**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**THE LAWS OF THE BERAKHOT**

**Rav David Brofsky**

**Shiur #71: *Birkot Ha-Shevach***

**Abnormal Creatures and Beautiful Creations**

This week, we will begin our study of the *Birkot Ha-Shevach*. This is one of the most varied and eclectic areas of the laws of *berakhot*. It presents us a challenge unique to *Birkot Ha-Shevach*, as we are often called upon to decide whether a given phenomenon is worthy of blessing. Furthermore, responding to natural, human, and historical phenomena through reciting blessings heightens one’s awareness and deepens one spiritual experience.

This week, we will begin studying the blessing said over natural phenomena. The *gemara* teaches that a blessing should be say upon seeing both unusual creatures (*beriyot meshunot*) and exceptionally beautiful creations (*beriyot tovot*). These are interesting blessings, as they do not relate to the benefit or even to the joy one feels from God’s creation; they merely inspire one to think of and praise God’s creative powers.

**Unusual Creatures**

The Talmud (*Berakhot* 56b) teaches that one should say a blessing upon seeing unusual beings:

R. Yehoshua ben Levi said: One who sees spotted people recites: Blessed…Who makes creatures different (*barukh* … *meshaneh* *ha-beriyot)*. The *gemara* raises a challenge: One who saw a person with unusually black skin, a person with unusually red skin, a person with unusually white skin (*lavkan*), an unusually tall and thin person, a dwarf, or one with warts (*darnikos*) recites: Blessed…Who makes creatures different. However, one who sees an amputee, a blind person, a flat-headed person, a lame person, one afflicted with boils, or spotted people recites: Blessed…the true Judge (*barukh dayan ha-emet*), not: Who makes creatures different (*meshaneh ha-beriyot*).

The *gemara* answers: This is not difficult. When R. Yehoshua ben Levi says to recite “Who makes creatures different” refers to a case in which the individual was spotted from when he was in his mother’s womb, since birth. While this, when one recites “The true Judge,” refers to a case in which the individual only became spotted after he was born.

This passage relates to two blessings that are recited on physical phenomena. Over natural phenomena, one says “*barukh … meshneh ha-beriyot*,” and upon seeing an abnormal phenomenon caused after birth, one says, “*barukh … dayan ha-emet.”*

(Some explain that the *gemara* refers to a case in which two “white” parents parent a black child, something indeed unusual and unexpected (*Halakhot Ketanot* 1:240). Others explain that in the ancient world, these skin colors were so uncommon that one would say a blessing upon seeing them, and because of their subsequent difficulty in integrating into society, one might even fear sorry for people with these skin colors. These blessings are not said nowadays before seeing people of different colored skin.)

Regarding the first case, the *Rishonim* discuss whether the blessing is said over the abnormality itself (Me’iri), or only when the abnormality is perceived as a negative trait, or only because one feels bad for the person (Ra’avad, cited by Ritva 58b). Interestingly, although the Bach (225:3) assumes that the Ra’avad refers only to the blessing of *barukh ... dayan ha-emet*, others (see Perisha 225:7) understands that this blessing be said even upon seeing a regular person, even one who does not feel pity for.

The *gemara* also teaches that “one who sees an elephant, a monkey, or a *kifuf* recites: ‘Blessed…Who makes creatures different.’ The *Acharonim* discuss whether this applies to all highly unique animals (see *Halikhot Shlomo* 23:35) or just these. Although some *Rishonim* identify the “*kifuf*” as an owl (Abudraham, *Hilkhot Berakhot* 8), others explain differently, and 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*”).

**Beautiful Creatures**

The Talmud (*Berakhot* 56b) teaches that one should say a blessing upon seeing exceptionally beautiful creations:

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*).

The *Rishonim* make a number of observations regarding this blessing.

The *Rishonim* emphasize that this blessing was establish upon seeing truly exceptional creatures. For example, the Rambam (*Hilkhot Berakhot* 10:13) writes that this blessing is said when one sees “the most beautiful and well-formed creations” *(beriyot na’ot u-metukanot be-yoter*). Similarly, the Ra’avad (cited in Ritva 58b, s.v. *ha-ro’eh*) writes that this blessing is only said when “one has not seen nicer [creatures] than these.”

The *Acharonim* add that it may be inappropriate for a man to gaze upon a woman, admiring her beauty, and say the blessing (*Bi’ur Halakha*, *s.v. afilu*). He also discusses whether one should avoid gazing at or praising a non-Jew for his appearance.

Are these blessings recited nowadays? The Chayei Adam (63:1) relates that it is not customary to say this blessing. He explains that one should only say the blessing the first time he sees these unique creatures, “and since we are accustomed to them, there is no significant difference.” Similarly, the Sha’ar Ha-Tziun (225:33) explains that since the blessing is meant to be said on “the most beautiful and well-formed creation,” who could possibly determine which creature fits that description? The Mishna Berura (225:32) writes that one should say this blessing without *shem u-malkhut* (“*Hashem, melekh ha-olam*”).

On the other hand, R. Yitzchak Eisik Yehuda Safrin of Komarno (1806-1874) writes in his Shulchan Ha-Tahor that “one should not treat these blessings lightly, as it is a great obligation to say them …” and he rejects the view which discourages saying these blessings nowadays.

Interestingly, R. Ovadia Yosef (Yalkut Yosef, 265:21) writes that one may visit a zoo, and say the blessing “*meshaneh ha-beryot*”, with the *shem u-malkhut*, upon seeing an elephant or a monkey. Similarly, one may say the blessing “*she-kakha lo be-olamo*” upon seeing a beautiful bird, such as a parrot. He adds that one may say these blessings every thirty days (footnote 21). However, he adds that the blessing of “*she-kakha lo be-olamo*,” said upon seeing an exceptionally beautiful creature, should be said one the first time he sees the creature.

Next week, we will discuss the blessings said upon seeing natural phenomenon.