Talmud Brachot Top Ten Teachings, Daf 59:

1. **Nothing new under the sun.** In order for the Flood to happen in the time of Noah, G-d had to displace some stars. After the Flood, G-d took two other stars to close that gap. Why wouldn’t He just create two new stars? Because, as Ecclesiastes 1:9 says, *ein kol chadash tachas hashemesh* - there is nothing new under the sun. G-d does not create new things. But that is a strange assertion. Of course G-d can create new things out of nothing. That is what He did during Creation. Why would we say that G-d does not create new things? Perhaps, as we learn from Rambam and the Ishbitzer Rebbe, because healthy belief isn’t based on miracles. Though we believe that G-d is capable of miracles, we shouldn’t need them to find Him. We should be able to find G-d within the realm of science. Nature itself is Divine, so by simply observing nature as it already exists we should be able to see G-d’s hand. So G-d *can* create new things, but He *doesn’t* because it is not necessary. Anything that G-d needs to do can be done with what He has already created. Even a great miracle like the Splitting of the Sea didn’t require new substances. G-d changed the way the sea flowed, but only by using elements that already existed in the world. In Jewish belief, we have defined parameters of what G-d does and does not do. He can create new things out of nothing, but He doesn’t. This teaches us an important lesson about how to approach the world. If G-d would create new things all the time, we would assume that we don’t have the ability to make the world work only with things that already exist. We would never make advances in science, medicine, technology, or *tikkun olam*. We wouldn’t bother trying to cure illness or end hunger, because we would think it couldn’t be done without a miracle. The idea that everything we need, and even in a sense everything G-d needs, is already here empowers us to work towards making our world better. But then why does G-d ever make miracles at all? Because the world occasionally needs a miracle, to remind people that they are not G-d but are created with a purpose. The miracles of the Exodus from Egypt signified that G-d created the world and remains in control. Usually that control is hidden from the average person, and it is up to us to realize that G-d is behind things. We must find the correct balance, taking responsibility for our actions and believing that we can improve this world, but having the humility to realize that we are not the greatest power in the universe.
2. **Supernatural explanations for natural disasters.** Rabbi Katina was passing by the home of a necromancer (one who uses bones to communicate with the dead) when an earthquake hit. Rabbi Katina asked, “Does the necromancer know how this earthquake happened?” The necromancer responded, “Katina, why shouldn’t I know? When the Holy One Blessed Be He remembers His children, who are in pain amongst the nations, two teardrops fall into the great sea, the sound is heard from one end of the world to the other, and that causes an earthquake.” Rabbi Katina mocked this answer, saying that if there were two tears there should have been two earthquakes. In fact there were two earthquakes, so Rabbi Katina’s criticism was not valid, but he did not want people to believe in the necromancer’s explanation because that might lead to people following the necromancer’s practices. So Rabbi Katina gave a different explanation for the earthquake: G-d was clapping His hands. Other rabbis have other explanations for earthquakes: Rabbi Nosson says G-d is sighing, the rabbis say He is kicking the sky, and Rav Acha Bar Yaakov says He’s pushing His feet under the Throne of Glory. Of course we cannot take these explanations literally, because G-d does not have a body and does not physically live in the sky. Rather, the explanations are meant to teach us lessons that we need to use to try to improve the world. But pointing the finger at G-d in this way can be dangerous, because it can make people feel hopeless. Why bother trying to build strong structures, if G-d can just destroy them anytime with an earthquake? The gemara in Tractate Megillah says that it is permitted to translate the section of the Torah with the *klalos* (curses). Why would we need to be told this - is there a reason to assume it wouldn’t be permitted? The Mei Hashiloach says we might think that understanding the *klalos* would cause people to become distraught and overwhelmed by the negativity. But while the *klalos* may cause us moments of despair and fear, they are meant to give us purpose. We are supposed to learn from these curses the need for self-reflection and self-improvement. So while some people will want to blame G-d for natural disasters and not take any personal responsibility, that is not the correct response. We are supposed to take these disasters as messages, to see that things are not as they should be and to make an effort to improve ourselves and our world.
3. **Thunder**. When we hear thunder we make the bracha: “Whose strength and power fill the world.” A number of *amoraim* discuss what causes thunder. The rabbis say that the noise comes from clouds pouring water into one another. In Likkutei Maharan part 2, 8.4, Rabbi Nachman of Breslov explains that dark rain clouds represent the other side, which in that state of darkness and sadness blocks meaningful prayer. But when the clouds start sharing water with each other, this represents the expansion of Divine knowledge, which causes a breakthrough, a large sound, the thunder of Divine awareness of the increasing of the glory of G-d. This increased awareness translates into an increase in conversions to Judaism and an increase in prophecy. Notice that Rabbi Nachman is not interested at all in a literal or scientific understanding of thunder. He understands the gemara purely as a beautiful metaphor for the light that comes out of darkness and the return of prophecy.
4. **The lesson of thunder.** Rabbi Alexandri says in the name of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi: Thunder was only created to straighten the crooked-hearted. The Mei Hashiloach explains that sometimes things cause us to feel fear and anxiety. Even the Ten Plagues in Egypt caused the Children of Israel emotional suffering. To learn important lessons and straighten out their hearts, they needed the thunder, the awe of the plagues. Yes, there can be scary moments in life. But we must take that fear and transform it into a focus on what is important and right and G-d-fearing. The goal is not to have anxiety, but to learn right from wrong and live life with a higher purpose. Rabbi Nachman of Breslov explains that thunder is a manifestation of the roar of powerful prayer. That is why at the Revelation at Mount Sinai we heard thunder and the sound of a shofar. When wisdom, which is likened to the moisture in the clouds, turns to sound, the result is thunder. The power of the chassidic teachings in this gemara moves us toward a deep understanding of our experiences in this world and opens the door for teshuva and *ma’asim tovim*.
5. **Rainbows**. A rabbi continued quoting Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi: when you see a rainbow in the clouds, you should fall on your face and bow, because the verse in Yechezkel (1:28) indicates that in his vision a rainbow appeared in the likeness of the Divine glory. In the west they cursed this practice, because it looks like you are bowing to the rainbow itself. However, everyone agrees that a blessing should be recited when a rainbow is spotted. The blessing begins, “Blessed are You…Who remembers the covenant.” Other rabbis added, “Who is faithful to His covenant and fulfills His word.” Today we combine all of this into one blessing. Other sections of the Talmud tell us not to look too closely at a rainbow and that the appearance of a rainbow is a sign that the generation is unworthy, because G-d needs the reminder of His promise not to destroy the world with another flood. The shape of a rainbow represents the power of a bow. It is the force of the bow that powers the movement of the arrow; this may be a metaphor for human desire, which drives people to be creative and to procreate. We may see signs of Divinity in the rainbow, but we must never confuse those hints with G-d. They are only a reminder of the covenant, an aspect of creativity that G-d imbued in the world. While art and the creative impulse are important, we do not worship human creativity. Rather, we approach it with humility and the recognition that the G-d is the Source of all creativity and art.
6. ***Oseh ma’aseh bereishis.*** The mishna tells us that when one sees mountains and hills he should make the blessing “*oseh ma’aseh bereishis”* – the Maker of the works of Creation. The gemara asks, are thunder and lightning not also made by the Creator of the world? But we did not mention this blessing for thunder and lightning. Abaye answers that we should actually make both blessings, “the Maker of the works of Creation” and “Whose strength and power fill the world.” Rava says that for thunder and lightning both blessings are appropriate, but for mountains and hills we should say only “the Maker of the works of Creation,” because mountains do not move but thunder is in different places. Perhaps the power that “fill[s] the world” represents surprises from Hashem that break the monotony of life. It is a reminder that although most of the time people live under their own fig trees, in their own specific places, there are also opportunities for amazement that take us out of our settled place and bring us to Hashem’s place of power and majesty.
7. **The blessing on the new sun.** When you see the sun at the beginning of its cycle, the moon in its strength, the planets in their orbits, and the zodiac in their order, make the blessing “*oseh ma’aseh bereishis*.” We know that the moon waxes and wanes every month, and when the moon is “new” we have Rosh Chodesh. But the sun doesn’t wax or wane. When is the beginning of the sun’s cycle? In the standard Talmudic text there is a quote from Abaye saying that every 28 years a new solar cycle starts, and that the Nissan equinox falls in the hour of Saturn on the evening of Tuesday. Every 28 years the sun is in the original place where it was created, whatever that means. In tractate Rosh Hashana, Rabbi Elazar and Rabbi Yehoshua debate whether the world was created in Nissan or Tishrei. The Rosh Hashana liturgy indicates that it was in Tishrei. So how could Nissan be the beginning of the sun’s cycle? There is another version of this gemara that only mentions seeing the sun in its strength and says nothing about a 28-year cycle. But maybe there is something to be learned from the debate about the timing of the Creation of the world. Maybe the potential for the world was created in Nissan but it actually came into being in Tishrei. This is still very difficult to understand, especially since time didn’t really exist before Creation. There are kabbalistic texts that enable us to reconcile the discrepancy between the scientific age of the universe and the Biblical account, based on some idea about worlds that preceded our world. Perhaps by bringing up the debate about the month of creation, the gemara is alluding to these complex ideas. See *Kabbalah and the Age of the Universe* by Aryeh Kaplan.
8. ***Shehecheyanu* and *hatov vehametiv*.** There are two blessings we can make when something good happens: *shehecheyanu* and *hatov vehametiv*. If a man dies and his only son inherits his fortune, the son makes a *shehecheyanu*. But if the inheritance is shared by two sons, they make a *hatov vehametiv*. *Hatov vehametiv* is used when the good thing that happens is shared with other people. When a baby boy is born, the parents make a *hatov vehametiv*. One who has a field should make a *hatov vehametiv* when it rains, because the rain is good for all fields and not just for his. The gemara asks, is it true that one who owns land should say a *hatov vehametiv* on rain, rather than a *shehecheyanu*? There’s a mishna that says *shehecheyanu* should be recited upon building a new home and buying new clothing, and also when rain falls. The gemara answers, if you work alone in the field you should make a *shehecheyanu*, but if you have a partner you should make a *hatov vehametiv*. The same applies to building a home; if you live alone you make a *shehecheyanu* and if you have a partner you make a *hatov vehametiv*. Shouldn’t everyone with a field make a *hatov vehametiv* on rain, because other field owners also benefit from the rain? No, it is only if an individual field is shared.

What exactly is the *shehecheyanu* blessing about? The rabbis originally suggested making a *shehecheyanu* upon seeing a new fruit for the first time, even if you are not eating the fruit. Perhaps it’s about having reached a time when the fruit is in season, or perhaps it’s about the excitement of knowing that this thing exists that you could benefit from, even if you’re not currently benefiting from it. You make the blessing as soon as you see the fruit, even if it’s not yours, because you know that it’s now in season and you know that you *can* have one yourself soon. Eventually the practice evolved, and now we only say *shehecheyanu* when we actually eat a new fruit. Most people today also do not make a *hatov vehametiv* or a *shehecheyanu* on babies, as the Rama notes.

1. ***Hatov vehametiv* on wine.** When you switch from one type of wine to another, while you’re sitting with good company, you make a *hatov vehametiv*. You do not need to make a new *hagefen*. You make the *hatov vehametiv* blessing only when the second wine is better than the first wine, though if you switch from red to white wine the white doesn’t have to be better than the red because it is considered healthier. Some say the second wine can’t have already been on the table when you started, but many *poskim* disagree. All agree that *hatov vehametiv* is not said by one drinking alone. It is only when one is drinking with others, which exponentially increases the joy, that one would make this blessing.
2. ***Shehecheyanu* on new clothes*.*** People think the *shehecheyanu* should be recited only when new clothes are worn for the first time, but actually you can make the blessing as soon as you buy the clothes. Of course, if you didn’t make the blessing when buying the clothes you can still make it when trying them on for the first time. Rav Huna asks, when do you make a *shehecheyanu* on new clothes? When you get a type of clothing you didn’t already have. If you already had the same type of clothes, you do not make a *shehecheyanu*. Rabbi Yochanan says you should make a *shehecheyanu* even if you already had that type of clothes.