

Shemini 5784 – Finding Hashem in a Solar Eclipse

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No berachah?

On July 29, 1878, astronomer Maria Mitchell described a solar eclipse. “As the last rays of sunlight disappeared, the corona burst out all around the sun, so intensely bright near the sun that the eye could scarcely bear it; extending less dazzlingly bright around the sun for the space of about half the sun’s diameter, and in some directions sending off streamers for millions of miles.¹”

On June 29, 1927, the writer Virginia Woolf observed a solar eclipse. “There was no colour. The earth was dead. That was the astonishing moment; and the next when as if a ball had rebounded the cloud took colour on itself again, only a sparkly ethereal colour and so the light came back. I had very strongly the feeling as the light went out of some vast obeisance; something kneeling down, and suddenly raised up when the colours came.²”

And on March 26, 1979, author Annie Dillard depicted an eclipse: “The sun was going, and the world was wrong. The grasses were wrong; they were now platinum. Their every detail of stem, head, and blade shone lightless and artificially distinct as an art photographer’s platinum print. This color has never been seen on earth... The hillside was a nineteenth-century tinted photograph from which the tints had faded. All the people you see in the photograph, distinct and detailed as their faces look, are now dead... I missed my own century, the people I knew, and the real light of day.³”

These descriptions are so moving. And yet, there is no berachah for witnessing a solar eclipse. Why not?

Siman Ra

Decades ago, Rav Chaim Dovid HaLevi, Chief Rabbi of Rishon l'Tzion and then Tel Aviv, responded to this question. He said we recite berachot when witnessing evidence of Hashem’s Creation – mountains, oceans, lightning – and not for an event which demonstrates Hashem’s reaction to our sins. He pointed to a gemara⁴ which identifies a solar eclipse as a demonstration of Hashem’s wrath at the sins of humanity, Hashem turning out the lights on us. So no berachah is warranted. It’s not part of Creation, of מעשה בראשית.⁵

Of course, we know that eclipses are in fact part of Hashem’s Creation, built into celestial mechanics. But as Rav Yaakov Ettlinger pointed out in the 19th century, Hashem uses natural events to send messages, like the rainbow after the Mabal.⁶ So that’s what Hashem is doing here, with the eclipse, sending a message of destruction and wrath.⁷ And so we recite no berachah for this emblem of Divine destruction.

Then What?

¹ <https://www.themarginalian.org/2013/11/01/solar-eclipse-maria-mitchell/>

² <https://www.themarginalian.org/2018/05/09/virginia-woolf-eclipse/>

³ <https://www.themarginalian.org/2017/08/01/annie-dillard-total-solar-eclipse/>

⁴ Succah 29a

⁵ Rabbi Asher Bush (in Shu”t Shoel b’Shlomo, and in an RCA email of Aug 14 ’17) asks that we do recite a berachah for great winds (even as Yerushalmi Berachot 9:2 says we daven against high winds as dangerous), even though they are destructive (Berachot 54a) and we have a berachah for bad news (ibid.). He does not resolve these problems. I think the answer may be that those events are destructive, but they are still part of מעשה בראשית.

⁶ See Ramban to Bereishit 9:12. And see Rabbi Asher Bush on this.

⁷ It is also possible to argue, like Maharal, Beer haGolah, Beer 6:1 – Every natural event has a spiritual cause behind it. Alternatively, one could embrace a form of astrology. Just as Hashem embedded into our world invisible forces like gravity and ultraviolet light, which act on us in ways we cannot detect without special equipment, so Hashem empowered the Sun, Moon and stars to act upon our lives in ways that defy simple understanding. Like Shabbat 156a on being born under a particular sign, or Esther Rabbah 7:11 re the significance of the zodiac signs of each month. We are warned not to calculate propitious times for particular activities, but various authorities have written that there is legitimacy to such calculations, we just forbid them as a matter of halachah.

This idea, that Hashem picks natural events and identifies them as times for a particular Divine activity, is found in a range of contexts. When Hashem demonstrates mercy in deciding not to punish the Jews fully after the Eigel, Moshe decides that this is an עת רצון, a time when Hashem is merciful in general. (Rashi to Shemot 33:18. And see Yeshayahu 49:8 and Tehillim 69:14. And especially see Yevamot 72a מילתא היא עת רצון מילתא היא. And Birkei Yosef to Orach Chaim 1:6-7 on propitious times for davening.) When there is a drought in the days of Rav Yosef, he says that it’s a time of ריתקה, of Divine wrath, when prayer will not be effective. (Ketuvot 106a)

But if there is no berachah, is an eclipse a rare zone of exclusion in which Judaism does not belong, in which we cease appreciating the Divine and expressing our emotion in religious terms? Can there be such a vacuum, in which Hashem does not belong?

I'd suggest just the opposite – a newfound silence helps us appreciate the sound that was there before. When the sun's light disappears, we should notice the lack of a berachah, and as a result recognize the range of ways in which we routinely recite berachot to Hashem based on the sun's light:

- When we have enough light for basic visibility in the morning we recite berachot on tallit and tefillin
- As the sun scales the eastern horizon we recite Shema and its berachot, followed by shemoneh esreih
- The sun crosses the midpoint of the sky, and we daven minchah; it dips to the western horizon and we daven maariv
- On Friday afternoon, the sun defines when we light Shabbat candles and start Shabbat; some 25 hours later the sun defines the moment of havdalah.
- We have berachot of gratitude for sunlight as well. According to Rav Huna,⁸ we should have said such a berachah this past week; he said to recite the berachah of עושה מעשה בראשית when the sun emerges after three days of rain. And of course we have *birkat hachamah* every 28 years, on the renewal of a celestial cycle.

Rav Soloveitchik made this point in one of his most famous poetic passages. Just a brief excerpt:⁹ “When halakhic man looks to the western horizon and sees the fading rays of the setting sun, or to the eastern horizon and sees the first light of dawn and the glowing rays of the rising sun, he knows that this sunset or sunrise imposes upon him anew obligations and commandments.”

So in an eclipse, when we don't recite a berachah, we can experience a profound religious moment, a pause in our verbalization that enables us to pay attention, to reflect on how much our religious lives revolve around the sun. And maybe, that's a second reason why there is no berachah on a solar eclipse. We mark the necessity of the sun for our religious lives by suspending those lives until it returns.

The Light Remains

I've offered two reasons not to recite a berachah: that the eclipse is a sign of Divine wrath rather than representing Creation, or that the eclipse represents the absence of the mitzvot that come with the sun's light. But I'd like to suggest one more, very important reason, based on a thought of Rav Yehonatan Eibenschutz.¹⁰

Rav Eibenschutz argued that when Chazal talked about the sun's darkening as a bad sign, they were talking about sunspots, and not eclipses. He wrote, “If someone would put a barrier in front of a candle, so that its light didn't shine, would that be a dimming of the candle? The candle is still shining normally!” Even during the dramatic darkness and platinum colorlessness described by Maria Mitchell, Virginia Woolf, and Annie Dillard, the sun's light was shining. There is no berachah to make, because the light is still there; we just aren't seeing it.

I find that a vital perspective, six months into this terrible war, six months into the captivity of the hostages. We've been living through a terrible eclipse, an extended global darkness. As Virginia Woolf said, “There was no color. The earth was dead.” But Rav Yehonatan Eibenschutz was right – the light has gone nowhere. It's behind a barrier, it's hard to perceive, but it's still there. Ours is to find it, to fan its flames and to reflect its brilliance, to appreciate those glowing rays of the rising sun – and then we will truly be able to recite a berachah.

⁸ Yerushalmi Berachot 9:2

⁹ *Halakhic Man*, pp. 19-21, Kaplan tr.

¹⁰ Ya'arot Dvash II (pg קמח of <https://hebrewbooks.org/14493>), and brought by Rav Yosef Engel in Gilyonei haShas to Succah 29a (pg קלב of זרעים-מועד <https://hebrewbooks.org/14059>)