Talmud Brachot Top Ten Teachings, Daf 58:

1. **The bracha on a multitude.** Rabbi Hamnuna says if you see a multitude of Jews - this is interpreted as a gathering of 600,000 - you should make the bracha “*Baruch atah Hashem…chacham harazim*” - Blessed are You, G-d…the wise Knower of secrets. A *beraisa* explains that the reason we make this bracha is that the minds of the Jews making up this multitude are not similar to one another and neither are their facial features. Ula says that this bracha should only be said in Israel. If you see the same multitude in Bavel, no bracha is said. The number 600,000 makes us think of the Exodus, when 600,000 Jews were freed from Egypt. Yet this bracha makes no mention of the Exodus. What is so interesting about people having different minds and facial features? In fact, our differences are what make us so special. One Jew doesn’t need to look and think like every other Jew. We are all so different - and yet we are still a nation. The bracha doesn’t need to mention the Exodus or the Revelation at Mount Sinai, because the multitude itself is the point. That crowd of 600,000 individual Jews is one nation. And therefore this bracha can only be said in Israel, the land of our nationhood.
2. **Gratitude for the multitude**. Ben Zoma saw 600,000 Jews gathered at the Temple Mount and made this bracha, but he added on to it: “Blessed are all these who have been created to serve me.” The Rambam in Moreh Nevuchim says that the purpose of regular people is to take care of great people, but that’s not what Ben Zoma meant by this bracha. Ben Zoma was expressing gratitude. He used to say, “How different am I from Adam? He had to work very hard to eat bread, while I can get it from the bakery. He had to work hard to make his clothing; I can get it from a tailor. People of every nationality are at my doorstep ready to sell me whatever I need.” While we are thanking G-d for creating so many different kinds of people, it is also appropriate to express thanks for the things other people do that benefit us. Ben Zoma also said, “What does a guest say about his host? ‘How wonderful that my host did all of these things for my sake! All the meat, wine, pastries, and all the wonderful things he’s given me! How much work he did to make this happen! I am so grateful for all of it.’” It is so important to see the things that other people do for us and to be thankful to them. Every person is different, and everyone is living his or her own life, doing things that are important for that life. But they also do things that benefit us, and it is important to recognize that and to be grateful.
3. **Blessings on sages and kings.** If you see a Jewish sage, make the bracha “*baruch shechalak mechachmaso leyir’ayav*” - Blessed is He Who has given a portion of His wisdom to those who are in awe of Him. If you see a wise non-Jew, the bracha is slightly different: “*baruch shenasan mechachmaso lebriyosav*” - Blessed is He Who has given from His wisdom to His creatures. If you see a Jewish king, make the bracha “*baruch shechalak michvodo leyir’ayav*” - Blessed is He Who has given a portion of His honor to those who are in awe of Him. For a non-Jewish king, the bracha is “*baruch shenasan michvodo lebriyosav*” - Blessed is He Who has given from His honor to His creatures. Reb Yochanan says a person should always make an effort to run to see a king, even a non-Jewish one, because meeting a non-Jewish king will show you the difference between a Jewish king and a non-Jewish one. In Reb Yochanan’s time there was no Jewish king, so he might have been talking about Mashiach. There is a question about whether or not this bracha should also be said upon seeing a president. Maybe not, because a president is not on the same level as a king. After all, a president’s power is not absolute and can be taken away. But not making the bracha on a president is like saying that only a king counts as a “real” ruler. Poskim debate this question. Reb Moshe Feinstein explains that there are two elements that would be required to make a bracha: that the ruler has real power, and isn’t just a figurehead like the British monarchy today; and that the power is not temporary, like that of a president who serves only four years and then needs to be reelected.
4. **Seeing without sight**. It was announced that the king was coming to a town, so a crowd went out to greet him. Among the crowd were Rav Sheshes and a Tzeduki. Rav Sheshes was blind, and the Tzeduki insulted him, saying his blindness made him useless. The whole point of being in that crowd was to see the king, so why should a blind man be there? But Rav Sheshes said, “We’ll see who knows more, you or me.” Troops started arriving, and it became very loud. The Tzeduki said, “The king is coming now,” but Rav Sheshes said, “No, he is not.” The king did not arrive, and after some time more troops passed by. It was thunderously loud, and again the Tzeduki said, “The king is coming now.” Again Rav Sheshes said he was not. Indeed, the king still did not arrive. A third troop came, and still the king was not there. Then it got very quiet, and Rav Sheshes said, “Now the king is coming.” The Tzeduki asked him how he could possibly know that. Rav Sheshes explained that the prophet Elijah had seen a powerful wind, followed by an earthquake, followed by a fire, and G-d had not been in any of those things. But after the fire came a *kol demama daka* - a still, thin sound. And G-d was present in that quietness. Since a human king has a quality like the Divine King, Rav Sheshes understood that the human king, too, would come in the quiet. In fact the king did come then, and Rav Sheshes made the bracha on seeing a king. The Tzeduki asked him, “How can you make the blessing when you can’t even see him?” The Tzeduki didn’t understand. He confused noise with importance, and he let his senses distract him from the truth. Rav Sheshes may not have been able to see, but he knew how to listen, and he was wise. In a way, he was able to see better than the sighted Tzeduki. This story may also be a parable about the Oral Torah, which the Tzedukim reject. They care only about what they can see in the text, but because they don’t believe in listening to tradition they fail to actually see the King.
5. **The human world as a parallel of the Divine.** Rav Sheshes explained to the Tzeduki that he knew the human king would arrive in the quiet because kingship on earth is like a mirror of the kingship of Heaven. Rav Shila once got into a dispute with a person who was acting inappropriately with a woman. Rav Shila punished the person, and the person went to the authorities to complain. The authorities asked Rav Shila, “Who do you think you are, to be punishing this person?” Rav Shila replied, “*lecha Hashem hagedulah vehagevurah vehatiferes*” - to You, G-d, is greatness, strength, and majesty. The authorities didn’t understand this response, so Rav Shila explained that he was blessing G-d, Who created kingship here on Earth which is a reflection of the Heavenly kingship. The authorities liked that answer and gave Rav Shila the authority to judge. This concept of the parallel between the human realm and the Divine is a foundation of Kabbalah. “As above, so below.” Just like we find ten *sephiros* in the Divine Realm, so too we find ten *sephiros* in the human realm. That is why we have ten fingers. Just like there is a Temple in the Heavenly Realm, so too we have a Temple on Earth. People tend to assume that these ideas are unique to Kabbalah and chassidus, but the Talmud and midrash actually have a number of significant teachings that reflect the concept of “as above, so below.”
6. **The Splitting of the Sea.** It was taught in a *beraisa* in the name of Rabbi Akiva: “To you Hashem is the *gedula* (greatness), the *gevura* (strength), the *tiferes* (splendor), the *netzach* (triumph), and the *hod* (glory).” *Gedula* – this is the Splitting of the Sea. *Gevura* – this is the Smiting of the Firstborn. *Tiferes* – this is the giving of the Torah. *Netzach* – this is Jerusalem. *Hod* – this is the Beis Hamikdash. What do we mean when we speak of *gedula*, G-d’s greatness? The Haggadah cites Rabbi Akiva’s opinion that each of the Ten Plagues in Egypt contained five components and that the Splitting of the Sea, at which G-d’s *yad hagedolah* (great hand) was displayed, was five times as great as the Ten Plagues and therefore contained 250 plagues. We are taught that a maidservant at the Splitting of the Sea saw more of G-d’s glory then even the prophet Yechezkel. On some level, the Splitting of the Sea was the greatest revelation ever. *Gedula* is usually associated with the concept of *olam chesed yibaneh*, Creation as an act of lovingkindness. What does the destruction of the Splitting of the Sea have to with Creation or lovingkindness? When G-d created the Yam Suf, it was *al t’nai* – on the condition that when the time came, it would split for the Children of Israel. The fulfillment of this condition revealed a deeper element of *olam chesed yibaneh*: a kindness that anticipates the necessity for nature to change at the right time. The miracle of the Splitting of the Sea was a kindness built into the very fabric of Creation.

Perhaps this can shed light on a number of other questions. Why don’t we say a full hallel on the seventh day of Pesach, the day the Splitting of the Sea happened? Why do we not recite a *shehecheyanu*? Because the Splitting of the Sea was not an isolated event. It was the culmination of the Exodus, and therefore our commemoration of the Exodus on the first day of Pesach includes the Splitting of the Sea. That is why we read about it in the Haggadah. We weren’t really free of Egypt until the sea split and drowned our slavers. When we celebrate Pesach, we are celebrating the entire process of the Exodus, which was not complete until the sea fulfilled the condition of its Creation and revealed Hashem’s *yad hagedolah*.

1. **Upon seeing Jewish houses.** One who sees the houses of Israel *b’yeshuvan* (settled) should say the bracha “*matziv almanah*,” and one who sees the houses destroyed should say the bracha “*baruch dayan ha’emes*.” What does “*b’yeshuvan*” mean? Rashi says it means settled like the way we were settled during the Second Temple period. Therefore, most authorities hold that this bracha isn’t made on just any sighting of Jewish homes, but that it can only be said in Israel and only in a time that is equivalent to the Second Temple period - meaning, only after the Third Temple has been established. Not everyone agrees with Rashi, but we have a concept *safek brachos lehakel* - when we are unsure whether or not a bracha is required, we are lenient and do not make the bracha. Rav Chisda was once traveling with Ulla, and when he reached the home of Rav Chana bar Chanilai he started groaning. His groaning was so heart-wrenching that people said he might hurt himself, but he refused to be comforted. He described how great this household had been in the past: there were 60 bakers day and night who would make food for anybody who needed it, and Rabbi Chanilai always had his hand on his purse to give money to anybody who came. The doors were open on all four sides. It was a home of magnificent charity, where they made sure to provide for everyone in a way that was not embarrassing. Seeing the state that home was in now, Rav Chisda said, “how could I not cry?” Ulla tried to comfort Rav Chisda, telling him of what Rabbi Yochanan said: from the time the Beis Hamikdash was destroyed, there was a decree on the homes of the righteous that at some point they would also lay in ruins. In the future, G-d will restore those homes along with His Temple. But this wasn’t enough to calm Rav Chisda. So Ulla said: “It’s enough that a servant would be like his master.” He meant that the homes of the righteous are in exile, just like we are. No matter how righteous a person is, his physical home has a limit as long as G-d’s home is still not standing. Rabbi Yochanan’s teaching means that the longevity of our people and our homes can only be assured by the Redemption and the reconstruction of the Temple. This explains why Rashi says the bracha on a Jewish settlement cannot be said except in the time similar to the Second Temple period. However, a number of halachic authorities have recently begun to make this bracha upon seeing certain resettled Jewish areas in Israel. Perhaps because they see the vitality of Israel today as the beginning of the Redemption, or perhaps because Rashi only says it needs to be a time *like* the Second Temple period, meaning that having the Temple is not actually a requirement but that having a significant Jewish population living in Israel and not in exile is enough.
2. **Upon visiting a cemetery.** One who sees a cemetery should make the blessing, “Who has created you in judgment, and has provided for you in judgment, and has sustained you in judgment, and has gathered you in judgment, and will bring you up again in judgment.” Mar B’rei D’Ravina concluded the blessing, “and He knows your numbers and He will bring you back to life and establish you. Blessed is the One Who brings back the dead.” Today, one who hasn’t been to a cemetery in 30 days makes a bracha that combines these two. The Zohar says that at certain times of the month there is an energy called *din*. We often translate *din* as justice, but it actually means judgment. Judgment may not seem just, because human judgment can be unjust and because human perception is limited. Death doesn’t always seem just. Neither does life. A person born under a certain astrological sign might face greater challenges in life than other people. Is that justice? There are things about the way the world works that we simply cannot understand. In our human understanding, these things appear to be unjust. But there is a bigger picture that only G-d can see, and His judgment is truth. When visiting a cemetery, and seeing the graves of those whose deaths we cannot understand, we acknowledge that G-d’s Divine judgment is beyond human comprehension, as if to say we can’t begin to explain why things happen the way they do because we are unaware of so many things that only G-d knows about.
3. **Upon seeing friends.** When you see a friend you haven’t seen for 30 days, say the *shehecheyanu* bracha. When you see a friend you haven’t seen for 12 months, say the bracha “Who brings back the dead.” Most opinions say these blessings are not said for mere acquaintances, but only for true friends. Today, these blessings are generally unnecessary. In the time of the gemara, communication across long distances was not simple. People who lived far apart would not have much news of each other. So in those days, seeing someone after 30 days apart was truly exciting because it was a chance to find out what you’d missed in their life during that time. And reuniting with someone after 12 months apart was even more special, because for all you knew they really could have died during that time. Certainly that made seeing them alive an occasion for a bracha. Even in those days, if there had been communication between the friends during the 12 months they probably would not make the bracha upon seeing each other again. Today, it’s much easier to know how our friends are doing even if we don’t see them. Even if we don’t speak to them directly, we probably know what’s going on in their lives. In fact, if you go for a whole year not knowing whether someone is alive or dead, that person probably isn’t a very close friend. So today, these brachos are basically irrelevant. Does a situation like the COVID-19 pandemic change things? Some people didn’t leave their homes or see any of their friends for many months. It could be that under limited circumstances, if you see someone you haven’t seen for a long time because of the pandemic, and you genuinely weren’t sure if you ever would see them again, a bracha might be appropriate. However, most poskim have not seen the pandemic as reason enough to reinstitute this bracha.
4. **Upon seeing someone who looks different.** If you see someone who is a very different color - the Talmud specifies black or white, meaning either very, very dark or albino, and early halachic authorities also mention red - make the bracha “*meshane habrios*” - Who makes different types of creatures. Various codes of law specify certain categories of people over whom one would make this bracha, including people who are very tall or very short, and those who have other physical distinctions that are not often seen. The gemara also specifies two animals that are so different from others that they rate this bracha; the elephant and the monkey. But we typically don’t make this bracha today, either on people or on animals, because we are more used to physical differences today. We’ve seen people of all shapes and sizes. Elephants and monkeys, too, are not hard to see today. In the past, society was much less diverse. Seeing somebody who looked very different was actually rare, and while it may seem insensitive to us to make a big deal about someone who is different, the point of the bracha isn’t to say that the person is weird. It’s not about saying “ew,” but about saying “wow.” G-d created these people too, and there is room for each of them in this world.