

HALOCHOSCOPE

A graphic of a telescope with Hebrew text inside the lens. The text inside the lens reads: "לחוליה ש... טור וכ"כ הרא"ש... בר יצחק וכו' דזכי בשד... תוספתא פ"ד ד... ק ורמי אהדדי וכו' כן... שון רמז"ס והמ"ס... מתשצח

This week's question:

Does one recite a *brocha* on the perpetual rainbow at Niagara Falls, and if not, why not?

The issues:

- A) What is a rainbow?**
- B) The *brocha* on the rainbow**
- C) Reasons for no *brocha***

A) Rainbows

A rainbow is the effect of white light refracted through water. It happens when the sun is at an angle, shining through rain. The same effect can be seen whenever light is refracted, artificially or naturally. Nonetheless, it was created separately from light. Light was created on the first day. The sun was created on the fourth day. Artificial light was created when Adam struck flints together on *Motzai Shabbos*. [One version says it was *Erev Shabbos* at twilight.] The rainbow was one of ten things created at twilight on the sixth day, right before *Shabbos*. Some say this list includes those things that hover between the natural and the supernatural. The six days represent the natural world, and *Shabbos* represents the supernatural. The *Navi* says that the appearance of Hashem is like the appearance of the rainbow in the cloud. While this esoteric statement cannot be explained simply, the usage of the rainbow to describe this indicates its supernatural side.

The Torah says that after the *mabul*, the great flood, Hashem uses the rainbow as His sign that He will never go back on His promise never to flood the world again. The commentaries discuss what this means. From the language of the Torah it looks as though the rainbow was created just then. This is impossible. Everything was created in the six days of creation. We even have a tradition telling us exactly when the rainbow was created. Some say this means that Hashem had created the existence of a rainbow, but that it would have remained out of sight for humans. After the *mabul*, He shows it to humans as His sign. Others say that it was always visible. At this juncture, Hashem pointed to it and said that He had placed it there originally. He now would use it to symbolize His covenant never to flood the world.

A number of commentators maintain that there was indeed a modification of the laws of nature, but nothing new was created. Some say that Hashem increased the intensity of the sunlight at this time, so that the rainbow would be able to appear. Some add to this that the weakness of the sun's rays beforehand allowed the flood to happen. Hashem removed the impediment from the sun's rays, so that they would prevent the clouds from thickening. They would then be able to shine through as a rainbow. Some say that the rainbow was always visible through moist air. However, it only shows after it has passed

through the water, on the other side. Thick clouds would act as a barrier to those on the ground. From that day on it would also be seen in thick clouds as a sign of the covenant. Some say that the clouds would never be as thick as they were before the *mabul*. They would become saturated much more quickly, and shed their water as rain. Therefore, it would be possible to see the rainbow through the clouds from that day on. This would be a sign that from now on, the creation would be less weighed down with matter. Some say that the secondary rainbow, which reverses the colors, was shown from that day on.

The commentators also explain how this natural phenomenon, whether it existed earlier or was only revealed later, could be considered a sign. Though it is natural, it could be chosen by Hashem as His sign, just as one might use a mound of stones as a sign of a treaty. Some say that a rainbow can only occur when the cloud has somewhat dissipated, indicating the imminent end of the rain. Some say that the shape of the rainbow indicates the removal of a Heavenly threat. It is a bow, but does not face down towards the world. It also has no bowstring. It is as though Hashem says He will shoot no arrows towards the earth. Some say it is somewhat supernatural, especially the secondary reversed rainbow. Therefore, it is a sign to the righteous of the generation that the generation deserves to be punished, for they have reversed the natural order with their sins. The righteous should see it as a signal to rebuke their fellows. If the righteous are great enough, their fellows will be on a higher standard as well. They will not need the sign. Indeed, in the days of some sages there was no rainbow. Some say that the breakdown of the colors of the spectrum is a sign of too much disunity between people. Others see it the other way around. It is a sign that Hashem is willing to view the greatest and the smallest as equals. Some say that since the rainbow would be a sign that the world was no longer weighed down with concentrated matter, and a flood could no longer occur.

There is a novel approach that there always was a natural rainbow. After the *mabul*, a supernatural type of turquoise rainbow was introduced, as a sign. Natural rainbows occur all the time, including in the days of the greatest sages. Supernatural rainbows only occur when the world deserves severe punishment. [See Noach 8:22 9:13-17, commentaries. Avos 5:6, commentaries. Droshos Haran 1. Yaaros Devash 1:12.]

B) The brocha on a rainbow

The *Mishna* lists a number of *brochos* on seeing, hearing, or otherwise experiencing unusual natural events and spectacular phenomena. These include the *brochos* on thunder and lightning. They are known as *birchos hare'iyah vehashemiah*. In essence the *brochos* praise Hashem on creating these phenomena. Many of them also recognize the purposes of Hashem's showing us these same phenomena. Thunder is meant to straighten the crookedness of the heart. With it, Hashem shows His might. The same is true of earthquakes and the like. These *brochos* are not made before 'benefiting', but rather after seeing or experiencing the phenomena. The list in the *Mishna* does not include a *brocha* on sighting a rainbow. In fact, the Talmud cites an opinion that rather than saying a *brocha*, one would prostrate himself, based on the verse that compares Hashem's presence to a rainbow. This opinion is rejected, in favor of reciting a *brocha*. Prostrating gives the appearance of bowing to a rainbow. The text of the *brocha* is also not universally agreed

on. The *brocha* we recite is a version of a combined text. Some say that all this shows that there was no formal tradition on the *brocha*,. The language of the *brocha* also does not seem to reflect the sight of the rainbow, but its significance as a sign of the covenant. Actually, the Torah mentions Hashem 'seeing' the rainbow, and then 'remembering' His covenant, as opposed to humans seeing it.

Some commentators explain the *brocha* as a way of mentioning the concept that the rainbow existed before Noach. It was intended at Creation to be used for this sign, and Hashem shows his dependability by using it thus. There are some disagreements on the exact version that is acceptable. There is a view that one should not recite the full *brocha*, but should omit the Divine Names. This is based, in part, on the view that there are two types of rainbow, natural and supernatural. The *brocha* represents the supernatural rainbow that was introduced after the flood. Since we do not know whether the rainbow we see is the supernatural one, we should not recite a full *brocha*. However, the common practice is to recite the full *brocha*. Nonetheless, some poskim say that one who decides to omit the Names of Hashem should not be shunned.

The Talmud says that one should not gaze at a rainbow. This shows disrespect for Hashem. The rainbow is used as a metaphor for Hashem's 'appearance'. In addition, it is a representation of the shortcomings of the generation. Gazing at the rainbow causes one's eyesight to weaken. However, the poskim point out that one may not recite the *brocha* unless he sees it. Therefore, looking at it to be able to recite the *brocha* is permitted.

Some say that one should not inform another about the presence of a rainbow, even though it will help him recite a *brocha*. The rationale is that if one may not gaze at it, and if it weakens eyesight, one should not aid another in looking at it. Others maintain that one is providing others the opportunity to fulfill the *mitzvah* of reciting the *brocha*. Therefore, one should indeed inform them. Following either view is considered acceptable. One can avoid the controversy by informing another indirectly. One could say, "There is an opportunity for a *brocha* on a rainbow!"

One must see the actual rainbow in order to say the *brocha*. Viewing it through a window is acceptable. However, viewing its reflection does not count. The poskim debate whether one may recite the *brocha* more than once on multiple rainbows in the same storm system. These could appear at the same time in different parts of the sky, or at intervals. They might also be spread over more than one day. There is also a minority view that one may not recite it within thirty days of the last recital, even in a different storm. Another debate involves reciting it at night. Apparently, one can sometimes see the refracted light of the moon as a rainbow. Some say that at night a white bow is seen. The Hebrew *keshes* does not specify the colors. Others say that a *techailes*, turquoise bow can be seen at night. [See Brochos 54a 59a Chagigah 16a, Poskim. Tur Sh Ar OC 229:1, commentaries, (Pesach Hadevir, Likutei Maharich) ST Maharsham OC 124, Mitzion Orah OC 10, Bais Aharon Vyisroel 18:4:p. 520. Lechem Shlomo 320.]

C) When no brocha is recited

As mentioned, one must see the actual rainbow to recite the *brocha*. Sometimes, a part of the rainbow is concealed. Some say that one must be able to see the entire rain-

bow, while others maintain that seeing part of it is sufficient. One can sometimes see a rainbow in a pond. This might be the reflection of a real rainbow, or it might be another manifestation of refracted white light. The poskim say that one may not recite the *brocha* on this. Nonetheless, one may not gaze at this rainbow. In terms of the metaphor for the appearance of Hashem, this is the same spectacle. The reason not to gaze is present. The reason for the *brocha* is the sign. This spectacle does not represent the sign.

By the same token, there is no reason to recite a *brocha* on an artificial rainbow, such as that made when spraying water on a sunny day. However, the question is raised, what about a perpetual rainbow, such as that produced at Niagara Falls? The 'cloud' is present, in the form of spray. While it does not 'rain', the spray does precipitate eventually. This rainbow is seen above the water, rather than in the water. Furthermore, since the rainbow is present every day that there is sunlight, should one recite the *brocha* every time he sees it, or is it the 'same' rainbow? One could add, the rainbow 'moves' from side to side. It is seen on the American side until noon, and on the Canadian side afternoon.

First, the 'storm' producing the rainbow does not dissipate. It seems to be considered the same rainbow. One need not repeat the *brocha* on a second sighting. Although one repeats the *brocha* on spectacular creations on new sightings every thirty days, this is not the *brocha* one would recite on a rainbow. [Note: there is an indication in the Yerushalmi that if a thunderstorm continued for more than one day, one would recite the *brocha* each day. According to this, if there would be a *brocha* on the Niagara Falls rainbow, one could recite it each day.] Second, the Torah states that Hashem will show the rainbow 'when He forms a cloud'. To be considered a sign, a fresh cloud must appear with each rainbow. Third, it is not as though Hashem 'remembers.' Hashem reminds us about the presence of evil people. This can only be by periodic reminders, rather than to perpetual rainbows. Fourth, the rainbow is a special sign. It seems that Hashem would send us this signal specially, rather than continually. [See Yerushalmi Brochos 9:2, Poskim. Tur Sh Ar 227:2 MB 8 229:1, commentaries. B'tzail Hachochma II:18. Rivevos Efraim VI:103.]

In conclusion, if one wishes to, he should recite the *brocha* without Hashem's Name. ***On the Parsha ...*** *The glory of Hashem [cloud – Haamek Davar] was seen by all the people. And fire went forth from before Hashem .. and all the people saw it, and they sang praise, and they fell upon their faces .. [9:23-24] Praised, in thanksgiving [for the past] and prostrated in prayer [for the future] .. [Tagum Yonasan, Haamek Davar]* The commentary is on the order, first the praise and then the prostration. However, it does not really answer the question. They could have prostrated before the praise, and both praised the past and prayed for the future while prostrate! Perhaps this is a lesson in *bircas hare'iyah*. One should not prostrate on seeing the glory of Hashem, even to praise. As the Talmud says, this will give the appearance of bowing to the phenomenon. Rather, the *brocha* must be recited while standing.

Sponsored by Joshua Sindler in memory of Merv Berkman, Moshe Yudel ben Zalman

Lazar z"l, whose yahrzeit is on the 21st of Adar. ☞

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