

Eclipsing Hate **A Sermon for Our Timesⁱ**

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How many people saw all or part of the eclipse live or on simulcast this summer? For a brief few hours, the sun and the moon accomplished what presidents, political activists, and pundits have failed to do: unite our nation.

David and I were driving home from a two week vacation in Canada as we listened to CNN's Wolf Blitzer speak with reporters as the totality reached their communities, first in Salem, Oregon, then in communities moving east. By the time the eclipse had reached the Midwest, I was searching google on my smart phone for a place off I-95 where we could stop and see at least the partial eclipse viewable from where we were driving in New England.

I found a notice that the Waltham Massachusetts Public Library was hosting an eclipse viewing on their front lawn. There was some criticism in the press about how the library's order of special glasses didn't arrive because the supplier had run out of stock. But the article continued that the library was providing the materials for everyone to make their own pin hole cameras. David and I decided to pull in.

Have any of you ever been to Waltham? Waltham is a suburb of Boston, proud home of two universities, Bentley and Brandeis. You may know that Brandeis was founded as a Jewish alternative to the Ivy League universities at a time when there were strict quotas that blocked aspiring Jewish students from the education and opportunities a fine university offered. The town was a manufacturing center in the 1800s. Walking along the streets, it looked like Waltham was recovering from the economic hardship experienced by many east coast industrial towns. The sidewalks were paved in brick and some small cafes and a homemade ice cream parlor stood shoulder to shoulder with the kind of stores David and I know from our old, rundown, not yet gentrified neighborhood in Brooklyn.

In the midst of this renewal stood the library. Built in 1915 in majestic Georgian style brick, it was surrounded by an expansive tree shaded lawn. It was on this lawn that the librarians had set up a craft table so people could make pin hole cameras. Contrary to the reports, they had procured a handful of solar glasses. Everyone shared. Everyone was considerate of each other. No one hogged the glasses. There was no jostling or competition. There were no lines. We just gathered in small or not so small groups with people we had never met before, all caught up together in the excitement of the eclipse.

Because we had to share glasses, we didn't just look up. We looked at each other. All different ages, races, and religions were gathered on the lawn. There was a woman in a hijab and another in dreadlocks. David and I befriended a woman who had just that week arrived from India. Another was a woman from Guatemala with her daughter and grandson who were visiting from New Jersey. They spoke Spanish with each other and English with us. Her daughter had brought binoculars. The librarian showed her how to use them to create a magnified pin hole camera. She and I worked together. I held the white board and she the binoculars as a crowd gathered around us, raising a cheer whenever a clear image appeared and opening up the circle to make sure the kids, the *muchachos*, could see. The woman and I made a great team. We were at it for over an hour. After the eclipse maximum was reached, the crowd began to disperse. She

and I looked at each other and reached across the white board to embrace in a bear hug before we went our separate ways.

David and I only saw about 70 percent of the eclipse in Waltham but we saw 100 percent of what America is and can be together: helpful, respectful, cooperative, kind, caring and diverse.

Experiencing the eclipse at Waltham library was not just a respite from the hate and violence witnessed in Charlottesville the previous week. It was a *tikkun*, a repair, a hope for what America can be. For what God created the world to be.

Looking up with my glasses, looking around without them, I recited a blessing.

As the Rabbi says in *Fiddler on the Roof*, there is a blessing for everything, and indeed there are indeed several blessings for natural phenomena. In true Jewish fashion, there is a debate about which blessing should be recited for an eclipse. One opinion argues that eclipses historically evoked fear and, like lightening, are dangerous. Thus the blessing should be *baruch atah... shekoho u-gvurato malei olam*, "Blessed are You, Lord our God, Sovereign of the universe, whose might and power fill the universe." The other opinion argues that the eclipse is one obvious example of how the universe works so well together and thus the blessing should be the same one we recite for majestic mountains, *Baruch atah... oseh maasei bereishit*, "Blessed are You, Lord our God, ... who made the workings of the creation."

A *teshuvah* (rabbinical decision) written for the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, on which I sit, prefers the lightening blessing but permits the mountain blessing that honors the workings of creation, and that is the one I recited. *Baruch atah adoshem elokeinu melech haolam oseh maaseh bereshit*, "Blessed be God who made the workings of creation, the unique orbits of our sun and moon that give us time, tides, life, and such wonders as diversity, that enrich the world and our lives."

David and I got back into the car in time to catch the end of the coast to coast coverage of this astronomical phenomena. Earth is the only place in the universe found so far that has the right sized moon and sun with the right orbits to align so perfectly as to cause a total solar eclipse. I think the eclipse touched so many of us so deeply, united us across coasts and politics, race and faith, because it forced us to see something so much greater than ourselves. It forced us to confront, if only for a few minutes, our dependence upon the God given gift of the sun and the moon, without which none of us could live. It humbled us and awed us as few things have the power to do anymore, perhaps because we had absolutely no control over it, only over how we responded to it. And across the country, we who had been - and continue to be - such a torn, wounded and divided nation, were united for a few brief hours because the sun and the moon came together.

Perhaps we can too.

One of the most powerful sections, one of the most powerful commands in our Torah is that we should appoint leaders who will govern with *mishpat tzedek*: with the rule of law and justice: this Torah section continues with one of the most famous verses in all of the Torah, *tzedek, tzedek tirdof*, "Justice, justice shall you pursue." That command is not just directed to our leaders but to all of us.

For a few hours, the solar eclipse eclipsed the hate we have witnessed and replaced it with a reminder of who we can be as people and as a People, one nation united under God in all of our diversity, with liberty and justice for all.

Whether that vision is transformed into reality is up to all of us. Please join me, therefore, in reciting this prayer praising God's glory in creating the wonders of creation, which

includes astronomical wonders and biological human diversity. *Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech Haolam oseh maasei bereishit*: Blessed are you, Lord our God, Sovereign of the universe who created the workings of creation. May the glory and wonder You created and shared with us in this eclipse continue to inspire us in the weeks and months and years ahead to look beyond ourselves and appreciate and dedicate ourselves to protecting the glory of wonder at the diversity You created among us. And let us say, Amen.

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