

## The Blessing of the Sun

By Nina Beth Cardin

And God said: Let there be lights in the vastness  
of the sky to separate day from night...  
And they shall serve as lights in the  
breadth of space, to shine upon the earth.  
And it was so.  
(*Genesis 1:14 -15*)

The rabbis of the Talmud tell us that once every 28 years, the sun returns to the same place, at the same time of day and same day of the week as at the moment of its creation. (Berakhot 59a). This confluence of events, a restaging of the heavens as they were at the beginning of time, is not a moment to be overlooked in the rabbinic imagination. So, they bid us to celebrate this re-enactment of the creation of the sun every 28 years.

At the first rays of sunrise on this day of blessing, we are to go outside, face east and recite:

Blessed are You, Adonai, our God and God of all the universe, who makes all things in creation.

The next time we mark this event, called Birkat Hahammah, the blessing of the sun, will occur on Wednesday morning, April 8, 2009.

According to rabbinic calculations, this celebration will mark the 206th cycle of the sun's full return to its time and place at creation since its birth.

Originally, the moment selected for the celebration was the spring equinox. But, you might ask, if the equinox occurs in late March (around March 21), why do we celebrate it in early April? While the answer is a bit complex, the short explanation is that the original annual calculations were based on the Julian calendar which counted the year as having 365.25 days. The true solar year, however, is closer to 365.242199.

While that might not seem like a big difference, over a thousand years these minutes add up to a variance of 7.81 days. While the Gregorian calendar corrected for this disjuncture by dropping 10 days from the calendar in the year 1582 c.e., the rabbinic calendar did not make this adjustment. Add the leap days that were not added on the centuries divisible by 400, and you get an 18 day discrepancy.

The astronomical accuracy of this celebration aside, the thrust and message of this celebration endures. We are bidden to take a moment, once, twice or three times in our

lifetime, depending on the span of days with which we are gifted, and to turn our attention to this amazing, blazing ball in the sky which gives us light, warmth, comfort, and energy.

And then we turn and thank God for this divine, celestial goodness that God has bestowed upon us.

This year, Birkat Hahammah falls on erev Pesah, the morning of the first seder.

This gives us two wonderful opportunities.

We can base our study leading up to our siyyum that morning on texts regarding the sun. (You can find a link to a newly published Massechet Hahammah, an anthology of Jewish texts based upon images of the sun, at [www.blessthesun.org](http://www.blessthesun.org).)

Or we can build upon our burning of the hametz early the morning of erev Pesah, wrapping around it a larger recitation of psalms and prayers about the sun. (Check out [http://www.kehillaton.com/en/docs/birkat\\_hachama.pdf](http://www.kehillaton.com/en/docs/birkat_hachama.pdf) for a lovely, brief Birkat Hahammah liturgy.) The hametz we burn can reflect and recall the burning of gases at the center of the solar system which gives us energy, heat and life to support life on this precious planet.

This year, however, perhaps more than any other in the history of the earth, we need to learn how truly amazing and essential the sun is. We have been living these past 200 years in a technological revolution that has both elevated the quality of life for much of humanity as well as laid the groundwork for our self-destruction. Now we know that things must change. We must wean ourselves off fossil fuels for several reasons: (a) it is a limited resource; (b) as such, its cost will increase as its availability and accessibility decline; (c) mining it increasingly denudes, degrades and destroys this world; and (d) burning it releases enormous volumes of greenhouse gases that have been safely sequestered for millions of years. Once released, they blanket our world for hundreds more years with suffocating heat.

Birkat Hahammah, an occasion which teaches us to be amazed at the miracle of the creation of the sun, can mobilize us to change our behaviors and our society to create a more sustainable technological, and more embracing spiritual, culture.

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