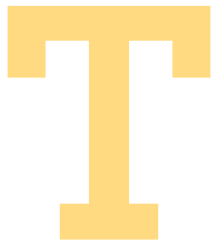


# *Birkat haChammah:* **An Evocative Blessing**

Why Is This *Erev Pesach*  
Different from Every Other  
*Erev Pesach*?

*The Sages ordained a blessing to be recited upon the sighting of the sun once every twenty-eight years. The blessing is recited on the day on which the sun returns to the very spot in the heavens that it occupied relative to earth at the moment of its original creation.*



To a Jew every *mitzvah* is treasured; each is a source of delight. As expressed by the psalmist, “Happy is the man who fears God, who desires His *mitzvot* greatly” (Psalms 112:1). Little wonder then that *Birkat haChammah*, despite its relative simplicity and infrequency of occurrence, has received extensive

treatment in rabbinic literature. The very rarity of its occurrence has served to magnify the rejoicing in its performance and to enhance the scholarly attention it has received.

*Birkat haChammah* is indeed a rare event—an event that recurs only every twenty-eight years. Even rarer is the occurrence of *Birkat haChammah* on the fourteenth day of Nisan, *erev Pesach*, as will be the case this coming spring. The phenomenon marked by *Birkat haChammah* did coincide with *erev Pesach* in 5685 (1925). However, before 5685, there was a gap of more than six centuries since *Birkat haChammah*'s last previous occurrence on an *erev Pesach* in 5069 (1309).

It is popularly assumed that the universe was created in Tishrei. That assumption is prompted, at least in part, by the fact that the calendar year begins on the first day of Tishrei. However, the Gemara, *Rosh Hashanah* 10b-11a, records a controversy between Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Joshua with regard to whether the world was created in Tishrei or in Nisan. *Birkat haChammah* was ordained on the basis of the hypothesis that the universe was created in Nisan.

Genesis 1:14-19 records that the sun was created on the fourth day of the week. According to rabbinic tradition, the sun was created at the very beginning of the day and appeared in the sky in the position occupied at *Tekufat Nisan*, i.e., the sun was set into place upon the onset of the fourth day at the position of the vernal equinox. Thus, *Birkat haChammah* is recited whenever the vernal equinox occurs at the very beginning of the fourth day of the week. At the time of the equinox, day and night are equal in duration, each being twelve hours in length. Since in the Jewish calendar each day begins with nightfall, the beginning of the fourth day is 6:00 PM Tuesday evening. In an annual calendar comprised of 365 days successive vernal equinoxes will occur each year on the same day of the month (allowing, of course, for a minor variation in a leap year) but one and one quarter days later in the week. It is then a relatively easy matter to perform the calculations that demonstrate that successive equinoxes will occur upon the advent of the eve of a Wednesday only once in twenty-eight years. *Birkat haChammah* is recited when the sun becomes visible after a vernal equinox that occurs at the beginning of the eve of a Wednesday as it did at the time of Creation. At the time of the equinox the sun occupies a position relative to earth identical to the position it occupied at the time of Creation. On the rare occasions that this phenomenon occurs on Tues-

day evening the blessing “*Oseh ma’aseh bereishit*—He who makes the work of Creation” is recited upon the appearance of the sun on Wednesday morning.

The 365-day solar year reflects the annual revolution of the earth around the sun. The Jewish calendar is lunisolar rather than solar, i.e., it is a lunar calendar based upon a cycle of twelve revolutions of the moon around the earth with corrections in the form of periodic intercalated months in order to reconcile the 354-day lunar year with the 365-day solar year. Those corrections are designed to prevent the migration of the *yamim tovim* throughout the solar year so that they may be observed in their appointed (solar) seasons. Consequently, each occurrence of *Birkat haChammah* will not be on the same day of the Jewish month. The dates of *Birkat haChammah* fluctuate from late Adar to late Nisan but because of the vagaries of the calendar the coincidence of *Birkat haChammah* and *erev Pesach* is extremely rare.

The occurrence of *Birkat haChammah* on *erev Pesach* conveys a significant message. Although the celebration of Pesach commemorates the Exodus from Egypt and *Birkat haChammah* recalls Creation, the two share a singular common motif.

“*Chayyav adam lirot et atzmo ke’ilu hu yatza miMitzrayim*—a person is obligated to look upon himself as if he exited from Egypt.” On Pesach a Jew is obligated not simply to recall a historical event but to imagine himself an actual

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event that acquires meaning as a testimonial to God as Creator of the universe only when that event is reflected upon, internalized and understood in a profound manner. Unlike other visual experiences that occasion a blessing, *Birkat haChammah* is predicated upon intellectual cognition.

But, objectively speaking, all of this is a mirage. The solar calendar is not precisely 365 days in length. The solar year is actually 365 days, 5 hours, 48 minutes and 46 seconds in length, and so the vernal equinox occurs earlier and earlier each year. That problem was essentially resolved by the modifications made with introduction of the present Gregorian calendar.

In ordaining *Birkat haChammah*, the Sages were well aware of the lack of precision in the solar calculations they attributed to Shmuel, one of the *Amoraim*. They recognized full well that the calculations of Rav Adda were far more accurate and relied upon them in their own astronomical determinations. Rav Adda reckoned the solar year as being 365 days, 5 hours,

55 minutes and 25<sup>25</sup>/<sub>57</sub> seconds in length. Nevertheless, *Chazal* employed the solar calendar of Shmuel for two purposes: for recitation of *tal umatar* and in introducing *Birkat haChammah*.

Daily recitation of *tal umatar*, a prayer for rain, begins with the advent of the rainy season in the Land of Israel. The rainy season is deemed to commence on the sixtieth day following the autumnal equinox. The autumnal equinox is, of course, a solar phenomenon. The equinox is established as occurring precisely 182 1/2 days after the vernal equinox, again based upon the premise that the solar year is exactly 365 days in length. The reason for adopting Shmuel's calculations for this purpose, even though they were known to be inexact, is quite evident: the *tal umatar* prayer must be recited by everyone. A method was required to facilitate fulfillment of that obligation that would enable any individual to determine the proper date for commencing recitation of *tal umatar*. Rav Adda's far more accurate, but far more complicated,

calculations required mathematical acumen well beyond the capability of the common man.

However, *Birkat haChammah* is the celebration of the anniversary of an astronomical event. Given the correct length of the solar year, or Rav Adda's close approximation thereof, it is clear that in the 5,768 years that have elapsed since Creation the vernal equinox has never recurred at its original hour. What, then, is the meaning of *Birkat haChammah* recited every twenty-eight years? Why did *Chazal* decree celebration of a nonfactual cosmic phenomenon?

If we focus upon the commonality that exists between remembering the Exodus and *Birkat haChammah*, the pieces fall into place. Pesach is designed to cause a Jew to reflect upon the miracles surrounding that historical event and come to a personal awareness of God "who brought us out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." *Birkat haChammah* is designed to cause man to reflect upon observed phenomena, to internalize those phe-

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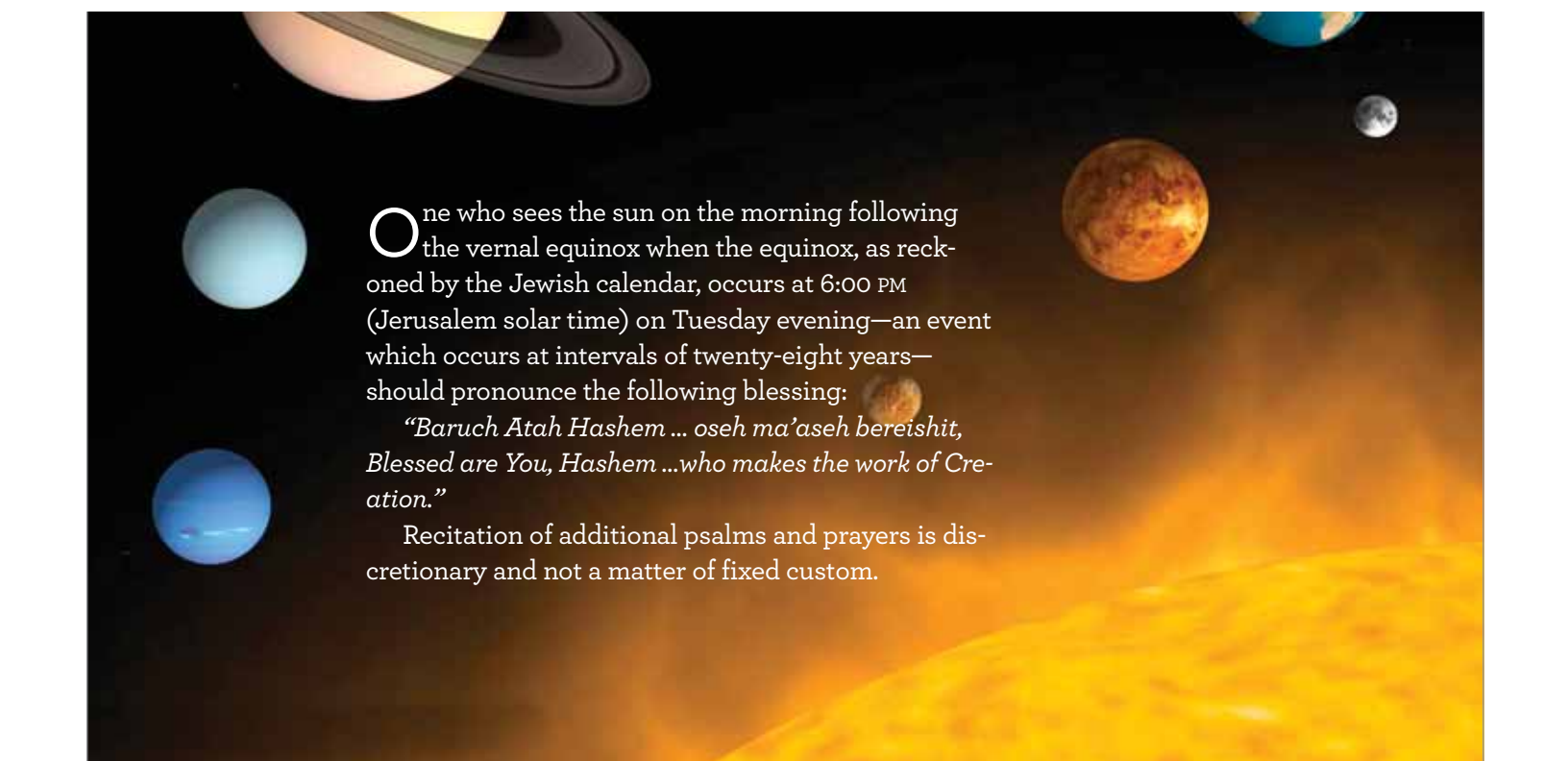
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One who sees the sun on the morning following the vernal equinox when the equinox, as reckoned by the Jewish calendar, occurs at 6:00 PM (Jerusalem solar time) on Tuesday evening—an event which occurs at intervals of twenty-eight years—should pronounce the following blessing:

*“Baruch Atah Hashem ... oseh ma’aseh bereishit, Blessed are You, Hashem ...who makes the work of Creation.”*

Recitation of additional psalms and prayers is discretionary and not a matter of fixed custom.

nomena and achieve a profound awareness of God as Creator of the universe.

Since *Birkat haChammah* is designed to trigger human cognitive processes, objective reality is almost inconsequential. To the popular mind, the Julian calendar—and hence the solar year of Shmuel—was correct. For centuries, it was, by and large, unquestioned both among Jews and non-Jews because it proved to be quite suitable for human needs. In adopting Shmuel’s calculations for *Birkat haChammah*, Chazal in no way intended to denigrate or diminish the verities discovered by science. Quite to the contrary, they relied only upon the more accurate view of Rav Adda for carrying out the more esoteric task of performing the calculations necessary to assure the integrity of the calendar.

Nevertheless, the Sages seized upon the widespread popular presumption regarding the length of the solar year and used it as a tool to underscore and to reinforce a profound theological truth. Since *Birkat haChammah* is an acknowledgment of a renewed perception of God as Creator of the universe, the cause of that awareness is not crucial. Chazal seized upon acceptance of Shmuel’s determination of the length of the solar year as a means of prompting people to focus upon the wondrous nature of God as the Author of Creation.

The blessing is evocative rather than responsive. It is designed to arouse man from his lethargy, to force him to reflect upon this cosmic phenomenon, to summon him to contemplation.

The occurrence of *Birkat haChammah* on *erev Pesach* is more than a curious coincidence. Man must not only acknowledge but personally perceive God as both the Redeemer who led us out of Egypt and as the Creator of the universe. On *Pesach*, *matzah* and *maror* are empirical triggers designed to encourage us to acknowledge God as our personal Redeemer. The blessing pronounced upon the visual appearance of the sun on the day of *Birkat haChammah* is designed to prompt Jews to reflect upon the cosmic event that occurred on a particular hour of that day of the week and thereby to acknowledge God as Creator of the universe. That intellectual awareness should become acute in a manner akin to sensory perception, with the result that man will not simply accept the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* in an abstract, detached manner but experientially perceive God as the omnipotent Creator.

*Birkat haChammah* coincides with *erev Pesach* only on the rarest of occasions. When this does happen the appropriate response should be to seize the occasion for intellectual apprecia-

tion of the wondrous work of the Almighty that, in turn, must lead to a profound understanding and recognition that He alone is the God of Redemption and the God of Creation.

Some time prior to *Birkat haChammah* on *erev Pesach* in the year 5685 (1925), the Ostrovtzer Rebbe reported that *Birkat haChammah* had coincided with *erev Pesach* only twice before in the history of the world: in the year of the Exodus from Egypt and in the year prior to the event commemorated by Purim. As noted in the forthcoming expanded edition of my book, *Bircas HaChammah*, the Ostrovtzer seems to have been in error both with regard to the dates and to the number of times that this coincidence has taken place. However, his reaction was very much to the point.

Noting the presumed coincidence of *Birkat haChammah* with deliverance from slavery in Egypt and deliverance from the diabolical plot of Haman, the Ostrovtzer prayerfully anticipated that (what he presumed to be) the third such occurrence would be the harbinger of the deliverance of Israel from its present, and final, exile. We failed to merit that deliverance in 5685 but it is our fervent prayer that, should the Messiah fail to have arrived earlier, *Birkat haChammah* on *erev Pesach* 5769 will signal the ultimate Redemption. ■



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