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PARSHA ENCOUNTERS

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Parshas Vayikra ✍️ Rabbi Akiva Niehaus

Birchas Hachama

Once every twenty-eight years we have the opportunity to recite *birchas hachama*, the *bracha* recited upon seeing the sun return to its original position on the same day of the week and at the same time of day as when it was created. This date is fast-approaching on *Erev Pesach* (April 8, 2009).

The *Gemara* in *Sanhedrin* (42a) says that one who recites *Kiddush Levanah* is considered as if he is greeting the Divine presence. When witnessing the constantly changing cycles of the moon, one can't help but be filled with praise for Hashem's mastery over the world. The sun's daily action of regularly rising and setting in the same pattern can blind us from seeing it as Hashem's work, and may lead one to attribute it to a natural cause. When the sun reaches a special location, we have the opportunity to contemplate who makes the sun move with such regularity. The recitation of a *bracha* grants one a chance to acknowledge Hashem's control over all aspects of nature, both the changing cycles of the moon as well as the never-changing movement of the sun (*Sifsei Chaim, Moadim* II pg. 265-9).

Although we do recite a *bracha* over the constellations in the daily *shacharis* (*yotzer hameoros*), there is a vast difference between that *bracha* and *birchas hachama*. *Yotzer hameoros* is a *bracha* thanking Hashem for the benefits we receive from the sun (and other celestial bodies). As such, it is recited every day (even if the sun is not visible) because we constantly benefit from the sun's presence. *Birchas hachama*, on the other hand, is a *bracha* praising Hashem for His wondrous creation. Such a *bracha* may not be recited daily because seeing the sun on a daily basis dulls one's sense of wonderment. Only when something extraordinary takes place (*e.g.*, the return of the sun to its place of creation) can one step back and give proper praise to Hashem after contemplating His control and command of nature (*Meoros Nossan* pg. 22).

The Source:

The source for this *bracha* is found in *Brachos* 59b: "One who sees the sun at the beginning of its cycle should recite *Baruch oseh b'reishis*." Abaye explains that this takes place every 28 years, when the *Nissan* (vernal/spring) equinox falls at 6 p.m. on Tuesday night.

The sun was created on the fourth day, which according to Torah law was Tuesday evening at 6 P.M. Although the sun returns to its original position every year, *birchas hachama* is recited only when it returns to its original position on the **same day** of the week and at the **same hour** of the day as the original creation.

The solar year is approximately 365 days and 6 hours long, which is the equivalent of 52 weeks, plus one day and 6 hours. After one year, the sun returns to its original position on Thursday morning at midnight - exactly one day and 6 hours later in the week than the previous year. After four years, the sun starts at the **same hour** as the original creation, exactly five days later (4 years x 1 ¼ days = 5 days). Continuing this calculation for seven cycles (twenty-eight years), the sun will return to its original position on the **same day at the same hour**. (Year 5 = Sunday night; year 9 = Friday night; year 13 = Wednesday night; year 17 = Monday night; year 21 = Saturday night; year 25 = Thursday night; year 29 = Tuesday night.)

Although the sun returns to its original position on Tuesday evening, the *bracha* is not recited until Wednesday morning when the sun is visible (*Rabbeinu Yonah Brachos* 43b).

The Proper Time:

The earliest time to recite the *bracha* is at *neitz hachama* (sunrise). Some *poskim* maintain that it is preferable to recite the *bracha* at sunrise even if this means it will need to be recited alone (*Kitzur S.A.* 60:7). The common custom, however, is to *daven shacharis* with *vasikin* and recite the *bracha* together with the entire *shul* after *shacharis* in order to fulfill the dictum *b'rov am hadras melech* (*Yizrach Ohr* 13:7, *Betzel Hachochma* 5:28, *L'horos Nossan* 4:16). [The *bracha* may be recited at that point even if one saw the sun earlier (*Betzel Hachochma* 5:27).]

Many *poskim* say that the *bracha* must be recited within the first three hours of the day because this is when the sun is close to its original position. After this time the *bracha* may be recited without Hashem's name (*i.e.*, *Baruch oseh ma'aseh b'reishis*) until *chatzos* (*Chasam Sofer siman* 56). [See *A.A. Butchach* (*O.C.* 229) who feels that the three hours are *shaos zmanios* from *alos hashachar*.] Other *poskim*, however, write that the *bracha* may be recited as usual until *chatzos* (*Chayei Adam* 63:5, *A.H.* 229:3, *Kitzur S.A. ibid.*, *M.B.* 229:8).

HALACHA ENCOUNTERS

Does the sun need to be visible?

Before reciting the *bracha* one should look (quickly) at the sun. If one is concerned about eye-damage it is permitted to wear sunglasses (*Yechave Daas* 4:18:10). If the sky is cloudy and one cannot clearly see the sun, the *bracha* may be recited as long as the outline of the sun is visible (*Chasam Sofer ibid.*, *M.B. ibid.*). If the sun is not visible at all, some *Poskim* hold that the *bracha* may still be recited. The reasoning for this is that the *bracha* is being recited on the fact that the sun is in its original location, which is not affected by its visibility (*Panim Meiros* 2:38). The *halacha*, however, follows the opinion of most *poskim* that the *bracha* may not be recited if the sun is completely hidden because the *Gemara* (*Brachos* 59b) states that *birchas hachama* is recited upon seeing the sun (*Chasam Sofer ibid.*, *M.B. ibid.*). Many *poskim* say that if the sun is not visible the *bracha* may nevertheless be recited without Hashem's name (*Kitzur S.A. ibid.*).

Some *poskim* maintain that on a cloudy day it is preferable to recite the *bracha* without Hashem's name before the first three hours of the day pass, and if the sun becomes visible later (before *chatzos*) the *bracha* may be recited with Hashem's name (*Atzei Brushim siman* 60). Other *poskim*, however, argue that one should not recite the *bracha* without Hashem's name because then the *bracha* may not be recited later with Hashem's name (*Shaarei Tshuva* 229:3). [Some *poskim* write that if the sun remains hidden the entire morning, one should recite the *bracha* without Hashem's name immediately before *chatzos* (*Yizrach Ohr perek* 11). If the sun later becomes visible, the *bracha* should be recited again without Hashem's name (see *L'horos Nossan* 4:18:3).]

If concern exists that the day may indeed be cloudy, the *bracha* should be recited immediately upon seeing it even if one is by himself (*Shaar Hatziyun* 229:1). If one is in middle of reciting *shema* or its *brachos* and suddenly sees the sun visible between the clouds, he may recite the *bracha* between paragraphs if one is concerned that the sun may be covered again. [Only the *bracha* should be recited - not the other *tefillos*.] If one sees a cloud rapidly approaching the sun and not enough time remains to finish the current paragraph, he may recite the *bracha* immediately (*Yechave Daas* 4:18:8). [While waiting for the sun to become visible one may eat and drink even though the time to recite *birchas hachama* has already arrived (see *Betzel Hachochma* 5:29).]

Reciting *Shehechyanu*:

Some *poskim* write that *shehechyanu* is recited upon fulfilling this momentous mitzvah (*Chayei Olam Notah O.C. siman* 5). They maintain that the joy experienced upon seeing the sun in its original position, a rare occurrence indeed, is no less than the joy of seeing a long-lost friend which deserves the *bracha* of *shehechyanu* (see *S.A.* 225:1). Most *poskim*, however, maintain that *shehechyanu* is not recited. The rationale for this is that *shehechyanu* is recited only if a personal benefit is received. Additionally, when looking at the sun, one cannot see anything new or special. Furthermore, one's joy cannot be complete when viewing the sun because the sun's strength will multiply seven-fold in the days of *Moshiach*. Also, *shehechyanu* is recited only on a *mitzvah* which involves an action, not merely a *bracha* (*Maharam Shik O.C.* 90, *Ksav Sofer O.C.* 34, *Shvilei Dovid O.C.* 229). Nonetheless, some *poskim* advise one to wear new clothing or to eat a new fruit which requires the recital of *shehechyanu*, and have in mind that the *bracha* is going on *birchas hachama* as well (*Minchas Yitzchok O.C.* 15, *Yechave Daas* 4:18:4).

Women and Children:

Like all other *mitzvos*, children that have reached the age of *chinuch* (6 or 7) should recite *birchas hachama* (*Yizrach Ohr perek* 9).

Birchas hachama, a *bracha* recited on a certain date every 28 years, would seem to be a *mitzvas asei shehazman grama* (a time-constrained *mitzvah*).

The general rule is that women are not obligated to fulfill such a *mitzvah*, but they may do so if they wish. However, many *poskim* say that this *bracha* should not be recited by women. Many explanations are given for this: Some *poskim* feel that they may only perform a *mitzvah* involving an action, unlike *birchas hachama* which is only a *bracha* (see *MG"A* 296:11). Additionally, since *birchas hachama* is recited outside with a large group, it would be a lack of *tzniyus* for women to congregate outdoors (*Yizrach Ohr perek* 11. See *Har Tzvi O.C.* 1:118, *Maharam Shik ibid.*, *Sho'el U'ma'ishiv tinyana* 4:168 and *Minchas Yitzchok* 8:34 for more reasons.).

Many *poskim*, however, argue that women may recite *birchas hachama*. One rationale for this is that *birchas hachama* is not a *mitzvas asei shehazman grama*. A *mitzvah* is considered a *mitzvas asei shehazman grama* only if the *mitzvah* must be fulfilled on a specific date, e.g., *matzah* on *Pesach*, *lulav* on *Succos*. *Birchas hachama*, on the other hand, is not limited to a specific date - it happens to be the date that the sun returns to its original spot. Therefore, it has the status of a *mitzvas asei sh'lo hazman grama*, which women are fully obligated to fulfill (*Maharil Diskin* vol. II *kuntres acharon* 5:26, *Chochmas Shlomo O.C.* 426, *Yalkut Hager-shuni O.C.* 426).

The accepted custom is for women to recite *birchas hachama* but they should not gather together publicly, out of *tzniyus* concerns (*Siach Hasadeh Brachos* 59b, *Minchas Yitzchak* 8:34). [If they wish, they may gather together in a secluded area (e.g., a girls school yard), or they may recite the *bracha* privately at home (Harav M. Sternbuch). According to Sephardic custom, women should fulfill their obligation by listening to the *bracha* recited by a man (*Ben Ish Chai I eikev*, os 19, *Yechave Daas* 4:18:6).]

Must the *bracha* be recited while standing?

When reciting the *bracha* together with ten men, it is proper to stand. If, however, the *bracha* is recited in private, it is permitted to sit. Thus, an invalid lying in bed may recite the *bracha* when he sees the sun (*Yechave Daas* 4:18:11). The *bracha* may be recited even if one sees the sun through a window (*ibid.*).

The Proper Order:

The essential part of *birchas hachama* is the *bracha*, *Baruch atah Hashem, Elokainu Melech Haolam, oseh ma'aseh b'reishis*. Over the years, many customs developed which added on various prayers and supplications. The *Mishna Brurah* (229:8) mentions the custom of the *Chasam Sofer: Halelu es Hashem* (*Tehillim* 148:1-6), *Birchas oseh ma'aseh b'reishis*, *Keil Adon* until *v'chayos hakodesh*, *Hashamayim misaprim* (*Tehillim* 19), *Aleinu* and *Kaddish Yasom*. Every *shul* should follow their own *minhag*.

In order to properly show respect to this special *mitzvah* it is customary to wear dignified clothing while reciting *birchas hachama* (*Yizrach Ohr* 13:8).

Much excitement is generated by a rare *mitzvah*, especially one performed every twenty-eight years. *Mitzvos* performed more often, certainly those done daily, quickly lose their shine and excitement. Many of us remember the enthusiasm we felt the first time wearing *tefillin*, or the first occasion lighting Shabbos candles. Let us try to channel the excitement that we feel upon performing a rare *mitzvah* into every *mitzvah*, even those performed on a daily basis. May we merit to recite this *bracha* together in Yerushalayim on this upcoming *Erev Pesach*, and again on 23 *Nissan*, 5797 (April 8, 2037).

Rabbi Niehaus is a full-time member of the kollel.