

## The beracha recited upon seeing royalty *Rabbi Aryeh Lebowitz*

- I. Introduction.** The Torah requires of the Jewish people that we relate any impressive events or experiences to the fact that God is the source of all that is impressive to us. We are all familiar with the blessings recited upon displays of the forces of nature such as the blessings upon hearing thunder and seeing lightning. Also in this category, but perhaps somewhat less known to us, is the blessing recited upon seeing a rainbow. We are also familiar with the obligation to recite *berachos* upon seeing certain places, such as those places that either have or once had *avodah zara*, a lions den, and a fiery furnace. The Torah also requires us to recite blessings upon seeing unusually impressive people, such as people who possess an unusual intellectual capacity, whether they are Jews or gentiles. In this article, we will focus on the obligation to recite a blessing upon seeing royalty. We will explain the nature of this blessing, and we will define the parameters of this obligation as it relates to current political leaders.
- II. Source of the obligation.** The *gemara Berachos 58a* states that when one sees a Jewish king he should say "*Baruch she'cholak mi'kvodo li'yirei'av*" and if he sees a non-Jewish king he should recite the blessing "*Baruch she'nosan mi'kvodo li'briyosav*". The *gemara* goes on to say that one should make an effort to see kings "and not only Jewish kings, but even gentile kings, because if he will merit, he will be able to distinguish between Jewish and non-Jewish kings". Rashi explains that this refers to those who will see the coming of *Moshiach* who will appreciate how much greater the honor given to the *Melech Ha'Moshiach* is than the honor given by the various nations to their leaders in this world. What emerges from this *gemara* is that there are two distinct, but obviously related obligations when it comes to seeing a king. First, there is the obligation to recite a *beracha* when seeing a king. Second, there is the obligation to make an effort to see a king and the honor he is given (even if it involves taking off time from torah study to do so – see *Mishna Berura 224:13*).
- III. Text of the beracha.** As we have noted, the text of the beracha recited on a gentile king (*she'nosan mi'kvodo*) differs from the

text of the *beracha* recited on a Jewish king (*she'cholak mi'kvodo*). (It is interesting to note that *Rambam Hilchos Berachos* 10:11 makes no such distinction, see *Perisha, Orach Chaim* 224.) *Beis Yosef* (*Orach Chaim* 224) offers two explanations for this distinction. First, Jewish souls are considered to be hewn from the *kisei ha'kavod* and are therefore considered to be a "small piece" of God. Gentile souls, on the other hand, come from a place more distant from God. Therefore, when we speak of honor given to Jewish people we say that God has "split" this honor from Himself to share with mankind. When speaking of honor given to non-Jews we say that God has merely "given" them honor, as if it came from a separate treasure house. Second, the *Beis Yosef* explains in the name of Rabbi David Abudraham, that "*she'nosan*" connotes a single gift that is given once and does not change. "*She'cholak*", on the other hand, has a connotation of a gift that can expand or diminish based on the merit of the recipient. (For additional reasons see *Bach* *ibid.* and *Taz* 224:1.)

**IV. What type of leader warrants this beracha?** The term "king" employed by the *gemara* is somewhat vague. In fact, nowhere in the *gemara* or its major commentaries are we told what kind of authority one must have in order to warrant a *beracha*. Later *poskim*, however, discuss this issue at length. We will offer a synopsis of the discussion found in the *poskim*.

**A. What type of power must the "king" have?** The *Radvaz* (*Responsa* 1:296) and the *Orchos Chaim* (*Hilchos Berachos* 49) indicate that only an official who is able to execute or pardon from execution is deemed to have the requisite power to warrant a *beracha*. Rabbi Ovadia Yosef *shlit"a* (*Responsa Yechave Da'as* 2:28) cites this opinion approvingly. However, Rabbi Moshe Shternbuch *shlit"a* (*Responsa Teshuvos V'hanhagos* 2:139) believes that the obligation to recite a *beracha* is not dependant on the actual power of the "king" as much as it is dependant on the honor shown to the "king". He deduces this from the above cited *gemara* that explained the rationale for this *beracha* to be that we should appreciate how much honor is shown to kings now, so that we will be able to appreciate how much

more honor will be given to the *Melech Hamoshiach*. The clear implication is that the issue is one of honor as opposed to real practical power. There are two important practical differences between these two approaches:

1. **Reciting a beracha on the President or Governor.** If the obligation is generated by an official who has the power to pardon a death row criminal (even if he lacks the power to execute on his own) the *beracha* should be recited on the President of the United States or even the Governor of a state. (This, indeed, is the opinion of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef.) If, however, the criteria is that they must be shown the honor reserved for royalty, one would not make a *beracha* on a president because, although he holds the highest position in the land, he only holds it for four years, he may be impeached at any time, and his approval is not necessary for all laws passed. (this is the opinion of Rabbi Moshe Shternbuch). Rabbi Moshe Stern rules that a *beracha* should be recited without mention of God's name.
2. **Reciting a beracha on a monarch in modern day England.** If the obligation for a *beracha* is generated by the honor shown to the monarch, then there would be no doubt that one would make a *beracha* on the queen of England. This would be true even if she were purely a figurehead with no official law-making abilities. Rabbi Shternbuch does in fact rule that a *beracha* should be recited upon seeing the monarch in modern day England.

**B. Should the beracha be recited on seeing a female monarch?** While most *poskim* see no reason to distinguish between a king and a queen in regard to this *halacha*, there are two schools of thought that suggest that this *beracha* should not be recited over a queen (even in the absence of a king).

1. Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Braun (*She'arim Metzuyanim Behalacha* 1:60:7) cites the *gemara* in *Kesubos* 17a that prohibits one from gazing at the beauty of a bride at her wedding, even if the intention is merely to make her more beloved to her husband (i.e. when he sees others appreciate her beauty, he will appreciate her beauty even more). Based on this, Rabbi Braun suggests, one should never make a *beracha* on seeing a queen because one is not allowed to see a queen, as this would violate the prohibition of gazing at women. This (rather radical) opinion may easily be rejected for a number of reasons. First, there is no prohibition in Halacha against *seeing* women. The prohibition is merely to *gaze* at women. In fact, at a wedding that very *gemara* in *Kesubos* says that we should remind the groom that his bride is "*na'ah v'chasudah*", even if it is not true, which is a fact he could only know if he has seen her. This very point is made by Rabbis Moshe and Bezalel Stern respectively in the Responsum (*Be'er Moshe* 2:9:4 and *B'tzel Hachochmo* 2:19). Second, it would seem that women are obligated in reciting a *beracha* when encountering royalty just like men are obligated. We can not preclude the possibility of reciting a *beracha* on a queen because there is certainly nothing wrong with a woman seeing a queen. Finally, it is clear from the continuation of the above cited *gemara* that one need not actually see the king himself in order to make the *beracha*. It is sufficient to see the entourage parading the monarch through the streets.
  
2. Rabbi Shternbuch (ibid.) cites those who suggest that since Jewish law does not allow for a Jewish female monarch ("*Som Tasim Alecha Melech*" – *V'lo Malkah* "Appoint for yourselves a king" – not a queen) we would not even recognize the authority of a non-Jewish female monarch. This argument may be rejected, however, for two

reasons. First, the entire point of this *beracha* is to appreciate the *distinction* between Jewish and non-Jewish royalty. This is just another way that they are indeed different. Second, the *Minchas Chinuch* raises the possibility that we may have a Jewish female monarch. He explains that the Torah only prohibits *appointing* a female monarch, but if her father was king and he died leaving no sons, she is not appointed but rather inherits the *throne*.

### **III. In what context must one see the king to warrant a beracha?**

- A. **Seeing a king in commoner's clothing.** Rabbi Ovadia Yosef cites a number of authorities who rule that one does not recite a *beracha* when he sees a king wearing normal clothing (i.e. the president on his ranch), and without the accompaniment of an entourage. These authorities reason that the blessing is recited on the "honor" granted the king. If the king is not currently displaying that honor there is no need for a *beracha*. Rabbi Yosef himself is unsure whether or not these authorities should be relied upon and therefore rules to recite the *beracha* without uttering the name of God. Rabbi Shternbuch reports that Rabbi Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld once met the king of Jordan in private (without the royal entourage) and recited a *beracha*. Rabbi Shternbuch suggests that in Rabbi Sonnenfeld's view one recite this *beracha* when they see a king, regardless of the context in which they see him. However, asserts Rabbi Shternbuch, even Rabbi Sonnenfeld would agree that the obligation to make an effort to see a king (and even to take time from torah learning to do so) would only apply if you can see the king together with all of the honor granted to him. The logic for this distinction is that the obligation of the *beracha* is generated by seeing somebody who was given extraordinary power by God, regardless of the context. The obligation to make an effort to see the king is in order to appreciate the difference between

Jewish and non-Jewish royalty as is stated explicitly in the *gemara*.

- B. **Seeing a king on television.** If one were to assume that a *beracha* should be recited upon seeing the president, we must examine whether the *beracha* should be recited upon watching the nightly news where a picture of the president will inevitable be flashed on the screen. Rabbi Yosef compares seeing a king on television to the *halacha* that one would not recite *kiddush levana* upon seeing the moon in a mirror (see *gemara Rosh Hashana 24b* and *Birkei Yosef, Choshen Mishpat 35:11*). The reason for this *halacha* is that witnessing a mere reflection of something is not considered to be equivalent to witnessing the item itself. As such, seeing the president (or king) on television would not cause an obligation for a *beracha*. This author, however, has heard from reliable sources who attended the Telshe Yeshiva in the 1950's that when the queen of England was inaugurated they brought a television into the yeshiva so that the boys can watch the ceremony and recite a *beracha*. Perhaps we may argue that it is not the physical presence of the royalty that generates an obligation to make a *beracha*, rather it is the overwhelming feeling of seeing the tremendous honor accorded to royalty that causes the obligation to say a *beracha*. If so, seeing the inauguration of a new queen would certainly be appropriate grounds for a *beracha*.

**IV. Conclusion.** We have explored some of the details of the little-known obligation to recite a *beracha* upon seeing royalty. May we soon be able to fulfill the reason for this *mitzva* and witness the true *kavod* that will be shown to the *melech ha'Moshiach*.