *Biblical and Talmudic Medicine*, trans. & ed. Fred Rosner (New York & London: Sanhedrin Press, 1978), 248-257, 533-537 & 541-544, and 546-551, respectively.

⁹ See, for instance, *Berakhot* 62a for dangers of going to the privy (including damaging spirits).

¹⁰ For instance, “The bath was not only considered to be an amenity, but most importantly a means for the maintenance of health” (Preuss, *Biblical and Talmudic Medicine*, 543).

¹¹ It is worthy to note that this text is a collection of blessings, whereas this is not speaking

Talmud reads as follows:

One who enters onto his¹² bed to sleep says from “*Shema Yisra’el*” until¹³ “*Ve-hayah im shamo’a.*”

And he says, “Blessed is the one who causes sleep to descend upon my eyes and slumber upon my eyelids and gives light to the pupil of the eye.

“May it be willful from before You, O Lord, my God, that You will lay me down peacefully; give me my lot in your Torah; accustom me to come to *mitzvah*; do not accustom me to come to transgression; bring me neither to iniquity, to sin, to temptation, nor to humiliation; may the good inclination rule over me; may the evil inclination not rule over me; save me from unfortunate accidents and illnesses; may neither bad dreams nor bad thoughts confuse me; may my bed be complete before You; light my eyes lest I sleep the sleep of death.

Blessed are You, Lord, who illuminates for the entire world in all of his entire glory.”¹⁴

First, the Talmud considers the spatiotemporal setting, that is, one’s entrance into bed.¹⁵ The Talmud’s setting is not immediately before one falls asleep, nor

about the total procedure for entering these places. See, for instance, *Tosefta Berakhot* 2:2 and *Shabbat* 10a in addition to *Ta’anit* 20a for what to do procedurally upon entrance into a bath house.

¹² Although the reader should be referred to my comment (“Rabbinic Sleep Ethics,” 84, n.4) on the default usage of the masculine gender, that is not to say that women were necessarily either excluded nor included in this prescription (it may, however, hinge upon the saying of the “Shema”).

¹³ Although most texts use the language of “until,” Rabeinu Hananel, the early eleventh-century Talmudic commentator, has the version to say “and,” thus it would be the first two paragraphs, rather than simply the first paragraph. The reason that this is a possibility is that each of the two paragraphs uses the language of lying down. (Rabbenu Asher, *Berakhot* 9:23).

¹⁴ *Berakhot*, vol. 1, *Talmud Bavli* (Vilna: Romm, 1860), 60b. (Henceforth, Romm edition.)

¹⁵ Why this language of “entering *into*” is used in relation to beds as opposed to “lying down on”, “going onto”, or anything similar, is on account that “beds were usually high, and were entered by a footstool.” Furthermore, canopies were not unusual, which added to the sense of ‘entering’ into another domain. (S. Safrai, “Home and Family,” in *The Jewish People in the First Century: Historical Geography, Political History, Social, Cultural and Religious Life and Institutions*, vol. 2, eds. S. Safrai and M. Stern (Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 1976), 736.) See, for instance, *Sukah* 10b for canopied beds. For a sense of space beneath beds in the Talmudic era, see, for instance *Berakhot* 62a (and its parallel in *Hagigah* 5b) where Rav Kahana hid under Rav’s bed, as well as *Bava Batra* 58a, where Rabbi Binah answers to Rabbi Yohanan that a bed of an *am ha-aretz* seems like a packed storehouse.

is it when one is already in their bed, but rather when they are making their way into bed. Moreover, it is not when they enter into their bed for any purpose (such as eating or reading, for instance) that they follow this ritual, but rather, it is for sleeping, *per se*.¹⁶ By saying this upon entrance into one's bed—by beseeching God to help one get to sleep,¹⁷ as well as to mark their entry into this space, separating themselves off from their concerns of the day—the intended effect may be soporific.¹⁸ As to the potential danger of the situation, like the other three situations mentioned in the *beraita*, the reason for the blessing here is for the Rabbis to show that we “are grateful that He bestows sleep upon us, because sleep rejuvenates us and allows us to function, but we are also scared of the physical and spiritual dangers that we may encounter while we sleep.”¹⁹

It is no surprise that the first component of the Talmud's bedtime prescription is not the blessing of *Ha-Mapil*, but saying the first paragraph(s) of the *Shema*. The recitation of *Shema*, consisting of three separate sections of scriptural verses,²⁰ dates back to antiquity.²¹ Outside of the above text from *Berakhot*, however, discussion of the *Ha-Mapil* blessing is absent from the Talmud's discussions regarding the reading of the *Shema* on one's bed.²² Since our text in *Berakhot* is the only mention of reciting *Ha-Mapil* along with the

¹⁶ One vague aspect of this line is the timing: is it simply once a day, when one goes to sleep at night? Or is it any time one goes to sleep? What about napping—should one say it then? What about sleeping (or napping, for that matter) in a place aside from one's bed (perhaps on a chair or on the ground)—or is it only when sleeping in a bed? The only other usage of the term “one who enters to sleep” is found in a *beraita* where “one who enters to sleep in the day...” or “one who enters to sleep in the night...” (*Sukah* 26b). It may be that the unqualified term in our text leaves open the possibility that one going into one's bed to sleep *at anytime* says the blessing. One further issue of the action is whether this line excludes or includes “bed usage” (a rabbinic euphemism for sex)—an issue we shall see later in this paper.

¹⁷ For a survey of insomnia in the Bible and the Talmud, see Sonia Ancoli-Israel, “‘Sleep Is Not Tangible’ or What the Hebrew Tradition Has to Say About Sleep,” *Psychosomatic Medicine* 63, no. 5 (2001), 781-783.

¹⁸ Cf. Franz's words on this matter: “[p]sychologically, sleep is a condition of disinterest for the presented situation or, in other words, it is a condition of total distraction” (Shepherd Ivory Franz, review of “La Fonction du Sommeil,” *Rivista di Scienza* 2 no. 3 [1907] by E. Claparède, *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods* 5, no. 6 (1908), 163). The function, then, of this blessing would be to help set apart this person's concerns from the day and help them focus on their present situation of trying to fall asleep for the night.

¹⁹ Naomi Gerszberg, “*Ha-Mapil*,” *Kol Mevaseret* 2 (2002), 85-86.

²⁰ Deuteronomy 6:4-9, 11:13-21, and Numbers 15:37-41. However, in the selected *Berakhot* text, only the first and second sections are mentioned, which is logical, since they both contain the line of “reciting them... when you lie down and when you get up” (Deut. 6:7, 11:19).

²¹ For instance, see I. Elbogen, “Studies in the Jewish Liturgy,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 19 OS, no. 2 (January 1907), 229-233. Cf. Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History*, trans. Raymond P. Scheindlin (Philadelphia, New York & Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society & The Jewish Theological Seminary), 22-23.

²² *Berakhot* 4b-5a, *Berakhot* 13b, *Yerushalmi Berakhot* 1:1, and *Yerushalmi Berakhot* 2:1 are all amoraic discussions.

Shema, it seems that *Ha-Mapil* was at least not a great matter of concern to the Amoraim. This point is especially salient in the *Talmud Yerushalmi*, where *Ha-Mapil* is not mentioned at all.

In our *Berakhot* text, it is unclear if the *Ha-Mapil* blessing is part of the *beraita* discussed earlier or if it is an addendum to the text of the *beraita*. If the *Ha-Mapil* blessing is indeed within the *beraita*, its source would seem Tannaitic, and either the Amoraim are not as concerned about its recitation as they are the saying of the *Shema*, or the need to say the *Shema* on one's bed is amplified by the Amoraim for other reasons.²³ But if the *Ha-Mapil* blessing is not within the *beraita* but has been appended to the *beraita*, its origin may be later, possibly even post-Amoraic, and we can thus understand why it was neither discussed, nor was it a desideratum among the Amoraim. Alternatively, the blessing may be of Tannaitic or Amoraic origin and was just not recorded until later.

Structure of *Birkat Ha-Mapil*

The overall structure of this blessing is a tripartite composition, consisting of an opening line of blessing, a middle section of requests, and a concluding line of blessing. It thus may be considered a full rabbinic blessing, fulfilling the rabbinic requirements to open and conclude a blessing (*Berakhot* 46a-b, *Pesahim* 104b).²⁴ The language employed is in the first-person singular, as opposed to a common plural language, which makes sense, since this person is undergoing this event on his or her own and is “concerned with personal, physical, and mental wellbeing.”²⁵

Among the multiple Talmudic manuscripts and medieval commentaries, we find numerous versions of the wording of this composite blessing.²⁶ While the opening and concluding lines of the blessing remain more or less consistent throughout the various texts, the middle sets of requests differ widely. A number of possibilities account for these different versions. There may have

²³ This amplification is either that the need is emphasized in a prescriptive manner by Rabbi Yehoshua, son of Levi (*Berakhot* 4b), or that he meant to mandate saying either all three, or just the first two, in addition to the first paragraph mentioned in our text.

²⁴ Cf. Ruth Langer, *To Worship God Properly: Tensions Between Liturgical Custom and Halakha in Judaism* (Cincinnati, OH: HUC Press, 1998), 24-27 for the structure of rabbinic blessings.

²⁵ Rabbi Dr. Elie Munk, *The World of Prayer: Commentary and Translation of the Daily Prayers*, vol. 1, *Daily Prayers*, trans. Henry Biberfeld (Jerusalem & New York: Feldheim, 1963), 224.

²⁶ Rabbi Raphael Rabinovitch, *Variæ Lectiones in Mischnam et in Talmud Babylonicum*, vol.1, *Tractate Berachoth et totus ordo Seraim* (in Hebrew) (Munich: H. Roesl, 1867; Jerusalem: Ohr Hahakhmah, 2002), 345, n. 7. Not only are there various versions, but even different recensions within a given author's work – in this case, Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah* on this text has a few different ones (Nachum L. Rabinovitch, *Sefer Ahavah*, vol. 1, bk. 2, *Mishneh Torah According to Bodleian MS. Huntington 80 with a Comprehensive Commentary* (in Hebrew) [Jerusalem: Ma'aliyot, 1984], 266.).

been initially a shorter version upon which people added lines, or a longer form which became shortened.²⁷ Alternatively, it may have been a medium-length blessing with various strophes being added and/or deleted. Therefore, the most valuable method by which to look at this blessing is to inspect each of the three main sections separately.²⁸

First Section: Opening Blessing

Although there are over a dozen different texts sampled here, each has the same beginning of “Blessed is the One who causes bonds of sleep to fall...”²⁹ with variations thenceforth:

- (1)...upon eyes.³⁰
- (2)...on Man and gives light to the pupil of the eye.³¹
- (3)...upon me and the One who gives light to the pupil of the eye.³²
- (4)...on my eyes and the One who guards me like the pupil of the eye.³³
- (5)...on my eyes and sets slumber upon my eyelids.³⁴
- (6)...upon my eyes and slumber upon my eyelids.³⁵
- (7)...upon my eyes and gives light to the pupil of the eye.³⁶
- (8)...upon my eyes and slumber upon my eyelids and gives light to the pupil of the eye.³⁷
- (9)...upon my eyes and sets sleep of slumber and the One who gives light

²⁷ Shlomo Naeh, “*Hergel Mitzvah*,” *Tarbitz* 65, no. 2 (January-March 1996), 232.

²⁸ While one could alternatively study the blessing by looking at each of the versions on their own and then comparing them, the structure, nevertheless, remains the same amongst them.

²⁹ All translations are mine.

³⁰ Rav Netronai Gaon, *Teshuvot Rav Netronai Gaon OH 9 (Teshuvot Rav Netronai bar H-lai Ge'on*, vol. 1, ed. Yerahmiel Brody (Jerusalem & Cleveland: Ofef Institute, 1994), 113). (Henceforth, Netronai.)

³¹ Menahem ben Rabbi Shlomoh, *Beit ha-Behirah*, vol. 1, *Masekhet Berakhot*, ed. Shmuel Dyc - man (Jerusalem: Yad haRav Herzog, 1965), 212. (Henceforth, Meiri.)

³² Rabbi Isaac ben Jacob Alfasi, *Hilkhot Rav Alfasi*, vol. 1, ed. Rabbi Nissan Sacks (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1969), 50. (Henceforth, Rif.)

³³ MSS Oxford 366, Paris 671. (Henceforth, Oxford (for both).)

³⁴ *Sefer Mitzvot Katan, Mitzvah* 151. (Henceforth, SeMaK.)

³⁵ Rosh, *Berakhot* 9:23. (Henceforth, Rosh)

³⁶ Rambam, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Tefilah* 7:1 according to *Mishneh Torah*, vol. 1, *Book of Ahavah*, vol. 2 (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem & Bnei Brak: Hotzaat Shabse Frankel, 2007), 74. (Henceforth, Rambam-Frankel.)

³⁷ Found in both the Soncino (Soncino, Italy: Joshua Solomon Soncino, 1483) and Romm printed editions of the Talmud (and, for that matter, the Bomberg version (Venice, Italy: Daniel Bomberg, 1520), p. 62b, which is identical in this matter to that of the Soncino version). So, too, Rambam, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Tefilah* 7:1 according to *Sefer Mishneh Torah al-pi Kitvei Yad Teimanim*, vol. 2, *Sefer Ahavah*, ed. Yosef Kapah (Jerusalem: Mekhon Mishnat haRambam, 1983), 174. (Henceforth, Rambam-Kapah.) It is noteworthy here to mention Kapah's words in a note on this passage (my translation): “and in the printed [editions], they added and emended as they liked” (Kaph, *Sefer Mishneh Torah*, 174, n. 1).

to the pupil of the eye.³⁸

- (10)...upon my eyes and sets sleep of slumber upon my eyelids, and light-giver to the pupil of the eye.³⁹
- (11)...upon my eyes and the One who gives light to the pupil of the eye, and the One who sets sleep of slumber.⁴⁰
- (12)...upon my eyes and sets sleep of slumber upon my eyelids and rest upon the pupil of the eye.⁴¹
- (13)...upon my eyes and sets sleep of slumber upon my eyelids and rest upon the pupil of the eye and guards me like the pupil of the eye.⁴²
- (14)... upon my eyes and the One who sets sleep of slumber to descend and the One who lights up the pupil of the eye.⁴³

A common aspect running through each of these versions is thanking God for being the One to cause sleep to fall upon the person. This is perfectly reasonable considering that this is the liminal moment that the person is moving from becoming tired in the waking realm, to accepting upon themselves their hypnagogic state and entering into sleep. The common language of “causes bonds of sleep to fall” utilizes the language of 1 Kings 20:31,⁴⁴ which imagines that ropes are binding up the sleeper. Indeed, the language used throughout the blessing repeatedly borrows from biblical verses.

The phrasings of both “sleep” and, separately, “slumber” were adapted from Psalms 132:4 and/or Proverbs 6:4. The two terms are separate forms of sleeping,⁴⁵ with the second (“slumber”) used as an intensification.⁴⁶ Thus, the phrase “sleep of slumber” is likely a mistake. Furthermore, it is interesting that this phrase is used as the object of “placing”⁴⁷—hinting perhaps that this

³⁸ Rambam, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhhot Tefilah* 7:1 according to *Mishneh Torah*, vol.1, *Sefer Ahavah*, bk. 2 (Jerusalem: Segula, 2003), 38-39. (Henceforth, Rambam-Segula.)

³⁹ Simhah ben Shmuel of Vitri, *Mabzor Vitri*, vol. 1, ed. Rabbi Aryeh Goldschmidt (Jerusalem: Mekhon Otzar Haposkim, 2004), 163. (Henceforth, MzVitri.) It is noted there that one MS has “returner” instead of “lightgiver.”

⁴⁰ *Sefer Hilkhhot Gedolot*, siman 1, ch. 9 (*Sefer Hilkhhot Gedolot* (Jerusalem: Mekhon ‘Or Ha - izrah, 1992), 89). (Henceforth, Hil. Ged.)

⁴¹ Rabbi Avraham ben Rabbi Yitzhak, *Sefer ha-Eshkol*, ed. Hanoch Albeck (Jerusalem: Mekitzei Nirdamim, 1938), 94. (Henceforth, Eshkol.)

⁴² Rav Amram Gaon in *Seder Rav Amram Ga'on*, vol. 1 (Warsaw: Ch. Kelter’a I Spolki, 1865; Jerusalem: Kiryaa Ne’emenah, 1965), 19. (Henceforth, Amram.)

⁴³ Rambam, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhhot Tefilah* 7:1 according to *Mishneh Torah: Mahadura Menuk - det Im Perush Le-Am*, vol.3, *Sefer Ahavah*, ed. Rav Shmuel Tanhum Rubenstein (Jerusalem: Mossad haRav Kook, 1958). (Henceforth, Rambam-Kook.)

⁴⁴ Rabinovitch, *Sefer Ahavah*, 266. Rabinovitch goes on to suggest that this understanding is reflected in the morning blessings with the saying of “the One who releases the bound” – that those bonds of sleep which had held back the sleeper are now removed.

⁴⁵ See Rabbi Meir Leibush’s commentary on the Proverbs verse.

⁴⁶ Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 1-9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 18A (New York & London: Doubleday, 2000), 213. See also 214, n. 163 there.

⁴⁷ Rabinovitch suggests that this language is based off of Job 40:25 (Rabinovitch, *Sefer Ah -*

word was not originally part of the blessing.

In a number of versions, the blessing borrows from Psalms 17:8, which says “guard me like the apple of your eye”⁴⁸—describing the pupil, lying in the midst of the iris. Those versions that have adopted the language of “guard me” request protection, especially at this vulnerable moment. Those versions which speak about lighting up the pupil of the eye rather than guarding it use such a phrase to balance the sleep that is about to descend upon the person’s eyes, with hopes of their post-sleep experience. Either way, this ocular focus seems to be due to the eye being the main sensing interface with one’s waking world. Thus, there is a movement from wakefulness to sleeping, then from sleeping to wakefulness—all brought on by God.

The first two versions of the opening blessing listed above offer an impersonal blessing of God, matching the concluding blessing. Although the third version offers a personal placement of the bonds of sleep upon the person, the last nine versions, also more personal, have the bonds of sleep being placed specifically on the eyes.⁴⁹ Additionally, the first and sixth versions have only one action verb, whereas the remainder use multiple action verbs.

Middle Section: Personal Requests

The middle section of the *Ha-Mapil* blessing, which includes a series of requests, also varies greatly among the manuscripts and commentaries’ versions. While many of the elements remain the same, even some of the common phrases are found in some versions and not in others. Most versions start off with the introductory language of “May it be Your will, Lord, my God,”⁵⁰ remaining with the personal, first-person theme of this blessing, and then all move to requests, starting off with “that....” What follows in each of them is a string of verbal strophes connected by the word “and.” In the chart that follows, I have omitted the connecting “and” and have provided ordinal numeration for each of the verbal strophes as they appear in each version:

vah, 266).

⁴⁸ Translations of Scripture in this paper are from *Tanakh: A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Hebrew Text* (Philadelphia & Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 1985).

⁴⁹ The logic behind suggesting that the bonds of sleep are upon the person would be that one is bound up, as it were, as their physical mobility is limited.

⁵⁰ *Sefer Mitzvot Katan* has added onto this “and the God of my fathers,” while *Mahzor Vitri* has a pluralized form of that. Additionally, while the Talmudic manuscripts have no mention of God, it is clear that this is meant to be inserted when pronouncing this blessing.

⁵¹ “Stand me up from my bed to life and to peace.”

⁵² “Stand me up from it to life and to peace.”

⁵³ “Stand me up from my bed to life and to peace.”

⁵⁴ “Stand me up from my bed to life and to peace.”

⁵⁵ “Stand me up to peace and to a good life.”

⁵⁶ “Do not bring me to iniquity, to sin, to temptation, nor to humiliation”

	Romm	Oxford	Soncino	Rif	Rambam	Hil.Ged.	Netronai	Anram	Rosh	MzYitri	Eshkol	SeMak	Meiri
That You will lay me down peacefully	1		1				1	1	1	1		1	6
Stand me up peacefully		6		7 ⁵¹	4 ⁵²	3 ⁵³	2	2	2 ⁵⁴	2		2	7 ⁵⁵
Give me my lot in Your Torah	2	1	2	1			3	3		3		3	1
Accustom me to come to <i>mitzvah</i>	3	2	3	2				4		4			2
Do not accustom me to come to sin	4	3	4	3				5		5			3
Do not bring me to sin, to temptation, nor to humiliation	5 ⁵⁶	4	5			1 ⁵⁷		6		6			
May the good inclination rule over me	6	5		4				7			1		4
May the evil inclination not rule over me	7		6	5				8		8 ⁵⁸	2		5
Save me from unfortunate accidents and illnesses	8		7		1 ⁵⁹			9			3 ⁶⁰	4 ⁶¹	
May neither bad dreams nor bad thoughts confuse me	9		8		2	2		10	3	9	4		
May my bed be complete before You	10		9	6	3			11	4	10	5	5	
Light my eyes lest I sleep the sleep of death	11		10	8	5			12	5	11	6	6	8
Guard me from coming into blood										7			

Looking at all of these different versions of the text can certainly obfuscate interpreting the blessing.⁶² For instance, while the smallest version is three

⁵⁷ “Do not bring me to temptation nor to humiliation.”

⁵⁸ “...and from evil thought.”

⁵⁹ The Bodleian MS (as does Rambam-Kook) has “Save me from evil inclination and from unfortunate accident” (see Rabinovitch, *Mishneh Torah*, 266).

⁶⁰ “Save me from mishap, from bad dreams, and from bad thoughts.”

⁶¹ “Save me from the evil inclination, from mishap, and from bad dreams and [bad] thoughts.”

⁶² Whether the mixing and matching came about through active recensions—whether via written or oral means—or whether there came about scribal and oral transmission changes. Curiously, the blessing with which *Ha-Mapil* shares the most similarity is that of *ba-Ma’avir*

lines long, the longest version includes twelve lines. Additionally, there is no clear chronology to range of length, as demonstrated by both the smallest and largest being Geonic. In any event, we shall now proceed to identify the major themes in this portion of the blessing.

The first line, “that You will lay me down peacefully,” appears in a little over half of the represented examples and almost always is the first line in this section (Meiri’s version has it toward the end). It expresses one’s hope to be able to sleep. The language of “lying down” seems to once again draw from biblical language.

The next line of “stand me up peacefully” occurs either as the second line, last line, or penultimate line in the listing in this section. This line along with the previous one works well as a mirror to those versions of the first blessing wherein both sleeping and waking are mentioned. This seems to be why it is found either directly juxtaposed to the first line or at the opposite end of the section.⁶³

The next line of “give me my lot in Your Torah” is mentioned in one of the first few lines of this section, sometimes the first, indicating that this is one of the more significant requests here. In fact, when one goes to sleep, they do relinquish their attempts to study more Torah. Therefore, at this time they recognize that sleeping and studying Torah are two mutually exclusive activities, and that regardless of their current pursuit of seeking sleep, they still hope to have a portion in God’s Torah.⁶⁴

The next two requests of “accustom me to come to *mitzvah* and do not accustom me to come to sin” are always found in tandem. Although it may seem strange that one would request these active actions as one is going to sleep, they may have a bed-related intention. As Shlomo Naeh has pointed out, these terms relate to euphemistic language for sexual intercourse.⁶⁵ The request then is for the sexual activity in which one may engage to be proper. Interestingly, whereas the discourse to this point has been centered on sleep, this line shifts the focus to bedtime activity in general, or in a non-sexual understanding of “accustom me to come to *mitzvah*” the focus has shifted beyond the bed entirely.

The following four lines of “bring me neither to sin, to temptation, nor to humiliation,” “may the good inclination rule over me,” “may the evil inclination not rule over me,” and “save me from unfortunate accidents and illnesses” seem

Sheinah, the last of a series of daily *berakhot* which are recited later in the morning order of blessings. This is peculiar since one would expect the blessing immediately following sleep, that of *Elokai Neshamah* found directly after *Ha-Mapil* in the Talmud, to be most like the one to directly precede it, in order to provide blessing “bookends” for sleep. This is not the case and instead, it is recited later [on the same page in the Talmud].

⁶³ It is unclear why the corresponding language of “rising” as found in the *Shema* paragraphs of Deuteronomy 6:7 and 11:19 is not used here, as it would seem to be particularly appropriate.

⁶⁴ Cf. Rabbi Yechezkel Landau, *Sefer Zion Le-Nefesh Hayah*, vol. 1, rev. ed. (Jerusalem: Vagshal, 1995 (orig. Prague: 1791)), 218, s.v. *she-tashkiveini le-shalom ve-ten helki be-Torah tekha*.

⁶⁵ Naeh, “*Hergel Mitzvah*,” 234.

similar to the two preceding lines in that they seem waking-activity oriented. They may also be related to the bed in terms of sex.⁶⁶ This is certainly true for the phrase “guard me from coming into blood” that appears uniquely in *Mahzor Vitri*, seemingly referring to blood of either *nidah* or *zivah* that may occur during sexual intercourse.

The early fourteenth-century scholar Rabbi Ya’akov ben Asher suggests that these non-sleep-related requests were added by the ninth-century sage Rav Amram Gaon.⁶⁷ If so, it could have been done for one of three reasons. 1) Because this blessing is said prior to entering one’s bed, the locus of sexual activity, and, as there is no other liturgical outlet for making these requests, this moment becomes optimal. 2) These requests are actually intended to relate to general waking hours and are said now as a means of preparation for the day ahead. 3) A mixture between the previous two: some requests may have been meant for bedtime and others for the next day.

The next line of “may neither bad dreams nor bad thoughts confuse me” is borrowed from the end of Daniel 5:10, which includes the following: “Let your thoughts not alarm you [...]” This line requests of God not to allow the sleeper to be perturbed with nightmares.

The request “may my bed be complete before You” seems, at first, to be speaking of the physical bed. Thus, one is praying for the bed to remain sturdy throughout the night and for the sleeper to remain sleeping, rather than disturbed by a collapsing bed. However, the language of “before You” seems to indicate a further meaning. It may be that the completeness refers to that which comes from the bed—the progeny conceived there.⁶⁸ Thus, it is likely speaking about sexual activity while on the bed.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ See *Kidushin* 81b for Rabbi Hiyah, son of Ashi’s daily request of “May the Merciful One save me from the evil inclination,” beseeching God to help him to have a disinterest in sexual activity.

⁶⁷ *Tur*, *Orah Hayim* 239. Although, whether Rav Amram added them from his own thought or had a different version is unclear. (Nach, “*Hergel Mitzvah*,” 232.)

⁶⁸ Rashi, *Berakhot* 60b, s.v. *u-te-bei mitati sheleimah lefanekha*.

⁶⁹ While at first glance, the phrase “my bed” has no special connotation – including the biblical *hapax legomenon* of Psalms 6:7 – the Rabbis construe this phrase with sexual meaning. While the phrase “usage of my bed” in tannaitic texts (*Ta’anit* 1:6, *Ketuvot* 5:6, *Eduyot* 4:10, *Nega’im* 14:2, *Tosefta Ta’anit* 1:5, 2:4, *Tosefta Yoma* 4:1, *Tosefta Ketuvot* 5:6, *Tosefta Nega’im* 8:6, *Tosefta Nedarim* 7:1, *Tosefta Zavim* 1:9, and *Nedarim* 81b) is of a sexual nature, the phrase “my bed” by itself is not (see *Ta’anit* 21a, *Megilah* 28a, and *Berakhot* 5a). Of particular interest in this shift of meaning is Abba Binyamin’s statement: “For two things, I pained myself all of my days: On my prayer: that it should be before my bed; and on my bed: that it should be placed between the north and the south” (*Berakhot* 5b). At face value, Abba Binyamin seems to be talking about both the physical or temporal juxtaposition of his prayer and his bed in the first case, and how he wanted to position his bed in the latter case. On the latter element of Abba Binyamin’s statement, the *stam* of the gemara connects the geographical positioning of the bed to a statement by either Rabbi Hama, son of Rabbi Hanina, or Rabbi Yitzhak, that one who positions his bed this way will merit male children (*Berakhot* 5b), thus reading Abba

The final line of “light my eyes lest I sleep the sleep of death” is taken from the last half of Psalm 13:4. Not only was a connection between sleep and death made in the Bible,⁷⁰ but a *beraita* in the Babylonian Talmud explicitly suggests that sleep bares a resemblance to death (*Berakhot* 57b).⁷¹ Moreover, as one is preparing for a loss of consciousness, one hopes that it is temporary.⁷² Thus, this line is used as a request that this sleep should be not be a permanent one. Furthermore, the language of lighting up of eyes is similar to some versions of the first and concluding blessings.

There are two main motifs woven into this section of requests. On one hand, we find preparation for sleep leading to arising to a new day. The second motif, however, is one of seeking blessing while engaged in sexual activity. A number of these are requests from the petitioner directly to God, but there are also several indirect requests, with the blesser hoping for his or her desired outcome to occur. In each of these modes, one gives up their authority over themselves and places themselves in the trust of God.⁷³

Binyamin’s statement with sexual connotation. Two additional amoraic usages of this term further illustrate their understanding of “my bed” as sexual. The first is Rav Yehudah quoting Rav expounding on Psalms 6:7, the biblical verse mentioned earlier, that even at the time of David’s pains, he still had sex (*Sanhedrin* 107a). While this understanding is not the simple understanding of the verse, Rav interprets “bed” as being “usage of bed” (Rashi, *Sanhedrin* 107a, s.v. *mitati*). The second amoraic usage is that of Reish Lakish, who also expounds a biblical verse: “And Jacob called his sons and said, ‘Come together that I may tell you what is to befall you in days to come’” (Genesis 49:1), an apparent discontinued clause. Reish Lakish seeks to fill this narrative gap by saying that Jacob, after becoming concerned with his loss of prophetic ability, began considering that “[P]erhaps there is an invalidation on my bed, like Abraham, out of whom came Ishmael, and like my father Isaac, out of whom came Esau” (*Pesahim* 56a). Reish Lakish presents Jacob being concerned not about his physical bed, but rather representing the bed as the locus of generating progeny. Indeed the amoraim see more meaning in a bed on which one engages in the sexual act rather than simply a bed for sleeping (Cf. *Shabat* 118b and *Gitin* 56a).

⁷⁰ See, for instance, Thomas H. McAlpine, *Sleep, Divine & Human in the Old Testament*, JSOTS 38 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987), 144-149.

⁷¹ The specific language used is that sleep is one-sixtieth of death, along with four other relationships between various items—mostly non-physical.

⁷² See the fascinating statement of Johnstone: “structurally the beginning of death is exactly like the beginning of sleep. Each is a loss of waking consciousness. That death is not merely the loss of waking consciousness, but the loss of *all* consciousness does not affect the extrapolation; sleep, too, can be, or at least seem to the erstwhile sleeper, a loss of all consciousness.” (Henry W. Johnstone, Jr., “Toward A Phenomenology of Death,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 35, no. 3 [1975], 396-397.)

⁷³ Cf. “When people sleep, some of the responsibility they have for taking care of their own and society’s interests, is transferred to others” (Vilhelm Aubert and Harrison White, “Sleep: A Sociological Interpretation, II,” *Acta Sociologica* 4, no. 3 [1959], 14). The theological import of this blessing then, is that the sleeper puts his or her trust in God, beseeching divine protection.

Third Section: Concluding Blessing

The concluding blessing line is the least varied of the three *Ha-Mapil* sections. Not only are there only several different versions, but they also differ little in message:

Blessed is the Light-giver of the world.⁷⁴

Blessed is the One who gives light to the entire world with his glory.⁷⁵

Blessed is the One who gives light to the whole entire world with his glory.⁷⁶

Blessed is the One who gives light to the whole world.⁷⁷

Blessed is the One who gives light to the world with his glory.⁷⁸

The theme of God giving light to the world seems to reflect the notion of giving light to the pupil of the eye included in most versions of the opening blessing line. The usage of this motif in the closing blessing creates a literary envelope—closing on a theme with which the blessing began. But the language of lighting up the world may seem out of place, right before sleeping—one might expect language about good sleep, sweet sleep, or even a renewed spirit or energy upon waking. So why is the blessing formulated in this way?

The blessing speaks of lighting up the world with the person thinking about their waking day ahead—once darkness has fallen over the land, they are in a moment of diminished opportunity, such that the pervading darkness forces a cessation of daily labors, crafts, and other regular activities. But the words of *Ha-Mapil* serve to give them hope, something to which to look forward. The nineteenth-century physician Robert Macnish describes that, upon awakening, “the eyes are painfully affected by the light, but this shortly wears away, and we then feel them stronger than when we went to bed.”⁷⁹ The motif of the light in *Ha-Mapil* suggests the same kind of powerful first moment upon our return to consciousness.

Some of the versions mention God lighting up “the whole world.” What is gained by adding the element of “the whole”? Perhaps this phrase suggests a stronger recognition of the greatness of God, demonstrated further in some versions through the inclusion of “in His glory.” This further appendage clarifies the results of God’s acts in “the whole entire world”—that his glory is so magisterial that He lights up the world.

⁷⁴ Oxford (& Paris).

⁷⁵ Soncino, Romm, Rambam-Segula, Hil. Ged, Rosh, and Eshkol.

⁷⁶ Rif, Rambam-Kook & Amram.

⁷⁷ Rambam-Kapah & Rambam-Frankel.

⁷⁸ MzVitri & SeMaK.

⁷⁹ Robert Macnish, *The Philosophy of Sleep*, 2nd ed. (Glasgow: W.R. M’phun, 1834), 38.

Conclusion

While the Talmudic manuscripts and early medieval commentators⁸⁰ (*ris-honim*) vary greatly in their representations of the *Ha-Mapil* blessing, certain themes, nevertheless, emerge.⁸¹ Throughout the *Ha-Mapil* blessing, motifs of heading to sleep, hoping to arise from sleep, sexual conduct, and the lighting up of eyes appear. All of these fit within the standard rabbinic rubric of a lengthy blessing, with a full opening blessing line, a middle section continuing the themes and requests, and then concluding with a short, closing blessing line. Although a semblance of sleep to death is suggested, “no anticipation of any metaphysical crisis is implied.”⁸² That is to say, the text of the blessing does not suggest a concern about contact with spirits or that one’s spirit necessarily leaves one’s body.

For a Jew approaching their bed to sleep, the Rabbis of the Talmud seek to provide a religious orientation for this pivotal experience. They use liturgical prescriptions, both from Scripture, as well as from their own blessing formulations to do so. While “sleep did not take up much of their attention in their halakhic system, as it was more likely seen as a very normal, quotidian activity,”⁸³ once the moment arrives and an individual has physically prepared for sleep, the Rabbis provide a frame for this moment that marks the transition from consciousness to unconsciousness. Upon the recital of this blessing, one becomes mentally prepared to move into a different mode of existence.

⁸⁰ Amongst these, one of the most significant is Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah* among which are found several versions of this text. Rabbi Rapoport suggested that “it is axiomatic to all students of the *Mishneh Torah* that this work was written with extreme meticulousness and precision. An accurate text is therefore all the more critical for the student who seeks to appreciate its proper meaning and decipher the delicate nuances of its phraseology” (Rabbi Chaim Rapoport, “Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Manuscripts and Indices,” *Jewish Action* 65, no. 3 [Spring 2005]: 40). Thus, for Maimonidean scholars, there is yet still room to investigate this blessing in the *Mishneh Torah*.

⁸¹ One problem that arises with private liturgy such as *Birkat Ha-Mapil*, that gives rise to such a divergence in versions, is that it is generally confined to a textual sphere as opposed to public liturgy, where people may more easily be more familiar with a certain way of saying it.

⁸² Martin L. Gordon, “*Netilat Yadayim Shel Shaharit*: Ritual of Crisis or Dedication?,” *Gesher* 8 (1981), 66, n. 80.

⁸³ Kaplan, *Rabbinic Sleep Ethics*, 93.