

## What Blessing Should I Recite for an Eclipse?

The Lessons of Power and Might

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Tomorrow is April 7, which marks 6-months since the Hamas attacks of October 7 ... six months that hostages have been held in captivity ... six months since Israel declared war on Hamas. I hope you will join me in attending the community rally tomorrow at 2:30 pm at the Washington Monument because we must do everything we can to bring them home now. But today I want to talk about the day after. ...

April 8. The day of the solar eclipse. Which has people asking the truly pressing question: *What is the proper blessing upon witnessing a solar eclipse?* It is surprisingly complicated, as my colleague Josh Heller wrote in a *teshuvah* in 2017, the last time we witnessed a solar eclipse in this area. In Judaism, there is a blessing for everything ... but not for a solar eclipse. And that's a problem because Jewish law does not permit using the formula "*barukh atah Adonai eloheinu melekh ha-olam*" to write new blessings – as many see that as a violation of the commandment against taking God's name in vain.

But what about the "old blessings"? Why is there no blessing for witnessing an eclipse? It may be, says Rabbi Heller, that we don't bless an eclipse because the ancients didn't think an eclipse was worthy of blessing. The Talmud suggests an eclipse is "סימן רע", a bad omen for the entire world, which can be compared to a human king who prepared a feast for his servants, placed a lantern to illuminate the hall and then, out of anger, took the lantern away and sent the revelers home in darkness." There is some discussion about who, exactly, is on the receiving end of the bad tidings; maybe a solar eclipse, when the lesser light blocks out the greater light, is a bad omen for the *other* nations. But it is a bad omen, nonetheless.

Of course, we don't generally view nature through that lens. We see the eclipse as a natural phenomenon – the aligning of orbital paths. And even if we were to categorize the phenomenon as a bad omen, there is another talmudic principle that we must bless the bad just as we bless all that is good. So we are back to the question: what blessing should we recite upon witnessing the eclipse?

Rabbi Heller offers two suggestions. The blessing for shooting stars, earthquakes, lightning, thunder, and powerful winds: "*Barukh ... she-kocho ug'vurato ma-le olam*, Praised is God whose power and might fill the universe." Or the blessing upon encountering nature's beautiful sites – mountains, hills, oceans, mighty rivers, vast deserts: "*Barukh ... oseh ma'aseh b'reishit*, Praised is God who authors the works of creation."

Both are legitimate, Rabbi Heller writes, but he favors the first one. And I agree with him – not only because he's much smarter than I, and I know better than to disagree with such a scholar.

But also because I like the idea that the eclipse is an opportunity to grapple with God's might. The other blessing just says "wow! That's cool!" But think about the eclipse as the ancients would have encountered it. There are two great lights, the sun and the moon and, unquestionably, the sun is the mightier one. The ancient rabbis likened the Jewish people to the moon, the "lesser light," because we are small but mighty and entitled to our place in the sky, our place among the nations.

Now, what happens in an eclipse? For a split second, it appears as though the lesser light overcomes the greater light. It is unnatural. And it is fleeting. It will not last. The sun is far mightier, and approximately four minutes after the sun disappears, it will be back with as much power and might and radiance as before. Even during the eclipse, when the mighty light appears docile, we know not to look directly because that sun is still powerful.

Praised is God, *shekocho ug'vurato ma-le olam*, whose power and might fill the universe. Human beings are powerful. We are smart. We've figured out a lot of things. But we must still humble ourselves before the unknown, vast, powerful universe that lies beyond our comprehension and control.

That's my takeaway from the story of the deaths of Nadav and Avihu, Aaron's sons who are zapped by a mysterious, powerful bolt of fire when they offer *esh zarah*, a "strange fire." There are no good answers for why Nadav and Avihu were killed. (Or, more precisely, there are hundreds of answers, which just means we really don't know.) The whole thing is shrouded in mystery.

Which means I can't be too definitive in my interpretation, either. But *this year*, I read that story through the lens of my commentary on the eclipse. We have two examples of heavenly fire on the day of the tabernacle's dedication. The first is when Moses and Aaron did everything right. They brought the offerings "*ka-mishpat*, according to regulation." They lifted their hands and blessed the people. "*Va-tetze esh mi-lifnei Adonai*, And fire came forth from before the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the fat parts on the altar."

And then we have Nadav and Avihu. They go into the sanctuary without invitation or authorization. They think the ritual is simple. They take a little flour from here, some oil from there, mix it together. ... They do not appreciate the gravity of what they are doing. They misjudge the powerful forces surrounding the holy space. "*Va-tetze esh milifnei Adonai*, And a fire came forth from before the Lord" – it's the same words as before, except this time, "*va-tokhal otam*, it consumed *them*; and they died at the instance of the Lord."

Where did they go wrong? Nadav and Avihu are *lesser lights*. They have power; they are ordained. They have access. They get caught up in the excitement of the holy day. And in that moment, they think they are more powerful than they really are. They think they can do it; and, tragically, they learn that they can't. They are *lesser lights*; and the *Greater Light*, is not on vacation. Through unspeakable tragedy, we discover just how true are the words of that blessing: *she-kocho ug'vurato ma-le olam*, God's power and might fill the universe ... and, most particularly, the sacred sanctuary.

I'll be thinking about that when I encounter the solar eclipse on Monday. There are two *great lights*; and even when it feels like one light is eclipsing the other, we know that the world will still have – and still need – two great lights. There are two political parties in this country. And even if

people dream that one party is going to overtake the other; even when it feels like one party, one ideology, has dealt a final death blow, we always find that the other party rises again. The country has two great parties; it needs two great parties; and it is a fool's errand to try to force one party to overtake the other. The powers all around are very strong.

The principle of "two powers" extends to other realms as well. It became painfully clear this week that even with all its military might, Israel cannot prosecute this war on its own, "us against the world." Israel deserves to exercise its sovereignty. Israel must lift the security and welfare needs of its citizens above all other global concerns. And at the same time, Israel cannot discount the importance of the other powers that fill the world. Israel needs the United States. Israel needs the American Jewish community – Orthodox *and* non-Orthodox, Republican *and* Democrat. And the Jewish community needs Israel – our safety and security and prosperity as a people are directly linked to the existence and stability of Israel. We need the Palestinians, too. There are two peoples living on our holy land.

There are moments when it feels like one power has the upper hand, where one community voice may eclipse the other, where the other great power doesn't matter as much. But those moments are fleeting and our failure to recognize and appreciate that can be dangerous ... on all sides.

I won't be traveling to Cairo, Illinois, on Monday to get the best eclipse experience. I will be cleaning my kitchen to prepare for Passover and, hopefully, thinking about our redemption from the other Cairo. But I have my special glasses and I will surely take time to marvel at the partial eclipse from my back yard. I will pray that the eclipse might become a good omen for the Jewish people. And I will pray every day until and throughout Passover for *besorot tovot*, the tidings of our future Redemption, our redemption from war and from history. And until that great Redemption arrives, I will do my best to appreciate, to respect, to revere the powers – and the Power – that fills our world. *Barukh Atah*, Praised are You ... whose power and might fills the universe. Shabbat shalom.