



WHEN SAYING A BRACHA, THE SURROUNDING ENVIRONMENT
MUST BE DIGNIFIED AND CLEAN.

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The Torah says: “Your camp should be holy” (Deut. 23:15). This means that when engaging in “holy” activities, such as prayer and Torah study, one’s surrounding environment must be dignified and clean.¹ With this in mind, we can appreciate the following guidelines that emphasize the need for dignity and honor when saying a bracha – both for the person saying the bracha, and also the setting in which the bracha is said.

Properly Dressed

Part and parcel of saying a “dignified bracha” is that all the people present are properly dressed. This includes both proper clothing and a proper head covering. As we will see in the following section, these requirements will differ slightly for men and women.

¹ Talmud – Brachot 25a

(1) Proper Dress for Men

(a) Nudity

- It is prohibited for a man to say a bracha while totally naked, i.e. with private parts exposed.²
- Another aspect of “holiness” when saying a bracha is that a man is required to have a “separation between his heart and his lower body.” This typically requires no special attention, as it is accomplished by wearing a belt, pants or underwear. However, if a man is at home wearing just a bathrobe, he would need to tie the robe’s belt, in order to create a separation between the heart and lower body.³
- It is improper to say a bracha with one’s top half uncovered, unless there is no realistic option.⁴



Joe is sitting at the beach in his bathing suit and wants to say a bracha on a nice cold drink. This is permitted, since his private parts are covered by a bathing suit, which also acts as a separation “between his heart and lower body.” If possible, Joe should use a towel or t-shirt to also cover his upper half.

² Pri Megadim – Introduction to ch. 74-75

³ Orach Chaim 74:1, with Mishnah Berurah 2; Aruch HaShulchan (OC 74:5). If the robe has no belt, the material could be pressed tightly against the waist (Orach Chaim 74:1, with Mishnah Berurah 2).

⁴ Mishnah Berurah 74:22

(b) Head Covering

The Talmud⁵ suggests that a Jewish man should wear a head covering under all normal circumstances, so that the “fear of Heaven” should be upon him.⁶ Certainly, a man needs to have his head covered while saying a bracha.⁷

If there is no kippah or hat available, and you’re really thirsty for a drink, can you cover your head with your hand? No,⁸ but you could:

- cover your head with your shirt sleeve,⁹ or
- ask someone else to put their hand on your head¹⁰



(2) Proper Dress for Women

(a) Nudity

The halacha is more lenient regarding women:

- As long as a woman is sitting down, she is permitted to say a bracha, as long as her private parts are not directly exposed.¹¹
- Further, there is no need for a woman to “separate between her heart and her lower body.”¹²

However, in both these aspects, it is recommended, when possible, for a woman to act strictly.¹³

⁵ Shabbat 156b

⁶ Orach Chaim 2:6; *Shu”t Igros Moshe* (OC 1:1). In fact, the word *yarmulke* is based on an Aramaic expression meaning, “awe of the King,” or the Hebrew *Yerah M’Eloka*, meaning “awe of God.”

⁷ Orach Chaim 91:3, 206:3

⁸ Orach Chaim 91:4

⁹ Mishnah Berurah 2:12, 91:10

¹⁰ Orach Chaim 91:4

¹¹ Rema – Orach Chaim 74:4, with Mishnah Berurah 17

¹² Mishnah Berurah 74:15

(b) Head Covering

Jewish law requires all married women to cover their hair in public places, or even in private if she is likely to be seen by a man other than her husband.¹⁴

Furthermore, even if there is no one else around, it is preferable for a woman to cover her hair when saying a bracha.¹⁵



Are Other People Properly Dressed?

We have established the need to be adequately dressed when saying a bracha. Beyond this, we need to be aware of how other people around us are clothed. Here again, the rules differ for men and women.

(1) For Men

A Man Around Other Men

A man may not say a bracha while facing the private parts of another male above the age of **nine**.¹⁶ Closing his eyes won't help; in order to say the bracha, he'll need to turn his body (not just his face) away so that he is not facing him anymore.¹⁷ This applies even in the dark.¹⁸

¹³ Rema – Orach Chaim 75:1; Orach Chaim 74:4, with Mishnah Berurah 16

¹⁴ For a full discussion of the laws of head covering for married women, see *Halichos Bas Yisrael* (ch. 5), by Rabbi Yitzchak Yaacov Fuchs (targum.com)

¹⁵ Rabbi Y.S. Eliyashiv, cited in *Halichos Bas Yisrael* 5:5

¹⁶ Orach Chaim 75:4. This applies even if the unclad person is a family member (Orach Chaim 73:3).

¹⁷ Even though Shulchan Aruch (OC 75:6) holds that merely closing one's eyes is sufficient, Mishnah Berurah 75:29 and Aruch HaShulchan (OC 75:11) rule that you must turn your body away.

¹⁸ Orach Chaim 75:6

A Man Around Women

A man may not say a bracha while facing the private parts of any girl over the age of **three**. Similar to what we said above, he would need to turn his body away.¹⁹

In addition, since women are required to dress modestly, a man may not see certain other parts of a woman's body when saying a blessing. These are:

- the upper arm (i.e. above the elbow)²⁰
- the thigh (i.e. the leg above the knee)²¹
- the torso from the neck down²²
- uncovered hair (if the woman is married)²³

This applies to all women – even a wife and daughter.²⁴ There are, however, different opinions as to what age these guidelines begin; consult your local rabbi for the custom in your community.²⁵

As we said above, in instances when you are facing another person's private parts, you must turn your body away. But what about when the problem is that the other person is "improperly dressed"?



This is actually a quite common scenario, such as in work-related settings,²⁶ or at a Shabbat table when you want to say Kiddush, but a female guest is not properly covered. In such a case, since there is no other feasible option, the man can face downwards or close his eyes while saying the bracha.²⁷

¹⁹ Orach Chaim 75:4, with Rema

²⁰ Orach Chaim 75:1, with Mishnah Berurah 2, 7

²¹ Orach Chaim 75:1, with Mishnah Berurah 2, 7

²² See *Ishei Yisrael* 55:13

²³ Orach Chaim 75:2. A man may recite a bracha in the presence of a *non-Jewish* married woman whose hair is uncovered (*Shu"t Igros Moshe* - OC 4:15:1). See Even Ha'Ezer 21 for other *tzniut* guidelines.

²⁴ Orach Chaim 75:1 with Rema, and Mishnah Berurah 75:2, 7

²⁵ Biur Halacha (OC 75 – s.v. *tefach*) implies that the age is three, and a daughter from the age of 11. However, Chazon Ish (OC 15:8) rules that the prohibition only applies from the age that the girl is attractive to men – which depends on each individual girl according to her development and size.

²⁶ see Orach Chaim 75:4

²⁷ Mishnah Berurah 75:1. The halacha is even more lenient when saying a bracha in front of a married woman whose hair is uncovered. (see Aruch HaShulchan 75:7; *Shu"t Igros Moshe* OC 1:42)

(2) For Women

Similar to what we said above, if there are other people around with **private parts** exposed, a woman may not say a bracha in front of them unless she turns her body away first.

What if a woman wants to say a bracha in the presence of other women who have **other areas** exposed – e.g. above the elbows and knees, below the neckline, or a married woman's hair? In this case the rules are more lenient, and it is permitted for a woman to say a bracha, even without closing her eyes or looking downwards.²⁸

A Woman's Singing Voice (*Kol Isha*)

Even when **not** saying a bracha, Jewish men are not permitted to hear a female singing. This is called *kol isha*, literally "the voice of a woman."²⁹ This is a complex halachic area – the rules vary depending upon whom and where the singer is. For example, some authorities differentiate if the female voice is a family member, while others debate the status of a female voice heard over the radio, rather than live.³⁰ Consult your rabbi for a full overview.

Whatever the case, when it comes to actually saying a bracha, a man is not permitted to do so in the presence of any female singing voice. This even applies when one's wife or daughter is singing.³¹

This prohibition only applies to men listening to women; however the halacha permits a woman to recite a blessing when hearing a man (or other women) sing.³²

²⁸ Mishnah Berurah 75:8; although Rema (OC 75:1) appears to rule strictly

²⁹ Talmud – Brachot 24a; Orach Chaim 75:3 with Rema, and Mishnah Berurah 16, 17. Mishnah Berurah rules that this also applies to non-Jewish women. He also rules regarding non-Jewish women singing: When stuck for other options, for example on a long train journey, it is permitted to say a bracha if you do not pay attention to the singing.

³⁰ For example, see *Tzitz Eliezer* 5:2 and *Yabiya Omer* (OC 1:6) for a discussion of saying a blessing when there is a female voice on the radio. See also *S'ridei Aish* 1:8 for a discussion of leniencies for "mixed singing" in religious outreach situations.

³¹ Orach Chaim 75:3, with Mishnah Berurah 17

Clean Body and Hands

Part of the “holiness” of a blessing is that one may not say a bracha if s/he presently feels the need to use the bathroom.³³ Further, before saying a bracha, the anal area must be clean of any waste residue.³⁴

One’s hands must also be clean before saying a bracha. “Unclean” in this sense means:

- actual dirt and grime³⁵
- touching a part of the body that is normally covered (e.g. armpit or groin area)³⁶
- scratching one’s head³⁷
- touching one’s shoe³⁸
- having been in a bathroom
- having been in a cemetery
- touching a deceased person
- touching lice
- when getting out of bed in the morning
- after a haircut³⁹
- after cutting nails
- after marital relations



If your hands are dirty, you should wash them before saying a bracha. In the event that water is not readily available, it is sufficient to wipe one’s hands on something like a cloth or a rock.⁴⁰

³² *Yabiya Omer* (OC 1:65)

³³ Orach Chaim 92:1

³⁴ Orach Chaim 76:5

³⁵ Orach Chaim 92:6, with Mishnah Berurah 27

³⁶ Orach Chaim 4:21

³⁷ Orach Chaim 92:7

³⁸ Mishnah Berurah 4:41

³⁹ Orach Chaim 4:18

⁴⁰ Orach Chaim 92:6, with Mishnah Berurah 27

A Dignified Environment

Another way in which we “dignify” a bracha is that the setting must be free of odors and waste.

(1) Odors

If there is a bad smell around, it is prohibited to say a bracha.⁴¹ For example:

- If a child is in the area with a smelly soiled diaper, you could only say a bracha if you are 7 feet⁴² away from **where the odor ends**.⁴³
- If you are near a bathroom, close the door and be careful that there is no bad smell emanating.⁴⁴
- If someone passes wind, you need to wait until the smell disperses before saying a bracha. Alternatively, you can distance yourself till **where the smell ends**.⁴⁵

(2) Waste

Decaying organic matter⁴⁶ — e.g. a garbage can — presents a problem when saying a bracha. If there is a smell emanating from it, then the rules stated above (regarding a diaper) apply — i.e. you must be at least 7 feet away from **where the odor ends**.



⁴¹ Orach Chaim 79:1, 4, 8, with Mishnah Berurah 23. This is an objectively bad smell, meaning that someone with a deadened sense of smell is still prohibited from saying a bracha in the presence of an objectively bad odor (Orach Chaim 79:1). However, if the source of the smell was removed, and only the odor remains, then the criteria become “subjective” — i.e. someone who cannot smell the odor, may say a bracha there (Orach Chaim 79:9).

⁴² in Talmudic terms, 4 cubits

⁴³ This applies only to a child from age three months and over (Orach Chaim 81:1; *Misgeret HaShulchan* 5:5).

⁴⁴ *Shu”t Igros Moshe* (EH 1:114)

⁴⁵ Orach Chaim 79:9, with Mishnah Berurah 32

⁴⁶ Mishnah Berurah 79:23, who adds that this does not apply to chemical sources such as gasoline, tar or paint

If, however, there is **no smell**, then it depends:

- If the waste is **uncovered**, then you may not say a bracha when **facing** the waste. Shutting your eyes won't help in this case; you would need to **turn away** from the waste, and move **7 feet** away from where it's lying.⁴⁷
- If the waste is **covered**, then there is no problem in saying a bracha (provided of course there is no smell). This applies even if the covering is "see-through," and even if you are standing right next to it.⁴⁸

For Review

- We need to be **properly dressed** when saying a bracha.
- We also need to make sure **those around us** are adequately dressed.
- A man should not recite a bracha in the presence of a **female singing voice**.
- The **body and hands** should be clean.
- Places with uncovered **waste or odors** present a problem when saying a bracha.

⁴⁷ Orach Chaim 79:1, with Mishnah Berurah 1 and Biur Halacha – s.v. "Oy"

⁴⁸ Orach Chaim 76:1