

Blessing of the Sun – Birkat Hachamah

from Harav Yitzchak Ginsburgh

Introduction

On the 14th of Nisan this year, 5769 (April 8, 2009), we will have the opportunity to recite one of the rarest blessings in Judaism, the blessing of the sun (בְּרַכַּת הַחֶמֶד).¹ The blessing of the sun is recited every 28 years, when, according to the astronomical computation of Shmu’el (a 3rd century Talmudic sage), the sun returns to the exact location relative to the earth where it was created on the fourth day of creation.

Four Cycles of Hakhel

The blessing of the sun is always recited in a *Hakhel* year (year of congregation), the year following a Sabbatical year (*Shemittah* year). The year is so named because of the congregation of the entire Jewish people on the last day of *Sukot* in this year, as commanded by the Torah,²

And Moshe commanded them saying, At the end of every seven years, in the Shemittah year, during the holiday of Sukot. When all of Israel come to be seen by God in the place that He will choose, you shall read this Torah before all of Israel, that they hear it. Congregate the people, the men, the women, and the children, and the strangers that live within your borders, so that they shall hear and learn to fear God, your God, and they shall observe and perform all the words of this Torah.

Since the blessing of the sun is recited every 28 years, it is recited every four *Hakhel* years. What is the significance of this cycle of four *Hakhel* years?

Indeed, when we look closely at the verse describing the congregation of the people during *Hakhel*, we see that the Torah enumerates four types:

1. the men,
2. the women,
3. the children, and
4. the strangers

Thus, *Hakhel* brings together four types of Jews. In fact, numerically, the *gematria* of *Hakhel* (הַחֶמֶד) is 140, or $4 \cdot 35$, where 35 is the value of “Jew” (יְהוּדִי). Since *Hakhel* has four



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letters, the average value of each letter is therefore a (type of) “Jew” (יהודי)! It follows therefore that each of the four *Hakhel* years highlights one of these types. In the first *Hakhel* of the cycle, the men; in the second, the women; in the third, the children; and, in the fourth, the strangers, i.e., converts (and resident aliens³).

These four types of Jews correspond to the four letters of *Havayah*, God’s essential Name, as follows,

type	letter	<i>partzuf</i>	Note
men	<i>yud</i>	<i>Abba</i> (father)	
women	<i>hei</i>	<i>Imma</i> (mother)	
children	<i>vav</i>	<i>Ze’er Anpin</i> (Small Countenance)	children are small, just as the Small Countenance is a smaller reflection of that which is above.
converts	<i>hei</i>	<i>Nukva</i> (Feminine)	correspond to the Divine Presence. A convert is accepted into the Jewish people under the wings, as it were, of the Divine Presence (<i>Shechinah</i>), the archetypal image of the feminine.

Thus, when the blessing of the sun is recited in the fourth *Hakhel* year, it is as if the souls of the entire congregation come together on this special occasion to function as a vehicle for the Divine Presence. All four parts of the Jewish people become one and like the four letters of God’s essential Name *Havayah*, form a unified whole. Indeed, the sun too, which we bless together on this special occasion is likened to God’s Name *Havayah*, as in the verse, “The sun and its shield are [like] *Havayah* and *Elokim*.”⁴

The Blessings of the Sun and the Moon

The blessing of the sun is, like all blessings over natural events, a glorification of the Creator (not of nature). It is actually the same blessing that we recite when seeing any of the extraordinary or awe-inspiring wonders or events of nature, such as for instance when seeing lightning, or when seeing the great deserts of the world, or the great mountain ranges, like the Himalayas, etc. The words of the blessing are,

Blessed are You, God, our God, Master of the universe, who reenacts the works of creation.

And in Hebrew,

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם עוֹשֵׂה מַעֲשֵׂה בְּרֵאשִׁית

There is of course no explicit mention of the sun, for this is another natural event.

In this respect, the blessing of the sun is different from the blessing of the moon. Once a month, following the rebirth of the moon (typically, on the *motza’ei* Shabbat following the 7th day of the new month, within the first half of the month), we recite a special blessing whose words are,

Blessed are You, God, our God, King of the universe, who with His utterance created the heavens, and with the breath of His mouth all of their hosts. He gave them a set law and time so that they should not alter their task. Gladly and full of joy, they carry out the will of their Creator, He who acts truthfully, whose actions are true. And He directed the moon to renew itself as a crown of glory to those who are borne [by Him] from birth. They too are destined to be renewed like her [the moon] and glorify their Creator for the Name of the glory of His kingdom. Blessed are You, God, who renews the months.

The reason for the difference is that the moon represents the Jewish people, who wax and wane as it does. And as stated in the blessing, “They [the Jewish people] too are destined to be renewed like her [the moon].” But, the sun represents the nations of the world, and specifically is considered an object of their worship, for which reason their calendar (particularly the Christian calendar) is based on its motion. In fact, among the sages, we find an opinion⁵ that it is forbidden to say a blessing over the sun, for it appears as the conduct of false religions.

Sanctifying Nature

With this in mind, the blessing over the sun receives an added dimension of meaning. By describing God as He “who reenacts the works of creation,” we proclaim that the sun is like all of nature and all of nature’s laws, all are re-created at every moment anew because of God’s will and all are governed solely by Him. By reciting the blessing at the (theoretical⁶) moment of the sun’s creation we are in effect reclaiming dominion over the sun as another part of God’s creation sanctified through our service.

In the context of the blessing of the sun, the verse that best describes this transfer of dominion over the meaning and purpose of nature is, “The might of His actions He has spoken to His people, in order to give them the inheritance of the nations.”⁷ In Hebrew, the *gematria* of the first word in this verse, “the might” (כֹּחַ) is 28, alluding to the 28 year cycle of the sun, at the end of which it returns to its initial location in the heavens. Moreover, the value of the entire verse (כֹּחַ מַעֲשֵׂיוֹ הִגִּיד לְעַמּוֹ לְתַתּ לָהֶם נַחֲלַת גּוֹיִם) is 2074, which is also the *gematria* of the words of the blessing “who reenacts the works of creation” (עוֹשֶׂה מַעֲשֵׂה בְּרֵאשִׁית), 1709 and 365, the number of days in a solar year! Elevating the “inheritance of the nations” to holiness is what is described in Kabbalah as the elevation of the sparks of holiness locked into mundane reality.

The Final Elevation of the Sparks

This verse also connects back to our observation that the blessing of the sun is recited once all four parts of the Jewish people are included, as above; specifically, after the

fourth cycle of 7 years, the cycle that corresponds to “the strangers,” i.e., the converts to Judaism.⁸ Converts (and righteous gentiles who have joined the Jewish people in service of God) are par excellence holy sparks that have found their way back to the Almighty.⁹ As the sages state, “The Jewish people were sent into exile for the sole purpose of receiving converts.”¹⁰

As noted, we recite the blessing every 28 years when the sun returns to the location in which it was created. This represents the pristine state of the sun before it became an object of worship by the nations of the world. As Maimonides explains,¹¹ idolatry began with worship of the sun (and the planets). In order to become the first believer in one God, Abraham had to first dismiss worship of the sun (and then of the moon, etc.). The numerical value of the initials of the words “inheritance of the nations” (נְחִלַת גּוֹיִם) is equal to “sun” (חַמָּה). Thus, there is no greater transfer of the inheritance of the nations of the world to the Jewish people than our ability to include the sun and a blessing over its creation by God into our service. Our ability to recite a blessing over the sun, contrary to its traditional association as an object of idolatry, represents the greatest victory over the false religions of the world. Reciting the blessing releases all the holy sparks from their bondage and grants us a unique opportunity to complete the service of clarification (עֲבוֹדַת הַבִּירוּרִים) thus ushering in a new era in which our only purpose will be to know God through the study of the Torah, a form of spiritual service known as the service of unification (עֲבוֹדַת הַיְחֻדִים).

Lights of Chaos in Rectified Vessels

In our generation, the Lubavitcher Rebbe¹² taught that in order for us to do our part in bringing redemption to the world we must take hold of the great lights of chaos and draw them down into the mature vessels of rectification. This description is based on the recognition that the great lights of chaos, like the holy sparks (that fell from the World of Chaos) are highly energetic and only they can provide the necessary power to bring about the change needed to usher in the Messianic era. But, because of their unrectified origin (i.e., high energy content), these lights/sparks need to be presented and used in an acceptable and normative way (i.e., to be placed in vessels of rectification).

The lights of chaos are associated with Esau, Jacob’s elder brother. About Esau the Torah says, “The first one came out, he was red....”¹³ It is specifically in the month of Nisan, which is called “the first month”¹⁴ that we are granted the power to achieve this directive—harnessing the lights of chaos in the rectified vessels/actions aimed at serving God and bringing the Mashiach. In the Bible, the Mashiach is likened to a plant¹⁵ which in the spring, the month of Nisan, buds and grows once again.

The sages describe the history of the world as divided into 3 periods of 2000 years each. The first 2000 years are described as the years of chaos; the second period of 2000 years as the years of Torah; and, the final 2000 years as the era of Mashiach, meaning that during these final 2000 years we are given the power to bring the world to a time of redemption and peace. Thus, the Messianic era is ushered in when we succeed in harnessing the tremendous creative energy of the first 2000 years (the years of chaos) in the pleasant and peaceful¹⁶ garments of Torah.

The Blessing and Kingship

The blessing of the sun is intrinsically linked with the office of the Jewish King, a connection that can be recognized from the following points:

The tremendous potential and energy found in the lights of chaos that the blessing of the sun has the power to rectify and bring under the dominion of the Torah comes from the crown, the reality that is beyond our understanding and knowledge. Unlike the other *sefirot*, the *sefirah* of crown has much light but few vessels. The ultimate purpose of the lights of the crown is attained in the commandment to appoint a king. Seeking and appointing a king, an exemplary individual who can truly lead the Jewish people, is perhaps the most difficult (and the most necessary) task we are faced with today. In a reality so filled with abusive, self-aggrandizing politicians seeking their own narrow self-interests, it is difficult to believe that there is a different type of leader, one who like King David can truly say, “I am lowly in my own eyes” and whose only purpose is to serve the Almighty. King David himself was, like Esau, of a reddish complexion and thus physically illustrated how the lights of chaos can be contained in a rectified vessel.

As noted, the blessing of the sun is recited every fourth *Hakhel* year, stressing its connection to the fourth part of the Jewish people, the converts. The commandment of *Hakhel*, of gathering the entire Jewish people (men, women, children, and converts), required that the king recite from the Torah before the congregation.¹⁷ Indeed, King David himself, who is destined to be the Mashiach, was the great-grandson of Ruth, the Moabite princess, who converted to Judaism. Ruth is considered the mother of all righteous converts and the sages learn many of the laws of conversion from her.

The connection between the blessing of the sun and the appointment of a Jewish king is further deepened when we recall that the month of Nisan is also the month of the New Year for Jewish Kings.¹⁸ In the relationship between the people and the king—the true leader—the people symbolize the moon who receives its light from the sun, symbolized by the king. Thus, perhaps the deepest intent one should have when blessing the sun this week is that we merit seeing the fulfillment of the prophecy, “And

then, the Jewish people will return to seek God their God and David, their king.”¹⁹ The existential demand for and appointment of a king, a true Jewish leader, represents the lights of chaos. Bringing together the many facets of our people (whether it be for Hakhel or for the blessing of the sun) represents the rectified vessel. When the king himself leads us by reading from the Book of Deuteronomy (as in Hakhel) or by reciting the blessing of the sun, this represents the lights of chaos within rectified vessels.

We end with a prayer that this year, when the blessing of the sun will be recited on the eve of Passover, the holiday of our liberty, we merit to see the embodiment of the sages saying that the “face of Moshe resembles the sun.”²⁰ About Moshe Rabbeinu, the sages say that “He is the first redeemer, he is the final redeemer.”²¹ Thus, the extension of Moshe Rabbeinu into our generation, that is, the leader of our generation also resembles the sun. In conjunction with the blessing of the sun, it is customary to add the blessing of time,

Blessed are You, God our God, King of the universe, who has granted us life, sustained us, and enabled us to reach this occasion.

This blessing is recited to express our great joy in having been granted the opportunity to witness and take part in this rare occasion. Still, in order to fulfill all requirements, it is customary to either wear a new, important article of clothing, or to place a new fruit that we intend to eat before us, and to have these in mind when reciting the blessing of time. Indeed, how wondrous it would be if we would merit that the blessing of time also include the momentous occasion of seeing the face of the Mashiach, the king of Israel and the redeemer. May he indeed appear immediately, in time for the blessing of the sun, and then we can truly bless God for having “granted us life, sustained us, and enabled us to reach this occasion.”

(based on a lecture given on Erev Rosh Chodesh Nisan, 5769, in Jerusalem)

¹. In Hebrew, there are three synonyms for the sun, שֶׁמֶשׁ, הַמָּאָה, and הַיָּרֵחַ (see *Rashi* to Judges 24:30). As explained elsewhere, these three synonyms correspond to the sun as it appears in each of the three lower worlds, Creation, Formation, and Action, respectively.

². Deuteronomy 31:10-12.

³. See *Ibn Ezra* to *Ibid.* 31:12.

⁴. Psalms 84:12. The correspondence between the sun and its shield and the two Names, *Havayah* and *Elokim* is treated in length in our forthcoming book on photosynthesis.

⁵. Rabbi Yehudah in the *Tosefta Berachot* 6:6.

⁶. We will explain this in an article on the astronomical computations involved in calculating the time for the blessing.

7. Psalms 111:6.

8. Or, as noted above the righteous gentiles, who have received the status of resident aliens in the Land of Israel.

9. As we will see in another article on the topic, the beginning of the counting of the 28 year cycles is in the 1st year of creation, which includes (in the revealed realm) only 5 days—from the 25th to the 29th of Elul. This year is called the Year of Chaos (שְׁנַת תְּהוֹמוֹת) and is associated with the World of Chaos from which the holy sparks fell into the mundane realm.

10. *Pesachim* 87b.

11. *Hilchot Avodah Zarah* 1:1.

12. The Lubavitcher Rebbe introduced this phraseology and entrusted it with us on the 28th day of Nisan (5751), again alluding to the word “might” (כֹּחַ), which equals 28 and appears in the verse, “The *might* of His actions He has spoken to His people, in order to give them the inheritance of the nations.”

13. Genesis 25:25. The color red symbolizes the burning of the blood with desire, the energy of the animal soul. Though this desire most often leads to negative actions, it has the potential to be used in a positive manner as well. See also *What You Need to Know About Kabbalah*, p. 25, n. 15.

14. Exodus 12:2.

15. Zachariah 6:12. See in length in our forthcoming book on photosynthesis.

16. As the verse states, “Her [the Torah’s] ways are pleasant and all her paths are peaceful” (Proverbs 3:17).

17. See in great length in our lecture of the 24th of Tevet, 5769.

18. See also our [article](#) on this topic.

19. Hosea 3:5.

20. *Bava Batra* 75a.

21. *Midrash Shmu’el* 14.