**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**THE LAWS OF THE BERAKHOT**

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**Shiur #72: *Birkot Ha-Shevach* (2)**

***Berakhot* Over the Forces of Nature**

[Last week](http://etzion.org.il/en/shiur-71-birkot-ha-shevach-abnormal-creatures-and-beautiful-creations), we began our study of the *Birkot Ha-Shevach*, specifically blessings said upon seeing both unusual creatures (*beriyot meshunot*) and exceptionally beautiful creations (*beriyot tovot*).

Regarding unusual beings, the Talmud (*Berakhot* 56b) teaches that when one sees people who were born with highly unusual physical characteristics, one says the blessing “Blessed… Who makes creatures different (*barukh* … *meshaneh* *ha-beriyot)*.” In addition, the *gemara* adds that when one sees an elephant, a monkey, or a *kifuf* (an owl, according to the Abudraham, *Hilkhot Berakhot* 8) one recites this blessing as well. The *Acharonim* discuss whether this applies to all highly unique animals (see *Halikhot Shlomo* 23:35) or just these. The Shulchan Arukh omits the *kifuf* completely. Although the Shulchan Arukh (225:9) rules that one should only say these blessings the first time one sees these phenomena, the Rema rules that one may say these blessing every thirty days. The Mishna Berura (30), based upon this doubt, writes that even after thirty days, one should not say the *shem u-malkhut* (i.e. just say “*barukh meshaneh ha-beriyot*”).

The *gemara* also rules that when one sees a person with a particular disability (for example, an amputee, a blind person, a lame person, one afflicted with boils) one recites “Blessed… the true Judge (*barukh dayan ha-emet*). The Ra’avad (cited by Ritva 58b; see also Bach 225:3) assumes this blessing is only said when one feels especially bad for the person.

Regarding exceptionally beautiful creatures, the Talmud (*Berakhot* 56b) teaches that “one who saw outstanding creatures (*beriyot tovot*) or beautiful trees (*ilanot tovot*) recites: Blessed…Who has such things in His world (*barukh… she-kakha lo be-olamo*).”

These blessings are generally not recited nowadays.

This week, we will discuss blessings said upon seeing or experiencing unique and awe-inspiring forces of nature.

***Oseh Ma’aseh Vereishit* and *She-Kokho U-Gevurato Malei Olam***

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) relates to this *mishna*:

We learned in the *mishna* that over mountains and hills one recites: Blessed…Author of creation. The *gemara* asks: Is that to say that all those that we mentioned until now, such as lightning, are not acts of creation? Is it not also written: “He makes lightning for the rain” (*Tehillim* 135:7)? Abaye said: Combine the two statements and teach that in all the cases in our *mishna*, one recites these two blessings. Rava said: There, over lightning and thunder, one recites two blessings: Blessed… Whose power fills the world, and: Author of creation. Here, however, over mountains and hills, one recites the blessing: Author of creation, but need not recite: Whose power fills the world.

Abaye and Rava reconcile these two sources and rule that at times one should “say both” (*mevarekh tartei*). According to Abaye, this is true regarding both the case of mountains and hills and that of lightning and thunder, and according to Rava, it is true only regarding lightning and thunder.

What does Rava mean? When does one say both blessings? The Ra’avad writes (*Hilkhot Berakhot* 10:14; see also Rashi, s.v. *karukh*) that one actually says both blessings. One expresses one’s wonder over the creation and admires God’s strength and might. Most *Rishonim* disagree and rule that one may see either blessing.

Although most *Rishonim* reject the view of the Ra’avad (and Rashi), there seems to be a disagreement regarding the relationship between these two blessings. While the Rif (*Berakhot* 43b) and Tosafot (*Berakhot* 59a, s.v. Rava) rule that one may say either blessing, the Rambam (ibid.) writes:

When one perceives any of the following: winds that blow extremely powerfully, lightning, thunder, loud rumblings that sound like large mills when they are heard on the earth, shooting stars, or comets, he should recite the blessing: [Blessed are You, God, our Lord, King of the universe,] whose power and might fill up the world. If one desires, he may recite the blessing: [Blessed are You, God, our Lord, King of the universe,] who performs the work of creation.

The Rambam implies that the proper, or most appropriate blessing is *she-kokho u-gevurato malei* *olam*, but, one may say *oseh ma’aseh vereishit*. The Rambam does not imply that one has only fulfilled his obligated *be-di’avad*, after the fact, but he still implies that one blessing is slightly more appropriate than the other.

This may be based on a principle we have encountered numerous times – one is supposed to say the most specific blessing. In this case, while it is certainly appropriate to relate to thunder and lightning as God’s creations, mentioning how they reflect God’s power and might is more specific, and may even be a greater form of praise.

The Shulchan Arukh (227:1) records this *halakha* in a similar manner as the Rambam, implying that he too maintains that at times *she-kokho* may be the preferred blessing. This may explain the view of the Taz, who writes:

It is customary to say, upon [hearing] thunder, *she-kokho u-gevurato*, and upon [seeing] lightning, *oseh ma’aseh vereishit*. I do not know the reason for this. Perhaps it is because the thunder reflects might, which is not true regarding lightning.

The Rambam and others imply that the blessing should most accurately reflect one’s experience and that when one experiences the strength of God the most appropriate blessing is *she-kokho*. Thus, upon hearing thunder, one should say *she-kokho*, while upon seeing lightning this is unnecessary.

The Mishna Berura (5) notes that one should say a separate blessing for lightning and thunder. However, if one hears thunder and sees lightning together, one should say only one blessing, *oseh ma’aseh vereishit*.

How often may one say these blessings? The Yerushalmi (*Berakhot* 8:2, cited by the Rif 43b) teaches that this blessing is not limited to recitation once every thirty days, like other blessings; rather, one may say these blessings during each and every storm. If the clouds disappear and then return and one sees lighting and hears thunder, one may say the blessings again. This ruling is cited by the Shulchan Arukh (2). Furthermore, the Mishna Berura (8) writes that the Yerushalmi implies that after a day passes, i.e. after waking up the next morning, one may say another blessing.

Upon seeing what type of lighting and thunder does one say a blessing? The *Acharonim* (*Halikhot Shlomo*, p. 287; Tzitz Eliezer 12:21) write that one says the blessing even upon seeing just the flash of light, without seeing the actual bolt. The Mishna Berura (3) cites the Chaye Adam, who rules that one should not say the blessing upon seeing “heat lighting.” Therefore, when one sees lightning, he should wait until hearing thunder in order to say the blessing. This would not apply in the winter, when the lighting is clearly part of a storm, and not due simply to heat.

In addition to thunder and lightning, the *gemara* mentions that one should also say a blessing upon seeing a meteor (shooting star), or, according to some, an asteroid (see Mishna Berura 1). One should also say the blessing upon experiencing an earthquake.

The Talmud also teaches that one should say a blessing upon experiencing “strong winds.” The Mishna Berura (1) suggests that while one should say the blessing “*she-kokho u-gevurato*” while experiencing extremely strong winds, over weaker winds, one should say “*oseh ma’aseh vereishit*.” He concludes by suggesting that maybe one should also say *oseh ma’aseh vereishit*, as we cannot truly gauge which are considered strong as opposed to week winds.

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