The breathtaking magnificence of our natural world inspires us to praise God with wonder and appreciation. Therefore, in addition to blessings on food and fragrances, the Sages ordained blessings over various natural phenomenon.

This class will cover blessings said over the following:

- mountains
- deserts
- thunder and lightning
- astronomical phenomena
- earthquakes and fierce winds
- natural bodies of water
- rainbows
- animals and trees
- strange-looking people
- friends and relatives
- Jewish multitudes
- great leaders
- outstanding Torah scholars
- places of miracles
- destruction and restoration

Before we get to the specific blessings, here are some general guidelines that apply to all these brachot:

- The blessing should preferably be said while standing.¹

- Viewing a phenomenon on film or broadcast is not the “real thing” and does not justify a blessing.² However, a bracha is said when viewing with the aid of a telescope.³

- If you are in doubt whether or not the blessing applies in a particular situation, the blessing may still be recited, but without using God’s name.⁴ In this way, you avoid any doubt of saying a bracha le’vatala (a blessing said in vain).

Mountains

Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, a leader of German Jewry in the 20th century, was not a man known for vacationing. Yet in his later years, he expressed a strong desire to visit the Swiss Alps, explaining that after he passes away, the Heavenly Tribunal will ask, “Shimshon, did you see My Alps?”

In fact, a great rabbi has been purported as saying that in the Messianic era, the majestic Alps will be transferred to the Land of Israel so that the Jewish people can always take pleasure in their beauty.⁵

¹ Siddur Rav Yaakov Emden
² Yabia Omer 6:12; Minchat Yitzchak 2:84:10; Yalkut Yosef (OC 3, pg. 603)
³ Petach HaDevr 224:10; B’Tzel HaChochma 2:16
⁴ V’Zot HaBracha, pg. 155, citing Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky
⁵ The Brisker Rav, cited by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetsky on www.torah.org
Due to the awe-inspiring nature of beautiful mountains, the Sages prescribed the following blessing:\(^6\)

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**Oseh Ma’aseh Veraishit**

חַגָּרִיתִּי מַלְתָּה הָעֵירָה
אלֹהֵינוֹ מֶלֶךְ הַעָלָם,
עשֶה מַעְשֶׂה בַּרְאָשִׁית.

Bâruch Atâ Adonoy, EloheINU Melech Hâ’olâm, oseh ma’aseh vereishit.

Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe,
Who forms the work of Creation.

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Some guidelines:

- This blessing may only be recited by one who is awed by the height of the mountain.\(^7\) Therefore, one who is not impressed with such mountains (perhaps as a result of familiarity) does not recite the blessing.\(^8\)

- Similarly, this blessing should not be recited from an airplane where the height of the mountain cannot be appreciated.\(^9\)

- If the mountain was seen in the past 30 days, the blessing is not recited.\(^10\)

It is a good idea to memorize this particular blessing, for as we will see, this same text is recited on other natural phenomena such as deserts, lightning, earthquakes, hurricanes, astronomical phenomena and impressive bodies of water. Throughout this course, we’ll refer to this blessing as “Oseh Ma’aseh Veraishit.”

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\(^6\) Orach Chaim 228:1  
\(^7\) see Orach Chaim 228:3  
\(^8\) Orchat Rabbeinu 1:117, citing Chazon Ish  
\(^9\) V’Zot HaBracha, pg. 155  
\(^10\) Mishnah Berurah 228:2
Deserts


These are the feelings that come to mind when we observe a desert. Yet the most important event in Jewish history – the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai – occurred in the desert.\(^{11}\) God did so in order to teach us that one who wants to totally connect with Torah must “make himself like a desert”\(^{12}\) – to discard any preconceived notions and open oneself up to the truth. In this way, a desert is a special source of inspiration.

The blessing Oseh Ma’aseh Veraishit should be recited upon seeing a desert for the first time in 30 days.\(^{13}\)

\(^{11}\) Exodus chapter 19
\(^{12}\) Talmud – Eruvin 54a
\(^{13}\) Orach Chaim 228:1, with Mishnah Berurah 2
Thunder and Lightning

The giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai was amidst thunder and lightning.\(^\text{14}\) As we’ve all experienced in an electrical storm, there is something awesomely dramatic about the momentary illumination of the skies, followed by a deafening boom.

Immediately upon seeing lightning during a storm,\(^\text{15}\) you should recite the blessing Oseh Ma’aseh Veraishit.\(^\text{16}\) (It is not necessary to see the actual bolt of lightning.)\(^\text{17}\)

The Sages instituted a separate blessing – She’kocho Oog’vuraso Malay Olam – to be said immediately upon hearing thunder:\(^\text{18}\)

\[
\text{She’kocho Oog’vuraso Malay Olam} \\
\text{בָּרָךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה,} \\
\text{אֶלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָאָרֶץ;} \\
\text{שֶׁבֶחָּה גְבוּרָתוֹ מְלָא גוֹיִם;} \\
\text{בָּרָךְ אַתָּה עָלֵינוּ בָּרוּךְ הָאָדָם הַמָּ良い}.
\]

\[\text{Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe,} \]
\[\text{Whose strength and glory fills the universe.}\]

- A blessing may be said on each of these phenomena no more than once a day, if it is during a single storm. As long as there is no complete clearing of the clouds, it is still considered the same storm.\(^\text{19}\)

- Usually, we see lightning before we hear thunder, because light travels quicker than sound; therefore the blessing on lightning is usually recited first. However, if you simultaneously experience the lightning and thunder, then only the blessing Oseh Ma’aseh Veraishit is recited over both phenomena.\(^\text{20}\)

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\(^{14}\) Exodus 19:16  
\(^{15}\) but not heat-lightning (Mishnah Berurah 227:3); though Aruch HaShulchan 227:1 disputes this  
\(^{16}\) Orach Chaim 227:1  
\(^{17}\) Halichot Shlomo, pg. 287; Shu’ot Tzitz Eliezer 12:21  
\(^{18}\) Orach Chaim 227:1. If you accidentally switched these two blessings, it is okay post facto (Mishnah Berurah 227:5).  
\(^{19}\) Orach Chaim 227:2, with Mishnah Berurah 8  
\(^{20}\) Mishnah Berurah 227:5
Astronomical Phenomena

There is something awesome about the celestial bodies that inspire every observer.\textsuperscript{21} King David proclaimed: “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the expanse of the sky tells of His handiwork” (Psalms 19:2).

The blessing Oseh Ma’aseh Veraishit is recited upon observing a comet, shooting star\textsuperscript{22} or meteor shower.\textsuperscript{23}

A new blessing is not recited if the same phenomenon is sighted again within 30 days. If multiple comets or shooting stars are seen during one night, only one blessing is recited.

No blessing is recited upon viewing an eclipse,\textsuperscript{24} since in kabbalistic literature an eclipse is considered a bad omen.\textsuperscript{25}

Earthquakes and Fierce Winds

In Jewish consciousness, whenever a natural phenomenon occurs, God is sending a message to the Jewish people. One of the ways that God urges humanity to better their actions is by sending earthquakes and strong winds.\textsuperscript{26}

Upon experiencing either an earthquake or strong and stormy (but not extraordinarily fierce) winds, recite the blessing Oseh Ma’aseh Veraishit.\textsuperscript{27}

\textsuperscript{21} In fact, the Talmud (Shabbat 75a) instructs us to focus attention on the astronomical bodies.
\textsuperscript{22} Orach Chaim 227:1
\textsuperscript{23} Maimonides (Brachot 10:14)
\textsuperscript{24} Orchot Rabbeinu 1, pg. 95
\textsuperscript{25} based on Talmud – Sukkah 29a
\textsuperscript{26} Sefer HaBrit (1:10, ch. 1, 2); Be’er HaGolah 4
\textsuperscript{27} Orach Chaim 227:1, with Mishnah Berurah 4
Natural Bodies of Water

Have you ever stood at the ocean shore and felt infinitesimal and humbled before the awesome expanse? Upon seeing an impressive natural river (such as the Euphrates or the Nile) or sea (such as the Mediterranean), you should recite the blessing Oseh Ma’aseh Veraishit.29

There is a special blessing – She’asa Et Ha’yam Ha’gadol – recited upon seeing an ocean:30

She’asa Et Ha’yam Ha’gadol

Bäruch Atå Adonoy, Eloheinu Melech Ha’olâm,
She’asa et ha’yam ha’gadol.
Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe,
Who made the Great Sea.

If the same body of water is sighted within 30 days, a new blessing is not recited.31 A new blessing may be recited if another body of water is seen, unless it was during the same leg of a journey.32 One who sees such bodies of water on a regular basis does not say these blessings.34

No blessing is recited upon seeing a waterfall.35

28 Upon seeing the Dead Sea, a blessing is not recited, since it was not in existence since Creation. (Halichot Shlomo – vol. I, pg. 287; V’Zot HaBracha, pg. 155, in the name of Rabbi C.P. Scheinberg; see however Ohr L’Tzion 14:40)
29 Orach Chaim 228:1
30 Orach Chaim 228:2. Mishnah Berurah 228:2 discusses whether the Great Sea refers to the Atlantic or the Mediterranean. According to some opinions, due to doubt, we do not say this blessing. However, according to all opinions one can definitely say the blessing at “Europa Point” in Gibraltar, a spot where the Atlantic converges with the Mediterranean. See B’Tzel HaChochma 2:12-17 for various opinions on this issue.
31 Mishnah Berurah 228:2
32 Halichot Shlomo, pg. 287
33 V’Zot HaBracha, pg. 154, in the name of Rabbi Moshe Sternbuch
34 Halichot Shlomo, pg. 288
35 V’Zot HaBracha, pg. 155, in the name of Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky
Rainbows

When God sent a flood to destroy the world in the days of Noah, He promised there would never be another flood, and designated the rainbow as an eternal sign of this promise. In that sense, seeing a rainbow today is a negative sign, alluding that the world is deserving of punishment were it not for the promise.

Upon seeing a complete rainbow, recite the bracha Zocher Ha’brit:

\[
\text{זוכר הברית:}
\]

- If multiple rainbows are seen during the same storm, the blessing may be said multiple times.

- It is forbidden to gaze excessively at a rainbow.

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36 Genesis 9:8-17
37 Talmud – Ketubot 77b; Sforno – Genesis 9:13, 16. For this reason, Mishnah Berurah 229:1 considers it inappropriate to inform others of the rainbow; however, Sefer Brit Kehuna 100:3 permits it.
38 Biur Halacha 229:1 – s.v. Haro‘eh; V’Zot HaBracha, pg.156
39 Shulchan Aruch 229:1
40 Sha’arey Teshuva 229:1; Mishnah Berurah 229:1; Yalkut Yosef (OC 229:1); V’Zot HaBracha 17:4
41 Talmud – Chagi’a 16a
**Animals & Trees**

Upon seeing a strikingly beautiful person, animal, bird or tree for the first time, you should recite the blessing She’kacha Lo B’olamo.\(^42\) However, due to some doubt as to what objectively qualifies as an “beautiful creature,” the blessing is recited without the mention of God’s name.\(^43\)

**She’kacha Lo B’olamo**

Bäruch Atå Adonoy,  
Eloheinu Melech Há’olám,  
She’káchá lo b’olámo.  

Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe,  
Who has such [beauty] in his universe.

Upon seeing impressive, exotic animals (e.g. elephants, monkeys or apes),\(^44\) recite the blessing Mishaneh Ha’briyot.\(^45\)

**Mishaneh Ha’briyot**

Bäruch Atå Adonoy,  
Eloheinu Melech Há’olám,  
Misháneh ha’briyot.  

Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe,  
Who makes the creatures distinctive.

Upon viewing multiple exotic animals in a zoo, only one blessing is said -- while having in mind all the others that will be seen.\(^46\)

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\(^{42}\) Aruch HaShulchan 225:14  
\(^{43}\) Orach Chaim 225:10, with Mishnah Berurah 32 and Sha’ar Hatziyun 33  
\(^{44}\) According to Rabbi Chaim Kaniveksy, as cited in V’Zot HaBracha, pg.156, this blessing may only be recited upon viewing elephants, monkeys or apes. However, according to Halichot Shlomo (vol. I, pg. 290), the blessing may be recited on all exotic animals, except for fish.  
\(^{46}\) Orach Chaim 225:8
Strange-looking People

Upon seeing a person with a strikingly unusual physical feature (that was present since birth), you should recite the blessing Mishaneh Ha’briyot (the same blessing said above on exotic animals):

- Upon subsequent sightings of the same person after 30 days, the blessing is recited without God's name, if you are still amazed by the features.\(^{47}\)

- Another blessing is recited upon subsequent sightings of other persons with similar features, even within 30 days,\(^{48}\) if you are still amazed by it.

- Obviously, be careful not to recite the bracha in a manner that will embarrass the subject.\(^{49}\)

Friends & Relatives

If you did not see a close friend or relative for 30 days (and you did not hear any communication about him),\(^{50}\) you should recite She’hecheyanu upon seeing him.

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She’hecheyanu

Baruch (Ata Adonoy, Eloheinu Melech ha’olam, she’hecheyanu vi’k’iyimano, vi’higiyano laz’man ha’zeh.

Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, Who has kept us alive, sustained us, and brought us to this occasion.

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\(^{46}\) V’olehu Lo Yibol (vol. I pg. 223); Halichot Shlomo (p. 290: 135)

\(^{47}\) Mishnah Berurah 225:30; see Shu’t Tzitz Eliezer 12:22 for elaboration

\(^{48}\) Aruch HaShulchan 225:13; see Shu’t Tzitz Eliezer 12:22 for elaboration

\(^{49}\) Nishmat Avraham (vol. I, pg. 100), citing Rabbi S.Z. Auerbach

\(^{50}\) Mishnah Berurah 225:2. If he was ill and became healed, then the bracha would be said even if you heard news in the interim (Sha’ar Hatziyun 225:3).
• In practice, this is said only if the person is very close to you and it makes you extremely happy to see him (e.g. parent, child, spouse).\textsuperscript{51}

• Only one bracha is recited upon seeing multiple such people at once.\textsuperscript{52}

• If it has been over a year since seeing the close friend or relative, recite the bracha Mechayeh Ha’meitim.\textsuperscript{53}

\begin{center}
\textbf{Michayei Ha’meitim}
\end{center}

\begin{center}
\begin{tabular}{ll}
Băruch (Atå Adonoy, & Eloheinu Melech Hå’olăm,) \\ (אלהים ומלך העולם) & מייחָא ייחָא ייחָא.
\end{tabular}
\end{center}

Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, Who brings the dead back to life.

Upon seeing a friend who has recovered from a life-threatening illness, recite the bracha B’rich Racha’mana:

\begin{center}
\textbf{B’rich Racha’mana}
\end{center}

\begin{center}
\begin{tabular}{ll}
B’rich Racha’mânà Malkâ d’ålmâ, & dee yahavâch lân, \\
רי ייהב ייהב, & ולו yahavâch l’afâ.
\end{tabular}
\end{center}

Blessed is the Merciful One, King of the Universe, Who has given you to us, and not given you to the dust.

\textsuperscript{51} Aruch HaShulchan (OC 225:2-3)  
\textsuperscript{52} Yalkut Yosef (III pg. 606)  
\textsuperscript{53} Orach Chaim 225:1
Jewish Multitudes

The Torah says that 600,000 Jews stood at Mount Sinai, and the kabbalists say that these are the 600,000 roots souls of every Jew who has lived since.\(^{54}\) Upon seeing 600,000 Jews at once, recite the bracha Chacham Ha’razim.\(^{55}\)

![Chacham Ha’razim](image)

Great Leaders

Upon seeing a non-Jewish ruler who has the power to pardon people sentenced to death, such as the president of the United States or the Queen of England,\(^{56}\) recite the bracha She’natan Mee’kivodo:\(^{57}\)

![She’natan Mee’kivodo](image)

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54 Zohar - Pinchas 216b; Chatam Sofer (Kovetz Teshuvot 52)
55 Shulchan Aruch (224:5)
56 According to Shu’t Shevet HaLevi 1:35, this blessing may also be said upon seeing female rulers. However, Shu’t Rivovot Ephraim 2:89 disagrees. Upon seeing a U.S. state governor who has the power to pardon people sentenced to death, one should recite the bracha without the name of God (see Mishnah Berurah 224:12).
57 Orach Chaim 224:8
• If the same ruler is seen again within 30 days, a new blessing is not recited.\textsuperscript{58}

• If multiple rulers are seen during one day, multiple blessings should be recited, unless they are all seen at once.\textsuperscript{59}

**Outstanding Torah Scholars**

The wisdom contained in Torah has served as the basis for all of Western civilization and for the three major religions.\textsuperscript{60} In order to imbue us with this appreciation, the blessing She’chalak May’chach’mato is recited upon seeing an outstanding Torah scholar:\textsuperscript{61}

\textbf{She’chalak May’chach’mato}  
\begin{flushright}
ברוך (אתה יי)
אלוהינו מלך העולם,
שחalach my’chach’mato lee’ray’áv.
\textbf{Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe,}\n\textbf{Who imparted [some] of His wisdom to those who fear Him.}
\end{flushright}

This blessing is rarely recited nowadays, as it is only said upon a world-renowned Torah scholar who excels in both wisdom and is truly God-fearing.\textsuperscript{62} Perhaps an example of such an individual today is Rabbi Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, an elderly scholar who lives in Jerusalem.\textsuperscript{63} Even if you don’t usually see Torah scholars of such magnitude, it is a good idea to become familiar with this blessing, since we will eventually need to recite it upon greeting the Messiah.\textsuperscript{64}

\textsuperscript{58} Kaf HaChaim (OC 224:27). Upon seeing an outstanding non-Jewish scholar who is proficient in the “Seven Wisdoms,” one should recite a special bracha (Orach Chaim 224:7); however, such scholars do not exist today (Piskei Teshuva 224:5).

\textsuperscript{59} Yalkut Yosef (OC 3, pg. 604); Kaf HaChaim (OC 224:27)

\textsuperscript{60} Deuteronomy 4:6

\textsuperscript{61} Orach Chaim 224:6

\textsuperscript{62} Talmud – Brachot 58a, with Maharsha – s.v. Baruch; Piskei Teshuvot 224:4

\textsuperscript{63} As heard from Rabbi Yitzchak Berkowitz. Shu’t Yechev Da’at 4:16 writes that this blessing may be recited today. However, Aruch HaShulchan (OC 224:6), Kaf HaChaim (OC 224:19) and Shu’t Tzitz Eliezer 14:37 rule that this blessing is not said nowadays, due to doubt as to which scholars qualify.

\textsuperscript{64} Shu’t Minchat Shlomo 1:91:27
Places of Miracles

What is a miracle? Can you possibly imagine the idea of a tiny seed being thrown into the ground, and before you know it a sweet, juicy orange is popping out of a piece of wood? The difference between what we call "nature" and what we call a "miracle" is a matter of frequency. As one witicist commented, "Niagara Falls is nice. But the real excitement would be to see it flowing the other way."

If you ever experienced a miracle and were saved from imminent danger, then upon returning to that spot, recite the blessing She’asa Lee Nase:65

She’asa Lee Nase

ברוך אתה הוהי Eloheinu Melech ha’olam,
שהאסא לי nase bamakom ha’zeh.

Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe,
Who performed a miracle for me at this place.

Upon visiting a place where miraculous rescue occurred for either your parents, ancestors,66 Torah teacher,67 or the majority68 of the Jewish people,69 recite the following blessing:

She’asa Nase Bamakom Hazeh

ברוך אתה הוהי Eloheinu Melech ha’olam, sh’asaa
לאפרים תבשלה nase bamakom ha’zeh.

Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe. Who performed a miracle for
[my father / my mother / my forebears / my teacher / our ancestors] at this place.

65 Orach Chaim 218:4
66 Orach Chaim 218:4
67 Orach Chaim 218:6
68 Orach Chaim 218:2
69 Orach Chaim 218:1. However, the places mentioned in Orach Chaim 218:1 are not discernable nowadays, and we do not recite this blessing unless we know the exact place of the miracle that was done for all or most of the Jewish people - (Mishnah Berurah 281:7, with Biur Halacha – s.v. K’Gon).
Destruction and Restoration

A number of blessings are recited upon seeing various manifestations of death, destruction and restoration.

A. Cemeteries

Upon seeing a Jewish cemetery or multiple Jewish graves together, recite the blessing Asher Yatzar Et’chem Ba’din that is printed in the Siddur, or on page 6 of the PDF file accompanying this class.70

• Even if you saw another cemetery recently, the blessing should be said – without God’s name – if 30 days have passed since seeing these particular graves.71

• If you will be entering the cemetery, you should not recite the bracha until coming within four cubits (seven feet) of a grave.72

• During a funeral procession, the bracha is not recited.73

• No bracha is recited upon seeing the Cave of the Patriarchs, Rachel’s tomb, the tomb of Joseph, or the graves of anyone else who lived before the Torah was given.74

Upon seeing a non-Jewish cemetery, one should recite the verse in Jeremiah 50:12: “The nations are a wilderness, a wasteland, a desert.”75

70 Orach Chaim 224:12
71 Mishnah Berurah 224:17; Kaf HaChaim (OC 224:38); Halichot Shlomo, pg. 290:134
72 Gesher HaChaim 1:29
73 Gesher HaChaim 1:29
74 V’olehu Lo Yibol (vol. I, pg. 118)
75 Talmud – Brachot 58b; Orach Chaim 224:12
B. Destroyed Synagogue

Upon seeing a destroyed synagogue, you should recite the following bracha (without the name of God):76

![Dayan Ha’emet](image)

B’ruch Dayan h’a’emet.
Blessed is the true Judge.

C. Restored Synagogue

Upon seeing a beautiful synagogue that was restored after being destroyed, recite the blessing Matziv G’vul Almana (without the name of God):77

![Matziv G’vul Almana](image)

B’ruch matziv g’vul almānā.
Blessed is He Who sets a limit for a widow.

For those who have the opportunity to visit the Old City of Jerusalem, there is a wonderful new opportunity to say this bracha. The Churva Synagogue was Jerusalem’s main Ashkenazi synagogue from the 16th until the 20th century, when it was reduced to rubble by Jordanian soldiers during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. In 1978, a high stone arch was erected where the Churva once stood, and this became a contemporary landmark of the Jewish Quarter’s central square. The synagogue is now being restored to its former glory and is due to be completed in 2009.

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76 Orach Chaim 224:10, with Mishnah Berurah
77 Orach Chaim 224:10, with Mishnah Berurah