



Ask The Rabbi

Researched at Ohr Somayach, Jerusalem

This Issue Contains:

1. Eclipse
2. Yiddle Riddle
3. Public Domain



OHR SOMAYACH אוהר שומאך
TANENBAUM COLLEGE

21-28 August 1999

Issue #247

Parashat Ki Teitze / Ki Tavo

ECLIPSE

Nathan from Mombasa, Kenya, wrote:

Dear Rabbi,

"What is the Jewish significance of the recent solar eclipse?"

Dear Nathan,

To answer your question, I'm sending you the following essay. (It's from Ohr Somayach's "Torah and Nature" series available from our website <http://www.ohrnet.org> and by email from <info@ohr.org.il>).

The Solar Eclipse: Rays of Hope

What is the meaning of a solar eclipse? To the ancient Chinese, solar eclipses meant that dragons were devouring the sun. To the Czechoslovakians, they meant that ice giants, bitter enemies of the sun, were conquering it. To the Romans, they meant that the sun was poisoned and dying.

To the Jews, solar eclipses meant that the moon was passing between the sun and the earth, thereby blocking the sun's light.

Notwithstanding the physical explanation of a solar eclipse, there is also spiritual significance to it: At the time when the sun is eclipsed, it is an unfavorable period for the world. A parable: This can be compared to a human king who made a feast for his subjects, and placed a lantern before them. When he grew angry with them, he told his servant, "Take away the lantern from before them, and place them in darkness!" (*Talmud Bavli, Succah 29a*)

The king is G-d, the King of Kings; the people at the table are ourselves; the lantern is the sun. The moon obscuring the sun is the king's servant who takes away the lantern. Although eclipses can be described in entirely

natural terms and occur at set intervals, they nevertheless indicate that the period is one of Divine retribution for various sins.

So, a solar eclipse signifies a harsh period. But an eclipse does not mean that the sun has been extinguished (contrary to what everyone else in the world thought)! The servant did not extinguish the lantern; he merely prevented it from illuminating the king's subjects. The sun shines as merrily as ever during an eclipse, even if we cannot perceive its light.

Many eras in history have been dark for us. But during these times, we should remember that G-d's light has not been extinguished; it is merely in a state of *hester panim*, hiddenness. The sun is not extinguished during an eclipse, nor does it move away; it is merely concealed. And just as the sunlight always emerges from its eclipse, so too are all situations of *hester panim* only temporary, destined to be followed by the light of G-d's redemption.

Even during the darkness of a solar eclipse, all is not entirely in gloom. The sun is four hundred times further away from us than the moon, but it is also four hundred times larger than the moon (secular scientists call this a "grand coincidence"). This means that from our perspective the moon precisely covers the sun. The result of this is that while the sun is essentially obscured, shafts of sunlight may appear around the edge of the moon as they shine through the mountains on its surface (these can damage the retina, and it is therefore dangerous to look at a solar eclipse with anything less than a welder's mask). We can also perceive the glimmer of burning gases in the sun's outer atmosphere. Admittedly, the light presented by these sources is minimal, but it is certainly detectable.

When Yosef's brothers sold him to a passing caravan, we are taught that G-d arranged matters such that the merchants would be carrying sweet-smelling spices instead of their usual foul cargo. Now, this would appear to be of little comfort to Yosef. He had just been betrayed by his brothers and sold to heathens as a slave. What was the consolation in his prison quarters having a nice smell?

The answer is that precisely because this was the lowest point of Yosef's life, G-d wanted to show that He

If you have E-Mail and a question, you can submit it to Ask The Rabbi for possible inclusion in a future edition. Just write your question using your E-Mail program, set the subject to "Ask The Rabbi" and send it to info@ohr.org.il. Or use our form at <http://www.ohr.org.il/ask/page/ask.htm>. We can't include all questions submitted, but we do try to respond to everyone.

Ask The Rabbi is written by Rabbi Moshe Lazerus, Rabbi Reuven Lauffer, Rabbi Reuven Subar, Rabbi Avrohom Lefkowitz,

Rabbi Mordechai Becher and other Rabbis at Ohr Somayach Institutions / Tanenbaum College, Jerusalem, Israel.

Ask The Rabbi is available from several sources:

- World Wide Web: Our address is <http://www.ohrnet.org>
- E-Mail via InterNet. To subscribe, send the message "sub ask {your full name}" to listproc@vjlists.com

☎ 22 Shimon Hatzadik Street, POB 18103, Jerusalem Israel

☎ 38 East 29th Street 8th floor, New York, NY 10016, USA

☎ 613 Clark Avenue West, Thornhill, Ontario L4J 5V3, Canada

☎ 972-2-581-0315

☎ 1-212-213-3100

☎ 1-905-886-5730

☎ 972-2-581-2890

☎ 1-212-213-8717

☎ 1-905-886-6065

☎ info@ohr.org.il

☎ RZCorlin@aol.com or estern@Aol.com

☎ Somayach@MSN.com

General Editor: **Rabbi Moshe Newman**

Production Design: **Eli Ballon**

was still with him. He did not want Yosef to fall into despair, so He sent him a small sign to reassure him. This minor but significant gesture strengthened Yosef's spirits during his long ordeal.

Such is the message of the shafts of light, which we perceive during the darkness of a solar eclipse. They are literally "rays of hope," and they remind us that even during the dark periods of life, we are to look for those small signs that tell us that G-d is still with us.

Sources

- Aruch LeNer and Iyun Yaakov to Succah 29a
- Beit Elokim to Perek Shirah
- Rabbi Chaim Shmulevitz in Sichot Mussar

Addenda

Eclipses: Physics or Metaphysics?

The Talmud (*Succah 29a*) refers to eclipses of the sun and the moon as unfavorable periods for the world. It further states that solar eclipses occur for four different reasons: 1) If a Torah scholar is buried without being adequately eulogized; 2) If a betrothed girl is raped and nobody responds to her cries; 3) Homosexuality, and 4) Two brothers being killed at the same time.

The question is clear: Many ancient peoples believed that eclipses were unpredictable events. But we know that they follow a set pattern and can be calculated in advance. Did the Talmudic Sages not know this? How can eclipses be a punishment for sins if they occur at predictable times? Two basic approaches are taken to explain the Talmud.

The first approach states that the Talmud certainly knew that eclipses are physical and predictable events. Rabbi Yaakov Ettlinger (*Aruch LeNer ad loc.*) notes that the

Talmud clearly understood solar eclipses to be caused by the moon obscuring the sun, as is clear from the parable that it uses. He also points out that the Talmud uses the seemingly superfluous wording, "at the time when the sun is eclipsed, it is an unfavorable period," when it could have simply said "when the sun is eclipsed." The word *z'man*, "time," is related to the word "*zamen*," prepared. (Every time it appears in Tanach, it is written only in reference to pre-appointed times.) Thus, the usage of this word shows that eclipses were known to be pre-arranged and predictable events. However, this does not present a contradiction to their being portenders of sin. Rabbi Ettlinger and the Iyun Yaakov explain that during eclipses, G-d exacts retribution for certain sins. Certain periods are set aside for Divine justice to be meted out, and these are indicated in the physical universe by eclipses.

*A different approach is taken by Rabbi Yonasan Eybeschitz (Ya'arot Devash 2:12). He explains the Talmud's term *likuy ha-chamah*, literally "the striking of the sun," to be referring not to solar eclipses but to sunspots. These are cool dark patches on the face of the sun (often larger than the Earth), caused by magnetic storms. These being events of unknown occurrence, he explains them to be a sign of G-d's displeasure. Indeed, sunspots send vast amounts of charged protons into our atmosphere, and several studies have tentatively shown corresponding variations in animal populations and incidence of disease among people. Rabbi Eybeschitz states that people of earlier times were more sensitive to such aberrations of the sunlight. Although sunspots and solar storm disturbances occur in an approximately eleven-year cycle, this can vary from seven to sixteen years.*

Yiddle Riddle

Eliyahu Shiffman < sarash1@netvision.net.il > wrote with this riddle: "I am a *levi*. There is one thing I have never witnessed in my entire adult life, and I never will either. *Yisraelim* sometimes see it, so do *kohanim*, but me and my fellow *levi'im*? Never! What is it?"

Answer next week...

THE PUBLIC DOMAIN

*Comments, quibbles, and reactions
concerning previous "Ask-the-Rabbi" features*

Ohrnet Express:

Thank you so much for answering my question submitted to "Ask the Rabbi."

I really appreciated the time you took for the explanation. I didn't expect really to ever see an answer, or I figured I might get an answer in months! Wow, I was amazed at how fast I got an answer!

Donna <Puffins@aol.com>

A serious concern that one may have eating carnivorous plants is the likely possibility that there may be insects (half-digested or otherwise) within the cavities and folds of the plant or on its surface. So before tossing that pitcher plant salad careful inspection is in order.

Eliyahu Lee, Bayport, NY <EResearch@worldnet.att.net>

Re: Preying Plants (Ohrnet Shoftim):

Take part in

THE PUBLIC DOMAIN

Send your comments to: info@ohr.org.il

You can submit your questions to

Ask The Rabbi

with your web browser from the page:

www.AskTheRabbi.org

Or if you want to use e-mail, address it to: info@ohr.org.il