

A STUDY GUIDE TO
מסכת החמה
MASSEKHET HA-HAMMAH

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PREFACE

Birkat Ha-Hammah, “the blessing of the sun,” is a celebration that marks the return of the sun to its original place in the heavens at the precise time and day of its creation. The opportunity to participate in this celebration occurs once every 28 years (and occurs in 2009 on April 8, the eve of Passover). Massekhet Ha-Hammah, “the Tractate on the Sun” gathers and interprets primary sources about Birkat Ha-Hammah and the significance ascribed to the sun in classic and contemporary Jewish sources. This study guide was written to facilitate individual and group study of the tractate’s nine chapters. It is our hope that the tractate will inspire reflection on the meaning of the sun both as spiritual symbol and in the context of environmental sustainability.

INTRODUCTION

The intention of the opening section is to explain the relationship between the Fast of the Firstborn, which takes place on the day of the eve of Passover, and the *siyyum*, a celebration of the completion of an entire body of traditional learning.

While there is a powerful connection between Passover and the Blessing of the Sun, there is no need to study Massekhet Ha-Hammah specifically for the *siyyum*. Therefore, it is worthwhile to think about and share with your study partner(s) what you hope to gain from participating in this process and what specifically drew you to study this tractate.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION/FRAME:

According to the Hebrew Bible, the sun was created on the fourth day. “And God made the two great lights: the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night; and the stars. And God set them in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth, and to rule over the day and over the night, and to divide the light from the darkness; and God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, a fourth day.” (Genesis 1:16-19)

Rabbinic tradition adds that creation occurred during the Hebrew month of Nissan, the time of the year when the days become longer. It is taught that the sun was created Tuesday night, the fourth of Nissan. Birkat Ha-Hammah occurs on the day that the vernal equinox coincides with the fourth of Nissan, which is once every 28 years. Due to only slight overestimations of the solar and lunar years, in combination with the establishment of the Gregorian calendar, these two days rarely actually coincide. However, the Rabbis’ prediction is always close. For example, this year, the vernal equinox is March 20 and the fourth of Nissan is March 29.

The connection between Passover this year and Birkat Ha-Hammah is even more astounding. In 2009, Birkat Ha-Hammah will be April 8, which means that it overlaps with the eve of Passover and the Fast of the First Born. Given that this coincidence is extremely rare, it is truly a once in a lifetime opportunity to learn this tractate for the *siyyum* of the Fast of the First Born. In addition, Birkat Ha-Hammah is based solely upon the solar calendar while Passover is based more on the lunar calendar. In this way, the joining of these two events constitutes a uniting of the “two great lights,” which are normally separate from one another.

The texts in Chapter One begin with the foundation for Birkat Ha-Hammah, then moves to what the blessing entails, and concludes with a discussion of whether one can say Birkat Ha-Hammah if it is cloudy and the sun cannot properly be seen.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

Section One

According to Hasidic tradition, the faithful one sees that every day is a new creation, that all the worlds are new, that we ourselves have just been born (cf. *Your Word is Fire*, Art Green. p. 28). Given that Birkat Ha-Hammah marks the return of the sun to its original place in the heavens at the precise time and day of its creation, this is an opportunity to see the world, and ourselves, as created again.

- What does it mean to see the world as a new place with new opportunities?
- How can acknowledging the various cycles of the earth bring new awareness for the environment?
- The fourth of Nissan and Birkat Ha-Hammah do not fall on exactly the same day. What does it mean for systems to not work exactly how we may want? How can we balance the symbolic and the practical?

Section Two

Text 2D states that the community no longer practices blessing the moon in its power, the stars in their paths, and the planets in their order. Traditionally, this is because we no longer have the skills to know when these cycles reset.

- What does it mean to be distanced from understanding how and when these cycles occur?
- Why do you think Birkat Ha-Hammah remained?
- How does our relationship with the sun differ from the other heavenly bodies?

Section Three

Texts 3c and 3d state that one may not be able to bless the sun if it is not visible through the clouds.

- What does it mean for a circumstance to not be perfect? What is good enough? For example, hybrid cars may not be the perfect solution to the energy crises, but are they good enough?
- Is it more important to participate in the blessing, even if it is cloudy, since it only occurs once every 28 years, or should you only do it if the environmental conditions are ripe? What does it mean for nature to let us down, Hurricane Katrina for example, and how does that affect our relationship to the environment?

CHAPTER TWO

INTRODUCTION/FRAME:

You will notice a pattern beginning with Chapter Two where each chapter goes back and forth between discussing heaven and earth. This duality continues throughout the remainder of the tractate. Chapter Two initiates the discussion of the heavenly realm by teaching about the moment of creation. The tractate begins in the heavenly realm since if Birkat Ha-Hammah marks the sun’s return to the moment of creation, then we need to first focus our attention to where it all began. Chapter Three then returns to the earthly realm with its discussion of humanity and those who are

righteous and those who are wicked. As the reader continues through the tractate it is this tension between heaven and earth which is meant to entice the reader to contemplate the appropriate relationship between humankind and the heavens. For example, where is the line between admiration and idolatry of the environment?

Chapter Two begins with the verses from the Torah which describe the actual moment of the creation of the sun and the moon. The two texts which follow it are from Genesis Rabbah, a midrash edited in the Land of Israel around 400 C.E. containing non-legal Rabbinic commentary to Genesis. These texts encourage us to consider the role of the sun in the environment and our relationship to it.

Source number two is another midrash which is based upon the use of a single verb, *natan*, meaning “gave.” It claims that God gave three gifts to the world which include the Torah, the Lights, and the Rains. Here we go back to the actual moment of creation and focus on God’s intention for how the world will function.

Source number three is a parable about humility exemplified by the moon. It discusses rewarding a person (or object) who says that s/he is willing to do the work which needs to be done.

Source number four closes the chapter on an emotional note. While the first three sources are more technical, the psalm is poetic. The move is influenced by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik’s book, *Lonely Man of Faith*. The basic premise of his claim is that there are two types of human experience. The first experience is acting as a technical being whose job is to surrender himself to the work of God and the second experience is acting as an expressive being who questions the existential, emotional, and spiritual state of people. Just as in this parable, Chapter Two has moved the reader from the technical to the evocative.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

Section One

Texts 1b and 1c comment upon the verses from Genesis.

- What is the main point given and difference between the statements of Rabbi Yochanan and Rabbi Berachyah?
- According to the *midrashim*, God created the sun to give light and to make a distinction between night and day. The invention of fire and electric lighting changes this initial relationship with the sun. How can we still connect with the cycles of the days and seasons given that we have ways of circumventing their effects? How does Jewish tradition help in this matter?

Section Two

This text plays with three verses using the verb *natan* to prove that God gave the earth the three gifts, Torah, rain, and the lights.

- How does this word play function?
- If the Torah is an instructional guide for living and rain provides for the physical needs in life (such as water and food), then what could be the function of the sun?

Section Three

This text is a parable.

- Who is the King, who are the two administrators, and who are the troops and senate in this parable?
- Why is it that the stars are seen at night with the moon, rather than at daytime with the sun? What does this say about the “personality” of the sun and the moon?
- If this parable teaches how we can learn about humility from paying attention to nature. What other lessons can the environment teach us?

Section Four

This text claims that the heavens declare the glory of God.

- How do you see nature as a metaphor for God's magnificence?
- How do you understand the relationship between God and nature?

CHAPTER THREE

INTRODUCTION/FRAME:

Chapter Three is entitled the righteous and the wicked because the texts within it use the sun and the moon as metaphors for righteousness. Here, we are brought back to the earthly realm as we are encouraged to think about the definition of righteousness in our relationship to each other as well as in relationship to how we treat the natural environment.

As you read through the chapter, you will experience a balance of questions between the figurative, such as how can the sun act as a metaphor for righteousness, and the literal, such as how is it that we can manipulate the sun today through technology. In addition, a basic principle of environmental awareness is that all things are interdependent. That is, all of the parts within an ecosystem are interlocked, each with its own role and each with its affect on the other. This chapter suggests that the same can be applied to the relationship between night and day and to the relationship between the righteous and the wicked. As you go read each text, ask yourself how the parts of the text are connected to one another, how the characters and symbols affect each other, and where the lines can get blurred so that such distinctions as righteous and wicked are no longer made.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

Section One

The chapter opens with a Psalm which compares God to a sun and a shield. The Roman philosopher Plotinus (204-270 C.E.) taught that the world was created by "emanations" from a perfect and unchangeable "One." He described these emanations by analogy to the way in which light and heat make their way from the sun to the earth. Here too, the Psalmist claims that the sun serves as a metaphor for the Divine. Although we are not able to see the emanations that Plotinus described, we are able to feel their heat and light. While we may not be able to see God, we may be able to feel God's presence.

- What is the difference between the two images of sun and shield? How do they help you understand God's relationship with people?
- What other objects in nature can be used as a metaphor for the divine? Why do you think the sun was used specifically instead of another natural entity?

Section Two

This source acknowledges a textual difficulty in the fact that Genesis 1:16 and 1:18 appear to be repetitious. There is a Rabbinic principle that there are no extraneous words in the Torah. Therefore, the midrash in Genesis Rabbah explains the purpose of the statement in Genesis 1:18. It claims that it is necessary to teach that the righteous have power over the day and the night, or the sun and the moon. Joshua, an example of righteousness, serves as proof given that he was able to manipulate the sun and the moon in order to help the Israelites achieve a military victory.

- According to the story, it was Joshua who made the sun stand still and not God. Can this be seen as a metaphor for the power that we have to control the sun today? For example, climate change is not about the actions of the sun itself but how the sun's energy impacts earth and interacts with our systems. While we may not be able to force the sun to stand still in the sky, we can harness sustainable clean energy as a way of ensuring the sun's

protection, just as it protected us in the time of Joshua.

- If you do not believe that Joshua was able to perform this miracle, what do you do with the story? Is there still a role for miracles in protecting the environment or is there perhaps a danger in hoping for this?

The proof text at the end of the midrash, “let me die the death of the righteous” is a quote from the Biblical character Bilam, who is considered wicked for seeking to curse Israel. Therefore, Bilam’s request to die righteous suggests an interdependence between the good and evil, as righteousness can exist even within a wicked person.

- What does this say about the opportunity for people to do *teshuvah*, or self-repair?
- As climate change worsens is there a line where *teshuvah* may no longer exist? For example, there are now about 22,000 polar bears in the wild. The most recent projections have the bear population plummeting by two-thirds by 2050 as global warming forces the ice to continue to retreat. By the end of the century, there may only be remnant populations left in Greenland and Canada’s most northern Arctic islands, which might be the only places cold enough to sustain the bears.¹ Does the ability to do *teshuvah* remain if the population does decline by two-thirds by 2050? What if they become extinct altogether?
- How do we understand true wickedness such as what people are experiencing in the current situation in Darfur?

Section Three

This source is an excerpt from the Zohar, which first appeared in thirteenth century Spain, as a mystical commentary on the Torah, written in medieval Aramaic. It references verses 5-7 found in Psalm 19, which concluded Chapter Two. It begins with a traditional *petihṭa*, or opening, which in this case is a verse from Numbers. The main point of the *petihṭa* is not elucidated until the end of the midrash. The Zohar is a difficult text and it is therefore important to read it emotionally rather than intellectually.

- How is the Zohar drawing a parallel between the sun and the Torah?

The Zohar imagines the natural world as engaged in a beautiful dance. For example, the masculine Sun emerges in the East and moves toward union in the West, the home of *Shekhinah*, or the feminine manifestation of God. Along the way, the Sun unites North, symbolized by *Din*, or Judgment, with its counterpart South, symbolized by *Hesed*, or Mercy. It thus fulfills its role as *Tiferet*, Splendor, the perfect balance of Judgment and Mercy.

- The Zohar provides an image where the world is in harmony with itself. What does world harmony look like and feel like to you? What can we do to ensure this harmony and how do we take it off balance?

Section Four

This text compares the sun to the righteous.

- What does it mean that the righteous are like the sun?
- “No *tzaddik* departs until an equal *tzaddik* is born” implies that righteousness always exists on the earth. How can this principle encourage us at the times when we feel pessimistic?

1. <http://www.vancouver.sun.com/news/Polar+bears+face+uncertain+future+Arctic/1120467/story.html>

Section Five

Here, the prophet, Malakhi, foresees an imminent “great and terrible day of the LORD that will set the wicked ablaze.” We can understand Rabbi Yehudah bar Ilai’s midrash as a perspective on climate change: the fire that will eventually consume the guilty ones “emerges from the bodies of the wicked.” In other words, with climate change and all other forms of environmental degradation, our actions sow the seeds of our own destruction.

- How do you theologically understand that in the case of the environmental degradation there is no distinction between the effects on the righteous and the wicked?

Section Six

This text states God “broke the sea in pieces... cleaved fountain and brook [and] dried up ever-flowing rivers.” At the end of the violence and struggle, however, God “established luminary and sun.” In this case, conflict leads to positive growth.

- Is it possible that occurrences such as rising energy costs and the negative effects of pollution will provide powerful enough incentives to develop alternatives to existing energy sources?
- If so, how does this influence the chapter’s theme of the blurring lines between good and evil? Is there such a thing as absolute righteousness or wickedness?

CHAPTER FOUR

INTRODUCTION/FRAME:

The texts in Chapter Four take some conventional ways of how we understand the world, and turn them on their heads. For example, one may typically believe that we depend upon the sun and the moon for various needs such as light, cycles of day and night, and heat. The chapter does open with the image of the plague of darkness, which encourages us to question what it would mean for us to be without the light of the sun and the moon. However, text 1b then reverses the concept and asks how our actions impact the planetary constellations instead of how they impact us. One of the arguments goes so far as to suggest that everything in the universe is created for our sake and, without humankind, would cease to exist.

In section two, the theme transitions from a more passive relationship between people and the constellations to a more dominant one. First is the story of Joshua, who asserts his dominance and power over the sun. Next, is the story of Jacob, the dominant figure of the people Israel, whose relationship to the people is compared to the sun.

In the Kabbalistic imagination the sun is considered a masculine being, whose traits are power and conquest, and the moon is considered a feminine being, whose traits are harmony and balance. While it is difficult to project symbols from the thirteenth century back onto the Rabbis, it is reasonable to imagine that these concepts could have applied in the Rabbinic mind.

In this light, the final texts in this chapter are surprising, as Jacob is typically compared to the moon and his brother, Esau, to the sun. The texts reverse these images. There are several options for why the Rabbis make this suggestion. One possibility is that the midrash attempts to concretize the story in the Torah where Joseph dreams about the sun, moon, and eleven stars bowing down to him. Jacob, in this metaphor, is usually conceived to be the sun. Another, more radical, possibility is that the Rabbis are making a statement that Jacob, who is a man of many flaws in the Biblical text, is not necessarily any better than his brother Esau. Further more, the sun and the moon are symbols of predictable cycles of behavior and, in contrast, humans are not as predictable. It is possible that the Rabbis are making the statement that although we typically understand Jacob as passive and Esau as violent, there is always a blurring of these lines and we cannot place the brothers into their individual boxes.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

Section One

Texts 1a and 1b are connected in the fact that in the story of the plagues and in the story of the flood, humans are punished through natural means. Text 1a recounts the plague of darkness the Egyptians received for not letting the Jews free from slavery. Text 1b asks questions about the flood in the story of Noah, when the world was destroyed for its wickedness.

- Why would the text want to use nature as a means for punishment?
- How is darkness a plague? How can thinking about it help us to appreciate the natural cycles of day and night?

The debate in text 1b is about whether human actions, and ultimately human survival, matter to the larger universe. If the constellations continued their path during the Great Flood than we are unable to influence the larger universe. Conversely, if they did not continue in their normal way then our existence becomes essential to how the universe functions.

In their conversation, Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehushua debate the meaning of the words, “as long as the earth remains.” For them, it is unclear if this verse refers to the beginning of time or from the point in time of the flood and onward. If the verse refers to the beginning of time, then the universe is a separate entity which is unaffected by our earthly actions.

- Do you agree with Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yonatan that humans do not matter to the larger world in that no matter how much we mess up this planet, we have no ability to influence the stars and planets that lie beyond?
- Do you agree with Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Yohanan that if we destroy ourselves then the remainder of the universe is of no use to God?

Section Two

Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai explains that Joshua’s control over the sun depends upon his commitment to the Torah and its values. In essence, Joshua earns his power over the sun. On the other hand, Rabbi Yitzhak offers a different perspective. Joshua’s “father” in this passage is Joseph, who saw the sun, moon, and stars bow to him in a dream; Joshua asserts hereditary power of a master over a servant.

- Do you see your commitment to Torah and its values as having an effect on your relationship with the natural environment? How?
- What does it mean to earn one’s position in the world versus having it handed to you? If the end result is the same, does the method of achievement matter?
- What is the danger and benefit of the potential for humans to have dominance over the sun?

Section Three

Text 3b identifies Jacob, the figurehead of the Jewish people, with the sun. This represents a variant tradition within Rabbinic literature. The dominant tradition identifies the Jewish people with the moon.

- What do you think was the Rabbis’ goal in comparing Jacob to the sun?
- In what ways do you think people are predictable and in what ways do you find them surprising?
- What does it mean for personality traits to be fluid?

CHAPTER FIVE

INTRODUCTION/FRAME:

In modern times, science and religion have been seen at odds with one another. In an article entitled “God vs. Science,” in *Time Magazine*, the suggestion was made that there are two great debates under the broad heading of Science vs. God. The more familiar debate is can Darwinian evolution withstand the criticisms of religious traditionalists who believe that it contradicts the creation account in the Book of Genesis? The second question was can religion stand up to the progress of science?² The belief that the advancement of one has a negative effect on the other does not necessarily have to be the presupposition of the relationship between science and religion.

Chapter Five is about the dynamic relationship between the awe inspiring aspect of creation and the scientific mind which encourages us to inquire into how it functions. In Jewish tradition, both wonder and knowledge are valued. For example, there is a blessing that is said after one uses the restroom which thanks God for the orifices that we have been given. This blessing makes the statement that we have some understanding of how our body operates but, at the same time, this does not affect our awe of it.

Section three adds to the discussion through suggesting that we lack in our awareness of the earth’s events given that there are happenings which either get pushed out of our consciousness or that hide other things. For example, the nighttime blocks out the sun and the daytime blocks out the moon. This forces us to question what it is that we actually see and what we are possibly missing. Conversely, it would be impossible to pay such detailed attention to everything that happens within our lives. Therefore, it is also important to question how you decide what you pay attention to and what you do not.

Sections four and five question human nature. Underlying the texts is the debate over whether nature or nurture is preeminent. In essence, the debate over science and religion continues through the question of whether genetics or environment plays a stronger role in one’s life.

Just as questions are the foundation for science and religion, the chapter concludes with one of the biggest questions for both – what does it mean that there are things we still do not know or understand?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

Section One

Source number one is a midrash on the verse from Genesis: “And He (God) brought him (Abraham) forth abroad, and said: Look now toward heaven, and count the stars, if thou be able to count them; and He (God) said unto him (Abraham): so shall thy seed be.” The debate in the midrash is whether God literally took Abraham outside to look at the skies above or outside of the natural world to look at the earth down below.

- The last opinion is that God took Abraham outside to look at the skies above. What do you think was the impact that looking out at the heavens had on Abraham?
- How often do you get to observe the constellations and planetary cycles? What do you think about as you look upon them?

Section Two

These texts attempt to “scientifically” identify where the boundaries exist for the heavenly constellations. These texts are in contrast to the first source, which focuses on the emotional experience that comes from looking at the stars. Here we are faced with the dilemma of how to search for intellectual knowledge while also maintaining awe and

2. <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1555132,00.html>

amazement. At the same time, the impulse to acquire scientific knowledge can be considered an expression of wonder. Meaning, spiritual amazement and the drive to classify everything are possibly two different expressions of the same psycho-spiritual state.

- For you, how does your understanding the science behind the natural world enhance or detract from your experience of it?
- How do you understand the dynamic between science and religion?

Section Three

Modern science is able to detect the presence of sound waves within the sun's atmosphere, yet we are unable to hear them. The Rabbis believed that the sound of the sun was blocked by "the hubbub" of Rome, or the distractions of urban life. Therefore, this section encourages us to see and hear past the noises of the cities and towns in which we live.

- There is a lot of "noise" in our lives which prevents us from truly experiencing. Television, the internet, and talking, are all ways in which we distract ourselves from paying attention to the world around us. What are some things that you can do to take a moment to listen? What, if any, experiences do you think your lifestyle blocks out that you would like to feel?
- For what types of things do you focus more attention on the experience itself? Work? Being in nature? Prayer? Spending time with friends?

Section Four

The texts in this section focus on the "true nature" of people. The first claims that Esau represents the sun and Jacob represents the moon. In the Rabbinic mind, Jacob and Esau come to signify two ways of being in the world: Esau, "a cunning hunter, a man of the field" (Genesis 25:27), rules through conquest and subjugation. The classical rabbis compared Esau to Rome, while their medieval successors identified Esau with Christianity. Jacob, "a quiet man, dwelling in tents" (*ibid.*), shies away from Esau's forceful actions. Rav Nahman draws an analogy to the Sun and Moon: the Sun, Esau, is the powerful light that pushes aside the Moon, Jacob, but the time is coming when Jacob's true nature will shine and be recognized.

In the second text, the nature of Moses' leadership does not allow him to enter the land with the people. Since the Israelites are moving from slavery to autonomy, it would be a more difficult transition for them to keep the leader that they have been relying upon so heavily. Inherent in this idea is the fact that Moses will be unable to change with the times.

- What is a "true nature?" Does this exist? Are there inherent things about people that are unable to change?
- How do you understand the nature versus nurture dynamic? If the twins, Jacob and Esau, were raised in the same parental environment how did they come to be such different people?

Section Five

All three rabbis imagine that the heavenly vault would be a place of potential conflict were it not for God's intervention. The planets' egos mirror human egos, each insisting on going first instead of working together toward a common goal. Therefore, the text suggests that conflict is a natural state of being. It is God who must intervene in order for peace to occur.

- What does it mean for disharmony to be the natural state?
- Do you see ego as a stumbling block for working towards a common goal in your own community? How?
- Common pool resources, such as fish or the atmosphere, are difficult to protect given that if you do not harvest them then someone else will. Therefore, individual incentive to conserve them is removed. At the same time, increasing temperatures threaten the water supply and over harvesting is leading to declining fish populations,

such as Chilean sea bass. All of these things raise the potential for conflict over natural resources in the world. Is there a way that we can act more like God, who makes peace in high places, in this regard?

Section Six

These texts attempt to delineate what is twilight. This issue is the focus of much attention and anxiety in Jewish law: neither day nor night marks a boundary area where the ordinary rules do not always function the way we expect. In reality, we often find ourselves in gray areas, in terms of professional ethics and family ethics, for example.

- How do you deal with the unknown? Under what principles do you generally operate when the ethical boundaries are unclear?
- Our own age, with its environmental and social upheavals, is like a twilight moment. What can we do now to define what the environmental and social landscape will be in the future? At what point are you comfortable saying that you do not know what the future will hold?

Section Seven

Text 7b claims that on the day of the summer solstice there will be no shade for any creature. At the same time, God acts to weaken the power of the sun so that all is not destroyed.

- To what extent can we rely upon God to protect us from environmental catastrophe? How do you see God as helping now, if at all?

CHAPTER SIX

INTRODUCTION/FRAME:

Chapter Six opens with the claim that it was inevitable human beings would misuse the environment through worshiping the heavenly bodies. At the same time, this fact was not enough for God to say that the sun and moon should not have been created in the first place. In the second text, God says to the sun and the moon that they must continue to function even if people are bowing to them. These texts provide the foundation for this chapter's intention, which is to encourage us to think about how one handles injustice, where is the point of giving up, and how can we speak to one another in a way that causes positive change.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

Section One

These two texts express a real concern for the balance between admiring the earth and its contents versus worshiping them.

- Where do you think the line is drawn between reverence and idolatry especially in terms of appreciating the natural environment?
- We might reasonably ask: Why would God create the sun and moon at all, if God anticipated that humans would later worship them? Here, as in so many other places in our tradition, we see that God wants us not only to do what is right, but to choose to do what is right. Are there times that you had to choose to do what was right when others around you were not making that same decision?

Section Two

In this midrash, the sun and moon protest their complicity in idolatry and refuse to carry out their duties. Although God knows that the heavenly lights are being misused, God still does not allow them to retract. In other words, God does not give up on people.

- Have you spoken out against any injustice? What type of injustice do you wish you would speak out against more?
- As the environment becomes more abused at what point do you give up? How do you maintain your faith that people will ultimately make good decisions?

Another way to understand this midrash is that it provides an alternative for the idea that something should not be used if it has the potential to be used in a way that is harmful. The use of nuclear power is an example of this idea. On one hand, it emits relatively low amounts of carbon dioxide, which means that its contribution to global warming is therefore relatively little. At the same time, these power plants are high risk and the problem of how to deal with their radioactive waste is still unsolved.

- Where do you stand on the debate of nuclear power? How does this text help inform your decision?
- Do you believe that if something has the potential for both benefit and danger it should be outlawed?

Section Three

Text 3a describes the difficulty of being righteous when the world around you is not acting in the same manner.

- What are some challenges that you face in maintaining an identity counter to the culture around you? When it comes to being a Jew in a counter culture what should the balance be between maintaining a separate identity and assimilation?

In text 3b, Rabbi Meir questions how one should engage in conversation with the other. The Hebrew phrase translated here as “enemies of Israel” actually refers to the Jewish people, and is typically translated as “Israel” without reference to the original euphemism. Rabbi Meir speaks from within a tradition of using “clean speech.” Our tradition sensed that sometimes people are better able to absorb information when it is phrased in a positive manner.

- What language do we use to depict environmental issues?
- If we focus only on the negative aspects of the environment, do we risk overwhelming people with despair? If we confront environmental challenges only indirectly, do we make the problems too easy to dismiss or ignore?

CHAPTER SEVEN

INTRODUCTION/FRAME:

This chapter is about the inherent tension between astrology, a common practice in Rabbinic times, and believing in God and the power of change. What is perhaps most interesting about this chapter is that the Rabbis do not reject the power of astrology altogether, but rather claim that it does not apply to the Jewish people in their daily lives. While they accept that the practice does have some grounding, they believe more in the power of one to control his or her own destiny by doing righteous acts and *teshuvah*, or repentance.

A secondary theme of these texts is the tension between living in the norms of the larger culture which surround you versus holding on to one’s own belief system. The Rabbis speak the language of the people through using astrological terms and values but, at the same time, offer an alternative way of life. The message is clear: the promise of change allows people to have hope and optimism that their futures are not sealed. The events of one’s life are determined by God and the individual, not the planetary systems.

Just as Jewish history is linear, moving from past to future, each of these last three chapters should instill a sense of moving forward. First, in Chapter Seven, is the message of hope, which leads into praise in Chapter Eight, and then Chapter Nine concludes with redemption.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

Sections One and Two

Associating the day of the week that someone is born with a particular personality characteristic is still common practice for some cultures. Many ethnic groups in the West African nation of Ghana base the first names they give to their new born children on the day of the week which the child was born. For example, a male child born on a Tuesday, might have the first name Kwabena. A Tuesday child is considered the problem solver and planner of the family. They are considered structured in nature, neutral in all matters and never take sides.

The Rabbis likely adopted their use of astrology from the larger culture around them. Still, even as the Rabbis describe their astrological predictions, they note the inevitable problems with their systems: the pious Rav Ashi and the notorious criminal Dimi bar Kakuzta were born on the same day; Rabbah, born under the influence of Mars, was neither a thief nor a butcher. Thus even as the Rabbis outline the conventional wisdom of their day, they express a healthy skepticism about its claims.

In addition, a main difference between the text in section one versus section two is one is based on the Torah while the other is purely material. The personality traits given in section one are based upon the days of creation, which incorporates Jewish tradition into the practice. Section two ascribes personality traits based purely on astrology, a product of secular culture alone.

- Are there boundaries to the types of practices that we should adopt from other cultures?
- How do you maintain a healthy skepticism of a particular practice for yourself, such as ascribing personality traits to the day of birth, while respecting another culture who values that tradition so deeply?
- What parts of your Jewish life are adopted from your American culture?
- If one were to add a Jewish element to a secular tradition, such as Halloween, does its celebration then become more acceptable or “Jewish?”

Section Three

In the Rabbinic mind, God’s punishment of human beings for their misdeeds will be to cut off the light from the heavenly constellations.

- What does darkness represent which makes it such a severe punishment?
- If you were to picture God punishing humankind would it be through nature? What does this text say about the Rabbis’ relationship to nature and the lights?
- The sun, the engine of all life on earth, is a crucial blessing, and yet so often we take it for granted. Only at times when the sun no longer functions normally, in an eclipse for example, do we notice our complete and total dependence upon it. What will it take for us to increase this awareness so that we do not have to wait for the dramatic effects of climate change before we step into action?

Section Four

The first two texts affirm that it is the combination of God and our own actions which determine our destiny, not astrology or pagan tradition. It is a powerful statement to say that we have control over our own lives instead of what other people think we are supposed to be or do.

- What guides do you generally use for making decisions? How do you negotiate taking advice from people, or doing what you think others expect, as opposed to choosing what you think is right for you?
- The midrash in text 4b comments on what it means that God told Abraham to “step outside.” One suggestion is that God told him to “step outside of himself.” What does it mean to step outside of one’s self? How and when is this helpful?
- What do you think is the message of text 4c? What does the bathroom symbolize?
- How do you view the roles of destiny and choice in your life? Where does God fit into that picture?

Section Five

The choice of a lunar over a solar calendar has moral implications for the Rabbis. Esau, the archetype of power and violence, marks his calendar by the sun, which is more powerful but ultimately constrained to a limited domain, the day. Jacob, on the other hand, marks his calendar by the moon; although the moon is humbled next to the sun's power, it moves freely through both day and night.

- What does it mean to value humility over power?
- What are some of the challenges and rewards of having a Jewish calendar separate from the Gregorian?

Section Six

Rabbi Levi teaches that we are empowered to “trample” our supposed destiny. Again and again, the Rabbis emphasize a consistent message: the future is in our hands. For better or worse, we must take responsibility for our own actions.

- How does someone function if s/he thinks that life is locked into a particular destiny versus having the belief that change is possible?
- How is this message empowering, especially in relationship to the environmental degradation that already exists?
- What does it mean that we have to take responsibility? Is it easier or more difficult for everything to be predetermined?

Section Seven

This text recounts the omens that are determined as a result of an eclipse. The text also claims that if one does the will of God that s/he will not need to fear its message.

- Do you think that the Rabbis of this text believed in the power of the omens?
- The second to last paragraph claims that “any nation that gets struck, their gods get struck with it.” What could this imply about the times when the Jewish people are injured?
- The last paragraph claims that if one does the will of God that s/he will not be dismayed by the omens. How do you interpret this statement? Do you see it as a way of avoiding the negative outcomes or a method for dealing with their consequences?

Section Eight

This story evokes a timeless Jewish theme: the power of righteousness and kindness to alter the course of a person's life. The last paragraph reveals that the astrologer's prediction was quite right: certain death was waiting for Rabbi Haninah's students when they set out that morning. At the same time, his knowledge of astrology only enabled him to see what was, and not what could be. The Rabbis continue to press their theme: Jews, who believe in justice and *teshuvah*, control their own destinies. It is our sacred duty to look beyond what is, and see what can become.

- When do you feel trapped in life and when do you feel opportunities for change?
- Do you believe that doing acts of justice can alter one's course in life? How?
- How can the message of looking beyond what “is” be used for climate change?

CHAPTER EIGHT

INTRODUCTION/THEME:

The intention of this chapter is to begin the transition from learning the tractate into preparing for the ritual moment of Birkat Ha-Hammah. The texts in this chapter focus on prayer and praise for God's creation of the physical world.

While some of the texts in the previous chapters have focused on more negative sides of nature, such as punishment and idolatry, these texts focus on thankfulness and the positive spiritual experience that ensues from witnessing God's creation. The chapter opens with the relationship between God's creation and God's mercy, then moves to being thankful for what one currently has and what one anticipates having in the future and ends with the relationship between the praises of nature and humankind.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

Section One

This Psalm constitutes a switch from the theme of God punishing humankind through nature to the natural world being a symbol of God's mercy. *Hesed*, or mercy, is the kindness that one shows without regard to the other person's actions. From this perspective, God did not create the world to reward us or in order to extract some later reciprocal action from us. Rather, our world was established on a foundation of unconditional kindness; God sets the paradigm and waits for us to follow.

- What do you think the Psalmist saw in nature that inspired him to declare praise for God's mercy?
- Nature can take on a dual role of being merciful or harmful. How does that affect your relationship to it? What other things act in this manner?

Section Two

Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahman offers a personal interpretation for our fixed prayer times: evening, morning, and afternoon, correspond to the milestones in a person's day and help us maintain our awareness of each moment. In addition, his established times also coincide with periods of the day that one may feel particularly frightened or relieved, such as when darkness has set.

- How do fear and joy affect your prayer life?
- How does acknowledging the cycle of the day increase awareness of the divine and/or the world around you?

Section Three

In text 3b, the sun gets the power to move because it praises God; when the prayer ends, so does its movement.

- What keeps you "moving?" How much, if at all, is prayer a part of that?

Additionally, Joshua must act to correct a potential negative side effect of his command for the sun to stop. Once the sun stops, it will no longer be able to praise God, given that the praise is what enables it to move. Since the sun is constantly praising God, Joshua knows that he must then take over. Joshua's action, to correct the negative side effects of stopping the sun, teaches us to consider the possible unintended consequences of our own actions.

- In 1939, DDT was discovered to be a very effective insecticide. It quickly became the most widely-used pesticide in the world. Pesticide use has increased 50-fold since 1950 and 2.3 million tons of industrial pesticides are now used each year. At the same time, in the 1960s, it was discovered that DDT was preventing many fish-eating birds from reproducing, which was a serious threat to biodiversity. Pesticides have many advantages, such as killing mosquitoes which can transmit potentially deadly diseases like West Nile virus, yellow fever, and malaria. How do we balance the positive effects of pesticides with their harmful consequences? In what other ways are we not considering how the side effects of our actions might be harming the environment?

CHAPTER NINE

INTRODUCTION/FRAME:

Just as the opening of the tractate drew a comparison between Passover and Birkat Ha-Hammah, the closing chapter does as well. Just as Passover begins with exile and ends with redemption, Chapter Nine encourages you to look toward the future and to imagine a redeemed world.

The last two chapters constitute a shift from what came previous to them. While the first chapters alternated between heaven and earth, Chapters Eight and Nine contain texts which combine the heavenly and the human realms together. In a sense, redemption is the dissolving of boundaries, especially the ones which keep us from uniting with God. Additionally, the texts begin with a discussion of personal redemption and then transition into the communal. Although the self must come first, the goal is communal redemption which again shifts from separation and distinction to unification.

There are two clear messages embedded within the texts of this chapter. The first is that God is and always will be present. The Presence exists whether it is felt and extends beyond the natural world. The second message is the inevitability of redemption. Redemption is coming and the only question is if you are going to choose to be a part of it or not.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

Section One

Amos's vision includes a time when people will literally be starving to hear the words of the Lord. Upon first read, his prophecy seems bleak. Yet, the text speaks of a time when people are thirsting for God, not for material goods. Thus, this text can be read as being about people seeking to live their lives as active participants in a godly world. Even though the text predicts a time of distress, it is not disheartening because ultimately that pain leads to personal growth and spiritual renewal.

- How do you interpret the thirst for hearing God's words? Do you see it as something positive or negative?
- Can you recall a time of personal growth that was difficult yet worth it in the end?
- What does it mean to be on a spiritual journey?
- On a more literal level, we know that one of the anticipated consequences of climate change is a growing shortage of food, especially in third-world countries. How do you understand the relationship between actual famine and famine from God's words?

Section Two

This Hasidic sermon expounds upon the famous verse from Exodus, "All that the LORD has spoken will we do and listen/understand." (Exodus 24:7). This is a declaration of faith that the Israelites make in unison after hearing God's words on Mount Sinai, which constitutes total commitment to God's commandments.

In this comment, R. Menahem of Chernobyl emphasizes two foundational axioms of early Hasidic thought. First, "Life-energy ebbs and flows." No person can maintain a perfect state of spiritual enlightenment indefinitely. Second, "All the earth is full of God's glory and no place lacks God." In other words, God's presence fills the world and is available to all people at all times. For him, spiritual perfection is the ability to say wherever I stand God is here. God is there when I am observing Shabbat and when I am eating *treif* (non kosher food), it is only up to us to recognize the presence.

R. Menahem also compares the internal dynamic of spiritual energy to the sun's rising and setting. Quoting Psalm 113, "From the rising of the sun until it goes down, the LORD'S name is to be praised," he claims that the descent from a higher level of spiritual awareness to a lower level is not a failure; but rather preparation for ascent to even higher levels. A step backward opens the way for an even larger step forward and this is an essential component

of the human condition. In this way, he validates the spiritual experience of total distance from God as much as the total commitment with which he begins his sermon.

- Upon what ideals, theological understanding, and life experiences is your faith based?
- Are there times that you have felt a distance from God which ultimately brought you closer? What about in other relationships?
- What does it mean to say that God is always there even when you do not feel the Presence?

Section Three

If the first text was about the transition from wanting distance to desiring closeness with God, this text imagines a world where unification between people and God exists. The prophet, Isaiah, predicts a time when God's radiance on the earth will be so great that even the sun and the moon are no longer necessary. Jewish tradition sometimes looks to the sun's rays as a model for imagining the emanations of God's presence in the world.

- What does a redeemed world look and feel like to you? Do you think it is possible to achieve?
- While texts in previous chapters use the sun as an intermediary for understanding God, this is no longer necessary. Have you ever experienced God directly? What did it feel like? Is this something for which you long?

Section Four

This final text presents a dichotomy. On the one hand, Rabbis Hiyya and Shimon see dawn as a symbol for the inevitability of redemption for the Jewish people. Just as in the case of dawn, salvation is not perceptible immediately but can happen slowly over time.

On the other hand, the final paragraph quotes verses from the Book of Esther (See Esther Chapter Four). It states that Mordechai told Esther that if she does not want to save the Jewish people, then redemption will come from somewhere else. However, if she chooses not to save the Jews, she too will die. Thus we see the paradox, while redemption is sure to occur, it may only happen for you if you contribute to its arrival.

- In what ways do you see or feel the possibility for redemption?
- If positive change is gradual, what can you do to become aware of it happening? How is this message encouraging or discouraging?
- How can you apply the final message of the text to climate change: even though redemption will occur, you cannot also stand by and do nothing?
- As you finish the final text in this tractate, what messages and new ideas are you taking with you? What do you think will contribute most to your participating in Birkat Ha-Hammah? What about in your environmental awareness/action?