**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**THE LAWS OF THE BERAKHOT**

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**Shiur #73: *Birkot Ha-Shevach* (3)**

***Berakhot* Over the Forces of Nature (2)**

Last week, we began our study of blessings said upon seeing or experiencing unique and awe-inspiring forces of nature. The *mishna* (*Berakhot* 54b) teaches:

For *zikin* (comets) and *zeva’ot* (earthquakes), for thunder, [gale force] winds, and lightning, one recites: Blessed…Whose strength and power fill the world (*barukh*… *she-kokho u-gevurato malei olam*). For [extraordinary] mountains, hills, seas, rivers, and deserts, one recites: Blessed…Author of creation (*barukh… oseh ma’aseh vereishit*).

The *gemara* (59a) cites Rava, who maintains that one should “say both” (*mevarekh tartei*) over lightning and thunder. Most *Rishonim* understand that one may see either blessing. Nevertheless, the Taz writes that “it is customary to say, upon [hearing] thunder, *she-kokho u-gevurato*, and upon [seeing] lightning, *oseh ma’aseh vereishit*.”

In addition to thunder and lightning, the *gemara* mentions that one should also say a blessing upon seeing a meteor (shooting star) or an asteroid (see Mishna Berura 1) and upon experiencing an earthquake. Furthermore, the Talmud teaches that one should say a blessing upon experiencing “strong winds.”

This week, we will conclude our study the laws of the *oseh ma’aseh vereishit* blessing, including the blessings said over lakes, rivers, and mountains.

**Blessings over Lakes**

The *mishna* mentioned above teaches that one says the blessing “*oseh* *ma’aseh vereishit*” upon seeing a “*yam*” (sea). The *mishna* then cites R. Yehuda, who rules that “one whosees the great sea recites Blessed…Who made the great sea (*she-asah et ha-yam ha-gadol*)."

The *Rishonim* disagree as to the difference between a “*yam*” (sea) and the “*yam ha-gadol*.” The Rosh (Teshuvot 4:4) rules that the “*yam ha-gadol*” refers to the ocean, “which surrounds the world.” Other *Rishonim* assume that the “*yam* *ha-gadol*” refers to smaller seas, such as the Mediterranean Sea. The Shulchan Arukh (228:1) appears to rule that one says the special blessing “*she-asah et ha-am ha-gadol*” upon seeing the Mediterranean Sea. Interestingly, the Mishna Berura (2) explains that the Mediterranean is unique and special due to the importance of the land of Israel.

Although the Shulchan Arukh rules that one should say the blessing of "*she'asah et ha-yam ha-gadol*" upon seeing the Mediterranean Sea, many *Acharonim* disagree and write that one should say “*oseh ma’aseh vereishit*”, the more general blessing, upon seeing the Mediterranean. Regarding the ocean, some rule the one should say “*she-asah et ha-yam ha-gadol*” upon seeing the ocean (Minchat Yitzchak 1:110), while others say the due to the doubt described above, one should say “*oseh ma’aseh vereishit*.”

One should say the blessing “*oseh ma’aseh vereishit*” upon seeing the Kineret as well.

How often does one say this blessing? The Talmud mentions a break of thirty days regarding the *Shehechiyanu* blessing (*Berakhot* 58b) and regarding the blessing said upon seeing the *yam ha-gadol* (39b).

**Blessing over Rivers**

The *mishna* (*Berakhot* 54b) mentions that one should say the blessing “*oseh ma’aseh vereishit*” upon seeing rivers. The *gemara* (59b) qualifies the *mishna*’s ruling:

And Rami bar Abba said that R. Yitzĥak said: One who sees the Euphrates River near the bridge of Babylonia recites: *Barukh… oseh* *ma’aseh vereshit*. And now that the Persians have rerouted the course of the river, one only recites the blessing from Beit Shavor upriver.

From the Talmud it appears that one should say the blessing upon seeing any river, as long as it still flows along its natural, and not man-made, route. Indeed, the Rambam (*Hilkhot Berakhot* 10:15) cites the language of the *mishna*.

R. David Abudarham (cited in Beit Yosef 228) adds that one says this blessing “only over distinct mountains and hills, regarding which the strength of the Creator is noticeable, and similarly [over] distinct rivers (*neharot meshunim*), such as the Perat and Chidekel.” This distinction, although not mentioned in the Talmud, is certainly understandable.

The *Acharonim* discuss whether one may say the blessing upon seeing any large and impressive river, or only over specific rivers.

Some *Acharonim* (Olat Tamid 228:2; see also Kaf Ha-Chaim 228:9) insist that it is customary not to say this blessing upon seeing rivers, as aside from the four river mentioned in the Torah, we are unable to determine whether the rivers existed from the time of creation. Indeed, the Chayei Adam and Kitzur Shulchan Arukh do not mention this blessing at all. Others (see Eliya Rabba 228:6, Teshuvot Be-Tzel Ha-Chokhma 2:11) rule that unless there is a real concern that the river does not flow along its original route, one may say the blessing. Many *Acharonim* rule that one may say this blessing upon seeing any large and distinctly beautiful river (Magen Avraham 228:3; see Arukh Ha-Shulchan 228:2, who mentions the Volga, Rhine, and Danube). Many are not accustomed to say this blessing, especially those who live near a large river. However, one who sees and is inspired by a particular large and impressive river should say the blessing.

**Blessing over Mountains, Hills, and Deserts**

If a person is taken by the grandeur and beauty of a mountain or hill, he should say the blessing “*oseh ma’aseh vereishit*.” R. Yaakov Emden (1697–1776), in his More U-Ketzi’a (228), explains that “the difference between a mountain and a hill is not is size and height; rather, a hill is an erect mound, steep which sharp sides.” In other words, one should say the blessing upon seeing tall mountains and steep valleys. The Chayei Adam (63:3) writes that one says the blessing upon seeing “famous mountains.” The Arukh Ha-Shulchan (228:1) mentions the Alps and other large European mountains. One should also say the blessing upon seeing the beautiful mountains of the land of Israel.

One generally does not say the blessing over mountains, rivers, and lakes near one's home. Furthermore, one may only say this blessing if he has not seen these sights in thirty days. One who can appreciate the grandeur of these creations may even say the blessing while in an airplane (*Betzel Ha-Chokhma* 2:15).

It is appropriate, in this context, to raise the following interesting, and I believe central question: Does one say these blessings only after being inspired by the greatness of a particular mountain, hill, river or lake, or is it the blessing which ensures that one does not overlook the beauty of nature its Creator. While some Acharonim are clearly inclined to limit the recitation of these blessings, often due to the fear of saying a *berakha le-vatala*, others encourage saying these blessings and lament the common custom of not acknowledging and praising God when seeing these natural phenomenon.