



Why May We Not Gaze at the Multicolored Rainbow?

Rainbow Repentance

I have hardly ever seen a rainbow, and although I have learned the appropriate blessing to recite when seeing a rainbow, I don't recall ever saying it. I long to see the exquisite sight of the multicolored rainbow in the cloud, and revel in the beauty of Hashem's natural phenomena. Yet, sadly, seeing a rainbow is not such a good omen, because it is a sign that the world deserved to be destroyed. Although it may seem as if the rainbow 'reminds' Hashem of His promise not to destroy the world yet, Hashem, of course, needs no reminders. Rather, the rainbow is a reminder for people on earth, who see the rainbow to realize that the world deserves to be destroyed right then, if not for Hashem's covenant never to destroy the world. Therefore, we ought to be inspired to do teshuvah when seeing a rainbow (Rabbeinu Yehudah bar Yakar, *Perush HaTefillot Vehabrachot* 2). This explains the opinion that if we see a rainbow, we should not tell anyone else about it, because that would be spreading a negative report about the inhabitants of the world, publicizing that they deserve to be destroyed at that moment (*Mishna Berurah* 229:1; Chayei Adam, *Laws of Blessings* 63:4; Rav Nevinzal, *B'Yitzchak Yikra* 229:1). Similarly, there is a halachic opinion that we shouldn't make the bracha loudly, to prevent our friend from hearing it and searching for the rainbow. However, others hold that since, it is a mitzvah to recite a bracha for the rainbow, we should tell others about it. Although, seeing a rainbow may be a negative sign, alluding that the world is deserving of punishment- were it not for Hashem's promise, nevertheless, no one can dispute that a rainbow is exceedingly beautiful. In fact, its appearance comes to teach us deep secrets about our relationship with our Creator and about the imminent redemption.

Are Women Obligated to Recite Brachot on Natural Phenomena?

Although women are generally exempt from time-bound positive mitzvot, we are still obligated to pray and recite blessings. The blessings for hearing thunder, experiencing lightening or seeing the ocean or a rainbow etc. are called for at unpredicted moments, to allow us to recognize and connect with the hidden Divine Creator within His natural world. We are commanded by halacha to recite a blessing upon every cosmic event: upon the crimson rays of the setting sun and upon the purple of sunrise, when the sun drips its rays upon the mountains; upon the moon rising in the pale light; upon the stars in their paths and comets which shoot into transparent distances; upon the sight of the rainbow in the clouds and the thunder and lightning within the fog; upon flowering trees and fragrant flowers; upon the thundering of the ocean and its rushing waves; upon bread and water, the fruit of the earth and the field; upon a healthy body created in wisdom, upon its muscles and nerves; upon the ability to move and to stand erect. In short, we bless upon all that man meets, which manifests the faithfulness of creation. The purpose of the brachot is to transform the world at that very moment of reciting the blessing into a supernatural, wondrous world. It is none other than the redemption of nature from its silence, from its orphan-state, by identifying the cosmic dynamic with the original will of the hidden Creator (Rabbi Soloveitchik, Essay on *Shir Hashirim, Uvikashtem Misham*)

What is the Blessing on Seeing a Rainbow?

After the flood, G-d promised Noach that He would never again bring a flood that would destroy the world. A rainbow is a reminder of this covenant that G-d made with Noach, his descendants, and all living creatures:

ספר בראשית פרק ט פסוק טז וְהִיְתָה הַקְּשֶׁת בְּעָנָן וּרְאִיתֶיהָ לְזִכָּר בְּרִית עוֹלָם בֵּין אֱלֹהִים וּבֵין כָּל נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה
בְּכָל בֶּשֶׂר אֲשֶׁר עַל הָאָרֶץ: יז) וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל נֹחַ זֶאת אוֹת הַבְּרִית אֲשֶׁר הִקְמַתִי בֵּינִי וּבֵין כָּל בֶּשֶׂר אֲשֶׁר עַל
הָאָרֶץ:

“And the rainbow shall be in the cloud; and I will look upon it, that I may remember the everlasting covenant between G-d and every living creature of all flesh that is upon the earth.’ 17 And G-d said to Noach: ‘This is the token of the covenant which I have established between Me and all flesh that is upon the earth’” (*Bereishit* 9:16-17).

Therefore, upon seeing a rainbow in the sky, we recite the following blessing:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה הָשֵׁם אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם זֹכֵר הַבְּרִית וְנֹאמֵן בְּבְרִיתוֹ וְקִיָּם בְּמַאֲמָרוֹ:

Baruch ata Hashem Elo-heinu melech ha'olam zocher ha'brit v'ne'eman bivrito v'kayam b'ma'amaro.

Blessed are You, Hashem our G-d, King of the universe, who remembers the covenant, and is faithful to His covenant, and keeps His promise.

The blessing should preferably be said while standing. We can make this bracha one time for every rainfall but not again until the rainbow and the rain have cleared up completely and it rains again (*Mishna Berurah* 229:2). Viewing a phenomenon on video does not justify a blessing. However, a bracha is said when viewing with the aid of a telescope. There is a difference of opinion as to whether we need to see the entire rainbow in order to make the bracha or if it is enough to see only a part of the rainbow. Whenever we are in doubt, we can recite the bracha without G-d's name, and thus avoid reciting a *bracha le'vatala* (a blessing said in vain).

Unified Coexistence of Opposites

Ramban explains the connection between the shape of the rainbow and G-d's promise never to destroy the world with a flood again. The rainbow doesn't appear with its feet pointing upwards, because that would make it look as if arrows are being shot at us from heaven. Rather, the rainbow points upwards, the way warriors used to turn their bow upside down as a sign of peace. Moreover, the rainbow has no string from which to shoot arrows (Ramban, *Bereishit* 9:12). Hashem placed the rainbow as a sign of the covenant, because it is made from fire and water, yet they make peace between them. Likewise, it is a sign of peace in the world. Also, the word *קְשֶׁת* /*keshet* – “rainbow” is related to the word *קֶשֶׁת* /*kash* – ‘straw.’ As if the sign of the rainbow insinuates that “had this sign not been before Hashem, the entire world would be turned into straw (Rabbi Yitzchak son of Asher Halevi, Riva, *Bereishit* 9:13). Thus, the rainbow unifies the two opposites of chesed and din. It appears in the cloud on the rainy days symbolizing for us, בְּרַגְזֵי רַחֵם - “In wrath remember mercy” (*Chabakuk* 3:2).

The Prohibition of Gazing at the Rainbow

The intrinsic association between the rainbow and Hashem's glory can also be learned from the connection between the word *קְשֶׁת* /*keshet* – “rainbow” and the word *מִוְקָשׁ* /*mukash* – ‘compared.’ *קֶשֶׁתִּי* /*kasti* – “My rainbow” – Something which can be compared to me. However, how is this possible? Only the way straw can be compared to the fruit. “It shall come to pass, when I cause clouds to come upon the earth,” Rabbi Yudan Bar Simon said, this is compared to one who had a boiling club and wanted to throw it at his son but instead hurled it at his slave. “And the rainbow shall be in the cloud; and I will look upon it, that I may remember the everlasting covenant between Elokim” – this is the attribute of Divine judgment – “and between every living soul...” (*Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* 35:3).

Since it states, *קַשְׁתִּי/kasti* – “My rainbow” the midrash understands that Hashem says, “The rainbow is compared to me!” However, since Hashem is beyond comparison, the rainbow is only compared to Hashem to the degree that the *קֶשֶׁשׁ/kash* – ‘straw/outer shell’ is compared to the inner kernel it surrounds. This is learned from the similarity between the Hebrew word for ‘rainbow’ and for straw. This also goes together with Yechezkiel’s comparison of the rainbow with the glory of Hashem (not Hashem Himself) as the appearance of brightness round about:

ספר יחזקאל פרק א פסוק כח כְּמֵרָאָה הַקֶּשֶׁת אֲשֶׁר יְהִיָּה בְּעֵנָן בַּיּוֹם הַגֶּשֶׁם כֵּן מֵרָאָה הַנִּגְהָה סָבִיב הוּא מֵרָאָה
דְּמוּת כְּבוֹד הַשֵּׁם וְאֲרָאָה וְאָפֵל עַל פְּנֵי וְאֶשְׁמַע קוֹל מִדְּבָר:

“Like the appearance of the rainbow that is in the cloud on a rainy day, so was the appearance of the brightness round about; that was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of Hashem, and when I saw, I fell on my face, and I heard a voice speaking” (*Yechezkiel 1:28*).

Since the rainbow embodies the glory of Hashem, it is considered brazenness to stare at the Shechina. Gazing at a rainbow displays disrespect for Hashem. For this reason and because the rainbow is a sign that the generation deserves destruction, we are instructed to refrain from staring at a rainbow. “One should not stare at the rainbow, rather one should look at it briefly and then make the bracha (*Shulchan Aruch 229:1; Mishna Berurah 229:5; Aruch HaShulchan 229:2*). It is good to be careful about this, as staring at the rainbow may cause one’s eyesight to fail (*Babylonian Talmud, Chagiga 16a*).

The Mystical Rainbow – A Sign of Mashiach

Before the flood, the clouds were so thick that the sun could not shine through to create a rainbow. The flood, which purified the world also purified the clouds so that the sun could shine through and form a rainbow. Thus, the existence of the rainbow is a direct result of the cleansing of the world. Its appearance is a reminder to G-d to never again destroy the world, because the world is still pure (*Malbim, Bereishit 9:14*). The rainbow is also a symbol and reminder of the final redemption, that comes in the merit of the cleansing and purifying of the world through our teshuvah. The mystical rainbow embodies the secret of unifying and balancing the opposites of harsh judgments and the withholding of judgments, fire and water, masculine and feminine, the Jew and the secrets of the Torah, human and Divine, the Divine and the animal soul, the natural with the supernatural. It is the balance point upon which opposites can co-exist in all their individual separateness, yet completely unified (The Rebbe of Lubavitch). The rainbow is the channel that connects the lower and upper worlds, while simultaneously channeling the light of the upper world down to earth. It is the interface between ourselves and the inner dimensions of the world, the Torah and our soul. It is a most beautiful multicolored vision, which awakens our desire to gaze at it. Yet we must withhold this desire and look away, as an expression of the gap between the inner and the outer, the upper and the lower. With Hashem’s help, when we arrive in the perfected world, we will be able to gaze at the rainbow in all its multicolored astounding beauty! Therefore, it is not surprising that the *Zohar* states, “One should not expect the coming of Mashiach until the rainbow is seen in shining colors” (*Zohar 1:72b*). So, when you see the rays of the rainbow, look for the feet of Mashiach!