



The Blessing to Be Said Upon Witnessing a Solar or Lunar Eclipse
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OH 227

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Question: The solar eclipse of August, 2017, has provoked great interest, and many are travelling hundreds of miles to witness it. Lunar eclipses are more commonly experienced phenomena that also attract attention. Is there a statutory prayer (a *brakha*) to be said upon witnessing a solar or lunar eclipse?¹

Answer: Our tradition suggests that we see each life experience as an opportunity to connect to the Divine. While many texts can be invoked, the classic, most intensive liturgical response is through the form of a *brakha*- a blessing, invoking God's name using the classic "Barukh Ata" phraseology. Such blessings are mandated, of course, for consumption of food and for the performance of many mitzvot. The ninth chapter of tractate Berakhot, in the Mishnah and Talmud, enumerates the text of many blessings to be said specifically upon encountering remarkable natural or human phenomena. Examples include thunder and lightning, trees in new bloom, rainbows, extremely large crowds, or creatures of unusual appearance.

A solar eclipse, when our view of the sun is blocked by the moon, is certainly a unique natural event which causes us to ponder our place in the universe. There are typically at least two solar eclipses a year, but they are short in duration and only visible along a fairly narrow track, so that most parts of the world may experience total solar eclipse only once every several centuries, and some travel long distances to experience them. In contrast, lunar eclipses, when the moon passes through the earth's shadow, are not much more frequent, but are visible to an entire half of the globe, so that most parts of the world experience a total lunar eclipse every 2-3 years.² In any case, either type of eclipse is a striking phenomenon. One could certainly respond with any number of texts from our tradition which speak of inspiration derived from celestial bodies (for example, Psalm 121 or 148, "El Adon" from the Shabbat Morning Shacharit). However, the question has been asked: Is there an appropriate *Brakha* formula to be recited?

The answer to this question may be of narrow interest on its own, applying only to a fairly rare event, but also provides an opportunity to understand the philosophical and practical process by which our liturgy has developed.

No Blessing at All?

Some suggest that no blessing at all should be said over an eclipse. noting that the Babylonian Talmud, tractate Sukkah 29b, says that an eclipse is a sign of divine displeasure.

1 With thanks to Rabbis Tim Bernard and Daniel Greyber for suggested texts

2 <https://www.timeanddate.com/eclipse/how-often-solar-eclipse.html>

"Our Rabbis taught: When the sun is in eclipse it is a bad omen for the whole world. To what can this be compared? To a flesh and blood king who made a banquet for his servants and put a lamp in front of them. When he got angry with them he said to his servant, "Take the lamp away from them, and let them sit in the dark." The text goes on to suggest that since Jews number their months by the moon, a lunar eclipse is a bad sign for Jews, while a solar eclipse is a particularly negative sign for non-Jews who follow a solar calendar, and to list specific societal ills for which the eclipse is a warning. These poskim conclude that, since the eclipse is a cursed event, no blessing should be said.

Today, we understand that eclipses are natural, predictable phenomena. They are part of the structure and order of creation, a predictable reflection of the Divine will that was manifested at the time of creation, rather than a specific, timely response to societal trends.

Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson³ acknowledged that eclipses were known even in ancient times to be a natural phenomenon, but felt that they are still a sign of bad events to come, and therefore should be cause for despair rather than blessing. However, even if one gives credence to the view that an eclipse indicates that there is "a bad moon on the rise," there is still powerful cause to recite a blessing. The Mishnah⁴ also teaches us "חייב אדם לברך על הרעה כשם שמברך על הטובה" - "One must recite a blessing over the bad just as one does over the good." Even if one sees the eclipse as a negative omen, it should still be recognized with a blessing.

Choosing the Right Blessing

The traditional sources (Talmud, Shulchan Arukh, etc) do not suggest a specific formulation. Our tradition offers several general pieces of advice for those who are unsure whether a *brakha* is called for. The first is that one is not supposed to compose new blessings not specified by the Talmud. Some (like Rabbi Haim David Halevi⁵), raised the concern that since the sages were aware of the phenomenon of eclipses and did not specify a blessing, one cannot be instituted. However, in practice, many of the blessings specified in Berakhot are applied to situations more broadly than those indicated.

A second criterion is "*safek berakhot l'hehaker*" - if one is unsure whether a blessing is required at all, then God's name should not be invoked, lest it be invoked in vain.

Finally, in general, one should choose the most specific blessing that applies to the circumstance at hand, but if it is unclear which blessing is most appropriate, we do not institute a new blessing, but we choose a more general blessing which is more broadly applicable. So, for example, if we encounter a form of produce which is clearly a fruit, one says the blessing "*borei pri haetz*" over produce of the tree. If it is unclear whether the food item comes from a tree or from a ground plant, we say "*borei pri ha'adamah*" (over the produce of the ground), since both fruits and vegetables ultimately come from the ground.

In this case, an solar or lunar eclipse is certainly an unusual phenomenon that evokes awareness of the power of God in nature, so it would seem that a blessing would be called for, and in the absence of a specific *brakha*, the one encompassing a more general class of phenomena would be appropriate.

The second Mishnah in chapter 9 of Tractate Berakhot offers two "generic" options for natural

3 Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson Igrot Kodesh 15:1071.

4 Mishnah Berakhot 9:5

5 Rabbi Haim David HaLevy, *Aseh Lekha Rav* 5:7.



phenomena, and it would seem that one or the other of them would be the most logical choice. For mountains, rivers and deserts, one blesses God " ... who performs the work of creation." ("עושה מעשה בראשית" *oseh ma'aseh bereshit*) For shooting stars, earthquakes, lightning, or violent winds, the one blesses God "Whose power and might fill the universe." ("שכחו וגבורתו מלא עולם") (*shekokho ugevurato maleh olam*)

Different explanations have been proposed as to why each of these formulae are particularly appropriate for the specific phenomena assigned to them.⁶

1. Those phenomena, like rivers, mountains and so on, which receive the blessing "Who performs the work of creation" (*oseh ma'aseh bereshit*) are, on a human timescale, relatively permanent, and might be seen as having been part of the original order of creation. In contrast, those that receive the blessing "Whose power and might fill the universe" like earthquakes and so on are transitory expressions of power, clearly not in continuous existence on even human timescale, and may not be as strongly associated with the creation of the world.

2. Phenomena like mountains and rivers are perceived only in a localized area. whereas earthquakes, thunder or winds may be felt over a region beyond one's line of sight, "filling the world."

3. Those which are assigned the "Whose power and might" are often perceived to be dangerous or inspire fear, related to God's power, while those which receive "Who performs the work of creation" are typically not seen as harmful.

Based on these criteria, it would seem that the most appropriate blessing upon witnessing a lunar or solar eclipse would be "Whose power and might fill the universe" ("שכחו וגבורתו מלא עולם") It fits the criteria, most closely since the eclipse is a transitory event which is perceived over a wide area. Furthermore, even though most people do not perceive them as such today, eclipses were at one time considered a sign of danger (see below).

One could make the counterargument that there has been a trend to lean towards seeing "*oseh ma'aseh bereshit*" ("who performs the work of creation") as the more general form of the blessing. In the Talmudic text⁷, Rava seems to suggest that in some circumstances, both may be said. Later sages⁸ indicate that one should recite only one of them over any given experience, so as to avoid "wasting" a blessing. In doing so, they leave the door open to choose either blessing, but in practice "Who performs the work of creation" often wins out. For example, though lightning originally was listed as "whose power", is now typically assigned to "*oseh ma'aseh bereshit*." (given the criteria above, this makes sense given that it is perceived as a more localized phenomenon, and does not have the same emotional impact as thunder). Furthermore, if one experiences both lightning and thunder, one says "*oseh ma'aseh bereshit*" on both.⁹ Even though a strong wind is normally assigned *shekokho uvegurato maleh olam* ("Whose power fills the earth"), if one encounters a wind but one is not sure whether it is sufficiently violent, then

6 CF Avudraham "*birkhat hareayah hashevach vehahodayah*", Mishnah Berurah 228:1 and Mishnah Berurah 227:5

7 Berakhot 59a

8 Mishneh Berurah 227:6

9 Mishneh Berurah Mishneh Berurah 227:5

"Who performs the act of creation" is substituted.¹⁰

Given the trend for other natural events, "*Shekokho uvgevurato*" is the more specific and therefore, most appropriate blessing, but one who recites "*oseh ma'aseh bereshit*" the more general form, has not lost out.

Practical Notes

Our tradition reminds us that we must stay away from anything that is a potential harm to life or limb. One should not look at a solar eclipse directly or even through regular sunglasses. A special eclipse-rated filter or pinhole apparatus should be used.

This blessing falls into the category of *birkat hare'aya* - blessings over that which is seen. A blessing should be said when the eclipse becomes visible, as opposed to being obscured by clouds. The blessing applies if the eclipse is seen through a filter or pinhole projection, for that is how eclipses are normally witnessed. One would not say a blessing over video of the event.

Conclusion:

One who witnesses an eclipse should ideally recite the blessing:

"בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, שְׂפָחוּ וּגְבוּרָתוֹ מְלֵא עוֹלָם." (Blessed.. Whose power and strength fill the world).

The more general blessing בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, עוֹשֵׂה מַעֲשֵׂה בְּרֵאשִׁית (Blessed, who performs the work of creation") would also be acceptable.

In addition, one may certainly add personal meditations or readings from our classic texts, like Psalm 121 or 148, or "El Adon" from the Shabbat Morning Shacharit.

¹⁰ Jerusalem Talmud Berakhot 9:2, cited in Tosafot on Berakhot 59a s.v. *al harukhot*, and Mishneh Berurah 227:4



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Source Sheet

1. Babylonian Talmud Sukkah 29a

<p>Our Rabbis taught: When the sun is in eclipse it is a bad omen for the whole world. To what can this be compared? To a flesh and blood king who made a banquet for his servants and put a lamp in front of them. When he got angry with them he said to his servant, "Take the lamp away from them, and let them sit in the dark."</p>	<p>ת"ר בזמן שהחמה לוקה סימן רע לכל העולם כולו משל למה הדבר דומה למלך בשר ודם שעשה סעודה לעבדיו והניח פנס לפניהם כעס עליהם ואמר לעבדו טול פנס מפניהם והושיבם בחושך</p>
<p>Our Rabbis taught, When the sun is in eclipse it is a bad omen for idolaters; when the moon is in eclipse, it is a bad omen for Israel, since Israel reckons by the moon and idolaters by the sun. If it is in eclipse in the east, it is a bad omen for those who live in the east; if in the west, it is a bad omen for those who live in the west; if in the midst of heaven it is bad omen for the whole world.</p>	<p>תנו רבנן בזמן שהחמה לוקה סימן רע לעובדי כוכבים לבנה לוקה סימן רע לשונאיהם של ישראל מפני שישראל מונין ללבנה ועובדי כוכבים לחמה לוקה במזרח סימן רע ליושבי מזרח במערב סימן רע ליושבי מערב באמצע הרקיע סימן רע לכל העולם כולו</p>

2. Igros Kodesh 15:1017 (Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, 20th century)

<p>It is known that one should not innovate a blessing that was not mentioned in the Talmud. The reason we do not say a blessing over an eclipse is because it is a sign of trouble coming, and in contrast one should pray for it to be cancelled, and call out without a brakhah.</p>	<p>ידוע הכלל אשר אין לחדש ברכה שלא הוזכרה בש"ס (ב"י או"ח סמ"ו). וי"ל הטעם דאין מברכין ע"ז מפני שהוא סימן לפורעניות הבאה (סוכה כט, א). ואדרבה צריכה תפלה לבטלה וצעקה ולא ברכה</p>
<p>Eclipses of the heavenly bodies are mentioned in several rabbinic texts, and it is a wonder that there is any doubt in this matter, for even the wise men of Egypt and Babylonia created tables of upcoming eclipses, and it is known from historical and holy texts that the Jews were in touch with these wise men.</p> <p>From the fact that they created these tables of predicted eclipses, it is clear that the eclipse is a natural phenomenon, but it is also a sign, like</p>	<p>לקוי המאורות מובא בכמה מקומות בדברי חז"ל ופליאה גם הספק בזה, כי ידוע אשר אפילו חכמי מצרים ולפני זה בבבל כבר ערכו לוחות הליקוים האמורים וידוע בספרי דברי הימים ומובא להבדיל גם בכתבי הקדש, אשר בני ישראל עמדו בקישור עם חכמי מצרים וחכמי בבל. מעריכת לוחות האמורים מובן שתופעה האמורה היא ענין טבעי, אבל ביחד עם זה יש בזה גם סימן, ובדוגמת ענין הקשת, שגם הוא ענין טבעי עתה, וביחד עם זה משמש אות,</p>

the rainbow, which is a natural event, but also serves as a sign.	
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3. Mishnah Berakhot 9:2, 5 (2nd century)

On shooting stars, earthquakes, and lightning and thunder, and on winds, we say "Blessed... Whose power and might fill the universe." On mountains and hills, and on oceans and rivers and on deserts, we say "Blessed... Who does the work of creation."	על הזיקין, ועל הזנעות, ועל הברקים, ועל הרעמים, ועל הרוחות, אומר ברוך שפחו מלא עולם. על ההרים, ועל הגבעות, ועל הימים, ועל הנקרות, ועל המדברות, אומר ברוך עושה מעשה בראשית
One must recite a blessing over the bad just as one does over the good	תיב אדם לברך על הרעה כשם שהוא מברך על הטובה

4.. R. David Abudraham Book of Explanations of Blessings and Prayers (14th century Spain) Birkhot Hareiayah

On shooting stars, earthquakes and lightning and thunder and on wind, one says, "Blessed... whose power and might fill the universe," meaning the one who give strength to nature to show the power of the Creator, so that people will fear Him. And if one prefers, once can say "who made creation."	על הזיקים ועל הזועות ועל הברקים ועל הרעמים ועל הרוחות מברך ברוך אתה ה' אמ"ה שכחו וגבורתו מלא עולם פירוש הנותן כח לטבע להראות כחו של יוצר בראשית כדי שייראו מלפניו ואם רצה מברך בא"י אמ"ה עושה בראשית.
The blessing for mountains, peak, oceans and rivers and deserts is "Blessed... who does the work of creation" because they were created at that time and they are praise of the Creator, because today we know that God created them during the six day sof creation. If they are still here, then certainly their Creator is still here.	על ההרים ועל הגבעות ועל הימים ועל הנהרות ועל המדברות מברך בא"י אמ"ה עושה מעשה בראשית כיון שישדן מאז ושכחו של מקום הוא כשמכירין היום דבר שאנו יודעין שהמקום בראו בששת ימי בראשית ועדיין הוא קיים קל וחומר לעושהו שהוא קיים.

5. Shulkhan Arukh OH 227:1 (16th century)

For the "Zikin" (which are a star that shoots like an arrow across the heavens) and earthquakes and lightning and thunder and winds that rage, for each of these one says the blessing "Blessed	א על הזיקים והוא כמין כוכב היורה כחץ באורך השמים ממקום למקום ונמשך אורו כשבת ועל רעדת הארץ ועל הברקים ועל הרעמים ועל רוחות שנשבו בזעף על כל אחד מאלו אומר בא"י אמ"ה עושה מעשה בראשית ואם ירצה
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are you... who does the work of creation" and if he wishes, he may say "... Whose power and strength fill the world."	יאמר בא"י אמ"ה שכחו וגבורתו מלא עולם
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6. Mishneh Berurah 227:5-6

Winds that blew violently [we say "Whose power"] and if they are not violent, but still a great wind we say "Who does the work of creation" since they are not violent.	ואם שלא בזעף אם הוא (ג) רוח גדול מברך עושה מעשה בראשית ולא יוכל לברך שכחו וגבורתו וכו' אחרי שהוא שלא בזעף גדול
The common custom is to say over lightning "Who does the work of creation" and over thunder "Whose power ..."	והעולם נוהגים לברך על הברקים עושה מ"ב ועל הרעמים שכחו וגבורתו וכו'
[when one has the choice of either blessing] One should not say both blessings, but should say one or the other.	אבל לא יברך שתי ברכות כאחת אלא או זו או זו

7. Mishneh Berurah 228:1

[Over seas and rivers one says] "Who does the work of creation." Since God established them from before, and it is the praise of God when we recognize today a thing that we know that God created during the six days of creation that still exists. We should not say over them "whose power and glory..." as we do over wind and thunder, for those are seen and heard from afar, but all the seas and rivers are each in their own place.	עושה מ"ב - פ"י כיון שיסדן [א] מאז ושבתו של מקום הוא כשאנו מכירין היום דבר שאנו יודעין שהמקום בראו מששת ימי בראשית ועדיין הוא קיים [ב] ואין שייך לברך עליהם שכחו וגבורתו מלא עולם כמו על רוחות ורעמים דהתם הם נראים ונשמעים למרחוק אבל ימים ונהרות כל אחד במקומו:
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