

Blessing the Sun and the Redemption of Creation

Mois Navon – Nissan 5769

The Rabbis taught: Anyone seeing the Sun at its turning point... should say "Blessed is He who made the Creation". And when is this? Abaye said: every twenty-eight years when the cycle returns and the Spring (Nissan) equinox falls in Saturn on the evening of Tuesday going into Wednesday.

(Ber. 59b)

The Gemara here teaches that a special blessing is made when the sun reaches its “turning point” – interpreted to be the vernal equinox.¹ Rashi (ad loc.) explains that the sun, created at the beginning of the fourth day (Gen. 1:14-19), was placed in the sky in this position of the vernal equinox. The Gemara then notes that the sun returns to this same position every 28 years, providing a glimpse of the primal creation and thus an opportunity to bless the Creator for His creation. This once in a generation blessing is referred to as “Birkat Hahama”.

Exciting as it is rare, the definition that the sun was placed on the fourth day in the position of the vernal equinox and that the cycle recurs every 28 years leads to no small amount of consternation. First, the vernal equinox is in the spring (i.e., Nissan), yet we celebrate creation in the fall (i.e., Tishrei). Indeed on Rosh Hashana we enunciate, “Today is the birthday of the world.” Second, compounding our confusion, is the discrepancy in the calculation of the 28 year solar cycle, as will now be explained.

In the times of the Gemara there were two values known to approximate the number of days in a solar year: that of R. Adda, 365.24682,² which is quite accurate and used to intercalate the lunisolar year, and that of Shmuel, 365.25,³ which is a rough estimation used to calculate the passage of the 28 years for Birkat Hahama. Both estimates deviate from the true vernal equinox, which is currently given as 365.24219.⁴ Now, being that Shmuel’s estimate was deemed sufficient for the calculation, Birkat Hahama is scheduled this year to be on April 8, 2009, which is at a significant disparity from the vernal equinox, which will have occurred some 18 days prior on March 20, 2009.

The decisors of Jewish Law over the generations have grappled with these issues. The Hatam Sofer (OH 1:56) notes the difficulties, concluding the matter requires “great investigation” – a term used very sparingly in halachic literature, emphasizing the significance of the quandary. Nevertheless, he concludes that since all the great decisors – Rambam, Rosh, Tur, Shulhan Aruch – ruled that Birkat Hahama is said as per Shmuel’s calculation, so too must we.

R. Tzodok of Lublin counseled to say the blessing without mentioning the name of God (shem u'malchut). R. Ovadya Yosef (Yehaveh Daat 4:18) notes that saying the blessing as such is as good as not saying any blessing at all. R. Ovadya brings numerous opinions including the practice of R. Tzvi Hirsh Young who, in 1785, acknowledged that indeed using Shmuel’s estimation leads to erroneous calculations, yet since the custom to say the blessing has become so wide spread, we can only minimize the damage by having just the Shaliach Tzibur say the blessing while individuals merely respond: “Amen.” R. Ovadya explains that such a practice is unacceptable, especially in the face of all the opinions that

¹ The vernal equinox is day in spring when the daytime hours equal the nighttime hours.

² Inferred from Yerushalmi (Avodah Zarah 1:2), see Bleich, Bircas HaChammah, p. 57, n.15.

³ Eruvin 56a.

⁴ This number too is not an absolute constant!

require every individual to make the blessing himself. Today there is virtually no dissent that everyone should say the full blessing on the day calculated by Shmuel.⁵

The truth is that the Rabbis themselves knew of R. Adda's more accurate solar cycle estimation, but specifically deemed Shmuel's rough approximation appropriate for the 28 year sun cycle.⁶ Clearly they were not concerned with accuracy. So our question is then: what is the intent of this blessing which is to make note of the creation of the sun, yet not at the true scientific time of its creation?

Perhaps the answer is alluded to in the words of the Minhat Yitzhak (8:34) who writes that in fact this blessing does not have its basis in physical reality.⁷ Indeed, as noted at the outset, the first difficulty with the Birkat Hahama is that we are denoting the creation as having taken place in Nissan when we normatively celebrate it in Tishrei.⁸ This point should already tip us off to the fact that we are not discussing an astronomical phenomenon but rather theological one. Indeed, R. J. D. Bleich (Contemporary Halachic Problems, Vol. II) writes, "... Birkat ha-Hammah ... is not responsive but rather evocative in nature." We do not say the blessing to denote a scientific moment but say it in acknowledgment of a theological one.

As such, an exegetical approach to our questions is appropriate. I propose that the answer to our quandary concerning the inaccuracy in the date of the blessing can be obtained by answering our first question as to why we are denoting creation in Nissan. That is, the blessing of Birkat Hahama must be understood in the context of the dispute between R. Eliezer, who argues that the creation took place in Tishrei, versus R. Yehoshua, who maintains that the creation took place in Nissan.⁹

Instructively, the month of creation is only one amongst a long list of events that the two Rabbis discuss:

Event	R. Eliezer	R. Yehoshua	
Creation	Tishrei	Nissan	disagree
Birth & Death of Patriarchs	Tishrei	Nissan	disagree
Birth of Yitzhak	Nissan	Nissan	agree
Sarah, Rachel, Hanna conceived	Tishrei	Tishrei	agree
Yosef released from Prison	Tishrei	Tishrei	agree
Servitude in Egypt Ceased	Tishrei	Tishrei	agree
Redemption from Egypt	Nissan	Nissan	agree
Messianic Redemption	Tishrei	Nissan	disagree

In reviewing the list of events, a pattern emerges wherein both agree that Tishrei is the time for "planting", or "seeding", a future which comes to fruition in Nissan.¹⁰ Consequently, R. Yehoshua simply believes that Creation is already the fruition of the thought that began in Tishrei; he sees the world as already destined for the perfection

⁵ Indeed, it is highly problematic for one to bless the sun at any other time, for such is considered to be idol worship (Tosefta Brachot ch. 6, see Encyc. Talmudit, Birkat Hahama).

⁶ See Bleich, Bircas HaChammah, p.58.

⁷ So too R. M. M. Schneerson (http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/820926/jewish/In-Depth.htm). Indeed another anomaly inherent in the calculations is that the first equinox falls out 7 days BEFORE creation itself (Smag Aseh 47; Yesod Olam 4:14)! As a result, the Chazon Ish (O.H. 138:2,9) states that the Birkat Hahama is simply a reminder "zicharon".

⁸ See Bleich, Bircas HaChammah, p.77, n.11.

⁹ Rosh Hashana 10b.

¹⁰ R. Y. Abarbanel (Ex.12:1) explains that the time from Tishrei to Nisan is the "pregnancy" upon which the "birth" takes place.

that God had planned in his initial thought. In contrast, R. Eliezer believes that Creation is the seed to which man must work to bring the world to fruition.

In the words of the Tosafot¹¹, “these and these are the word of the living God” – both opinions have their place in Jewish thought. That is, though we celebrate the creation of the world every year according to the opinion of R. Eliezer, thereby emphasizing that the completion of creation is dependant upon man’s perfection via repentance (Rosh Hashana being the inauguration of the 10 days of repentance); nevertheless, once in 28 years, we also give expression to the notion of R. Yehoshua, that ultimately, the world will be brought to its blessed conclusion, regardless of man’s participation. This idea is not one which should be emphasized, but one which should only be noted on rare occasion to remind man that God’s creation will be completed, regardless of man’s actions.

By blessing the sun according to R. Yehoshua’s opinion of creation, we acknowledge that creation and its ultimate halcyon conclusion are in the hands of God and will not be subject to man’s crafty calculations. Like the sun rising and setting without change, God’s will is unchanging and unstoppable.¹² I suggest that it is for this reason that the far less accurate calculation was chosen – in order that we not fool ourselves into thinking that, as great and deep as our knowledge of creation gets, we can ever out master the ultimate destiny that the Creator wills for His world.

As such, the blessing of Birkat Hahama is not about lining up the sun precisely to denote an astrological or astronomical event, it is about acknowledging the immutable destiny of creation, a destiny as immutable and unchanging¹³ as the sun itself. And this is why the very roughest of estimations is appropriate to define the time of the blessing, to emphasize that the blessing is not about astrology, not about astronomy but about destiny.

Interestingly, regarding the achievement of creation’s destiny, R. Eliezer and R. Yehoshua argue (San. 97b) about the nature of the final redemption. R. Eliezer propounds that the redemption will result as a consequence of Israel’s repentance; indeed, according with his opinion that Creation is dependant on man’s actions. R. Yehoshua maintains that irrespective of their repentance they will be redeemed, indeed according with his opinion that the world was created with its redemption “built in”. After some dispute, R. Yehoshua quotes a passage from Daniel (12:7) which leaves R. Eliezer, as the Talmud records, silent.

To recite Birkat Hahama is to acknowledge R. Yehoshua’s world view. To recite Birkat Hahama is to evoke awareness that God’s creation will be completed, regardless of man’s participation. We must recite this rare blessing in acknowledgment and awareness of divine destiny, with the prayer that we should merit to be a part of it, participating in hastening its completion – as expressed in the Gemara (San. 98a): ‘I the Lord will hasten in its time’ (Is. 60:22), that is, if they will be worthy, ‘I will hasten it’, and if not, then ‘in its time’.”

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¹¹ Rosh Hashana 27a.

¹² See Metzudat David (Tehilim 104:19).

¹³ Here the intent of “unchanging” is “as perceived by man”, for recent science has succeeded in noting a cyclical nature to the sun wherein every 11 years it goes through cooling and heating.