**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**THE LAWS OF THE BERAKHOT**

**Rav David Brofsky**

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**This shiur is dedicated le-zekher nishmot Amelia Ray and Morris Ray**

**on the occasion of their ninth yahrtzeits**

**by their children Patti Ray and Allen Ray**

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**Shiur #74: *Birkot Ha-Shevach* (4)**

**Rainbows**

Last week, we continued our study of blessings recited upon seeing or experiencing unique and awe-inspiring forces of nature. We noted that the *mishna* 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*.” 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.

In addition, the *mishna* (*Berakhot* 54b) mentions that one should say the blessing “*oseh ma’aseh vereishit*” upon seeing rivers. Although some *Acharonim* (Chayei Adam and Kitzur Shulchan Arukh), due to several doubts, 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. Indeed, *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.

Finally, if a person is taken by the grandeur and beauty of a mountain or hill, he should say the blessing “*oseh ma’aseh vereishit*.” One generally does not say the blessing over mountains, rivers, and lakes near one's home.

This week, we will conclude our study of the blessings said upon seeing natural phenomenon as we discuss the blessing said upon seeing a rainbow.

**The Blessing upon Seeing a Rainbow**

The Torah first relates the phenomenon of the rainbow in the beginning of *Sefer Bereishit*. After the conclusion of the flood, God blesses Noach:

And God spoke unto Noach, and to his sons with him, saying: “As for Me, behold, I establish My covenant with you, and with your seed after you, and with every living creature that is with you … And I will establish My covenant with you; neither shall all flesh be cut off any more by the waters of the flood; neither shall there any more be a flood to destroy the earth.” And God said: “This is the token of the covenant which I make between Me and you and every living creature that is with you, for perpetual generations: I have set My bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a token of a covenant between Me and the earth. And it shall come to pass, when I bring clouds over the earth, and the bow is seen in the cloud, that I will remember My covenant, which is between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall no more become a flood to destroy all flesh. And the bow shall be in the cloud; and I will look upon it, that I may remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is upon the earth.”

God tells Noach that the “bow in the clouds,” the rainbow, will serve as a sign, a reminder to God that He has made a covenant with the human race not to destroy them again.

The Talmud (*Berakhot* 59a) teaches that when one sees a rainbow, he should recite a special blessing:

As far as blessing is concerned, however, all agree that one certainly recites a blessing. What blessing does one recite? Blessed…Who remembers the covenant. It was taught that R. Yishmael, son of R. Yocĥanan ben Beroka, says: [Blessed] …Who is faithful to His covenant and fulfills His word. R. Pappa said: Therefore, we will say them both combined: Blessed…Who remembers the covenant and is faithful to His covenant and fulfills His word.

The Shulchan Arukh (OC 229:1) rules in accordance with this *gemara*.

The *Poskim* relate to two aspects of this *berakha*: the rainbow upon which one says the blessing and whether one should intentionally look or gaze at one.

Regarding the definition of a rainbow, the commentators offer different explanations of the rainbow which serves as a sign of the covenant between God and mankind. Some (Ramban 9:12; see also Rabbeinu Bachaye 9:13) emphasize that a rainbow’s legs are on the earth. Rabbeinu Bachaye writes, “It is customary in times of war to hold the bow facing one’s body, and in peace, to turn the bow around and hold the back of the bow.” In other words, the rainbow is an image of a bow which is not turned towards the earth – that is, a sign of peace. Others (see Ibn Ezra 9:14) explain that the colors of the rainbow resemble the lights of creation, and therefore affirm God’s commitment to the earth. Finally, the Abarbanel (9:14) implies that the rainbow’s appearance through the clouds demonstrates that God will not rain continuously on the earth.

This debate may have halakhic importance as well. While the *gemara* refers to one who sees “a rainbow in a cloud,” the Shulchan Arukh (229:1) only mentions a rainbow. Does one need to see a rainbow in the clouds in order to say the blessing, or even just the shape of a rainbow? The Bi’ur Halakha (229 s.v. ha-ro’eh) questions whether one says the blessing over seeing half of a rainbow. R. Shternbuch, in his Teshuvot Ve-Hanhagot (3:76:6), rules that since there is a doubt, one should not say the blessing if one does not see the entire bow shape of the rainbow. R. Ovadia Yosef (Yalkut Yosef 229:1), however, rules that one says the blessing even upon seeing only part of a rainbow.

The *Poskim* further discuss whether one says the blessing upon seeing a rainbow over a waterfall, such as the Niagra Falls. While the shape and colors of the rainbow are present, it does not appear through the clouds. R. Nachum Rabinovitz (HaDaron, Nisan 5627) rules that one does not say the blessing upon seeing a rainbow at the Niagra Falls, as one only says the blessings upon seeing a rainbow which appears after rainfall. He adds, however, that one should certainly say the blessing of “*oseh ma’aseh vereishit*.” R. Efraim Greenblatt (Rivevot Efraim 6:103) also discusses this issue and distinguishes between a rainbow that appears constantly and one that appears after the rain. One certainly does not say a blessing upon seeing a rainbow from a puddle of water. Similarly, the *Poskim* discuss whether one says the blessing upon seeing a rainbow at night (see Maharsham 2:124).

**Gazing at a Rainbow**

In two places, the Talmud relates to viewing a rainbow. In one context (*Berakhot* 59a), the *gemara* relates an interesting disagreement regarding the appropriate reaction to seeing a rainbow:

And R. Alexandri said that R. Yehoshua ben Levi said: One who sees a rainbow in a cloud must fall upon his face, as it is stated: “As the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud in the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness round about. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. And when I saw it, I fell upon my face” (*Yechezkel* 1:28). The colors of the rainbow symbolize the glory of God, and one may not stare at them. Yet, in the West, *Eretz Yisrael*, they would curse one who fell upon his face when seeing a rainbow because it appears as if he is bowing to the rainbow.

This *gemara* records a debate regarding whether one should fall on his face upon seeing a rainbow.

Elsewhere, the *gemara* teaches (*Chagiga* 16a):

“Whosoever takes no thought for the honor of his maker, it were a mercy if he had not come into the world.” What does this mean? R. Abba said: It refers to one who looks at the rainbow… for it is written: “As the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud in the day, so was the appearance of the brightness round about. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord.”

According to this passage, just as it is inappropriate to try to gaze at the glory of God (*Shemot* 24:10-11), it is not proper to gaze at a rainbow, which represents the glory of God.

The gemara continues:

R. Yehuda b. R. Nahmani, the speaker of Resh Lakish, expounded: anyone who looks at three things, his eyes are dim; at the rainbow, and at the prince, and at the priests. At the rainbow, because it is written: “As the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud in the day of rain… This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord.”

The Shulchan Arukh (229:1) rules that one should not gaze at a rainbow, seemingly based upon these passages. Interestingly, while the *gemara* implies that one’s eyes may become dim as a punishment for staring at a rainbow, R. Soloveitchik reportedly explained that since the language of this passage is in present tense, one should explain that one who gazes at a rainbow in search of God is “already blind,” as he does not realize what he sees.

Based upon these sources, some question whether one may tell a friend to look at a rainbow, even just in order to say the blessing. The Chayei Adam (63:4) cites another authority who rules that one should not tell his friends that there is a rainbow, as this constitutes “*motzi diba*” (relating something bad [about the world]). This is cited by numerous *Acharonim*, such as the Mishna Berura (229:1) and Kaf Ha-Chaim (229:1). Others (see Brit Kehuna, Ma’arekhet 100:3) rule that one may tell others that a rainbow is visible in order to arouse then to remember the covenant in repent. R. Ovadia Yosef (see Yalkut Yosef 229) concurs. This seems to be the custom.