

Shedding Light: What Do Eclipses Portend?

Adapted from the writings of Dayan Yitzhak Grossman

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An annular solar eclipse occurred on Shabbos Bereishis and was visible in a narrow swath of the American West. Named for the Latin word for ring, an annular eclipse occurs when the moon passes before the sun but is far enough from Earth that from our perspective, it doesn't block the sun completely. Instead, the moon blocks most of the sun but leaves an outer ring of sun—a "ring of fire"—visible. This Shabbos, Parshas Lech Lecha, there will be a partial lunar eclipse.

Reciting a *bracha* on an eclipse

R' Chaim Dovid Halevi maintains that no *bracha* is recited upon viewing an eclipse, because Chazal only instituted *brachos* on what they considered to be natural phenomena, but they considered eclipses to be Divine signs.[1] R' Yaakov Yisrael Kanievsky (the Steipler) is also quoted saying that no *bracha* is recited on solar eclipses.[2] While he is not recorded offering a rationale for this, his son R' Chaim is cited explaining that it is because eclipses are not good signs.[3] R' Chaim is also reported as having declared (not necessarily in the context of eclipses) that "we have nothing beyond what Chazal established," i.e., we do not recite *brachos* on phenomena that Chazal didn't say warrant one.[4]

R' Shmuel Wosner (the Sheivet Halevi), however, is reported to have expressed uncertainty about whether a *bracha* should be recited on a solar eclipse.[5]

Eclipses as signs

Chazal certainly do seem to maintain that eclipses are bad signs:

When the sun is diminished, it is a bad sign for the entire world...

It was taught in a *breisa*: R' Meir says, whenever the luminaries are diminished, it is a bad sign for the enemies of the Jewish People (a euphemistic reference to the Jewish People themselves)...

The Rabanan taught in a *breisa*: When the sun is diminished, it is a bad sign for idolaters. When the moon is eclipsed, it is a bad sign for the enemies of the Jewish people, because the Jews calculate (the calendar) by the moon and the idolaters calculate by the sun. When the sun is diminished while it is in the east (i.e., in the morning), it is a bad sign for those who live in the east. In the west (in the afternoon), it is a bad sign for those who live in the west. In the middle of the sky (at midday), it is a bad sign for the entire world...

The Rabanan taught in a *breisa*: On account of four things the sun is diminished: for the head of a *bais din* who dies and is not eulogized properly; for a betrothed maiden who was raped and cried out for help in the city, but no one saved her; for homosexual relations; and for two brothers whose blood was spilled at the same time.

On account of four things the luminaries are diminished: for writers of forged documents; for those who give false testimony; for those who raise small livestock in Eretz Yisrael; and for those who cut down fruit trees.[6]

Many thinkers, however, struggle with the concept of eclipses as signs in light of their regularity and predictability. The first Jewish source of which this author is aware that acknowledges that eclipses are entirely natural phenomena is the important medieval astronomical work *Yesod Olam* by R' Yitzchak Yisraeli ben Yosef, a *talmid* of the Rosh, at whose behest he composed the work.[7] The author explains that the aforementioned Gemara passage is actually explaining the purely astronomical causes of eclipses, and it is speaking allegorically, in riddles and allusions.[8]

R' Yitzchak Arama (the Akeidas Yitzchak) also interprets the Gemara allegorically. He rejects out of hand its straightforward reading as preposterous and false, declaring that "it is not a condition of adherence to the Torah to accept obvious falsehoods." He approvingly cites the Muslim philosopher al-Ghazali's rejection of a similar idea of eclipses constituting omens apparently held by Muhammad, in the course of which al-Ghazali states that greater harm is caused to religion by one who takes such things literally and accepts them than by one who challenges them.[9]

R' Yonasan Eybeschutz makes the ingenious suggestion that the Gemara is actually referring to sunspots ("which have no known cause"), not eclipses.[10] Although "the details of sunspot formation are still a matter of ongoing research,"[11] and the formation and location of individual sunspots are not entirely predictable,[12] sunspots are nevertheless considered by scientists to be just as rooted in the laws of nature as eclipses. Additionally, our Gemara refers to both the sun and the moon (and the "luminaries"), and while starspots do exist,[13] to the best of my knowledge there are no moonspots.

R' Dovid Pardo says that since ordinary eclipses are natural and predictable phenomena, they cannot be signs, and he suggests that Chazal were referring to special eclipses that occur unexpectedly.[14] (I do not know if records exist of the occurrence of any such eclipses.)

But while Rav Arama, Rav Eybeschutz, and Rav Pardo (as well as R' Chaim Dovid Halevi) all take for granted that the predictability and natural character of eclipses is inconsistent with their constituting omens and interpret Chazal's comments accordingly, others argue that there is no contradiction between the two perspectives.

The Rama agrees with the *Yesod Olam* that the passage is allegorical and that its true meaning concerns the secrets of astronomy (although he disagrees with that work as to the correct interpretation of the allegory). But he still maintains that although Chazal's references to the causes of eclipses are allegorical and their true causes are actually astronomic, their characterization of a solar eclipse as a bad sign is meant literally, "because although it is a natural event, nevertheless, so did Hashem Yisbarach decree, that it shall be a sign to the inhabitants of the world." [15]

R' Yehudah Loew (the Maharal), R' Yeshayah Horowitz (the Shelah), and R'

Yaakov Etlinger (the Aruch Laneir) also maintain that there is no contradiction between the understanding of eclipses as natural phenomena and Chazal's characterization of them as signs. They offer various approaches to harmonize these perspectives, one of which (offered by the Shelah) is that Hashem's omniscience makes it possible for Him to order the world in such a way that eclipses occur at the appropriate times, in reflection of human sinfulness.[16]

[1]Shu"t Asei Lecha Rav *cheilek* 5 *siman* 7 pp. 90-92.

[2]Orchos Rabeinu *cheilek* 1 O.C. *cheilek* 2 *siman* 121 p. 95.

[3]See Sha'ar Ayin (Ariel) p. 77.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Ibid. p. 78.

[6]Sukkah 29a.

[7]See Yesod Olam (Berlin 5608), Introduction, p. 2(a).

[8]Ibid. *ma'amar* 3 end of *perek* 17 p. 58 s.v. *Ve'achar shenisba'er kol zeh*.

[9]Akeidas Yitzchak, Mevo She'arim p. 19b s.v. *Vecha'asher siyeim*, and cf. Sha'ar 14 (Parashas No'ach) p. 126b.

[10]Ya'aros Dvash *cheilek* 2 pp. 63a-b.

[11]Wikipedia contributors. Sunspot. In Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Sunspot&oldid=1170422913>.

[12]See Wikipedia contributors. Solar cycle. In Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Solar_cycle&oldid=1176153474; Wikipedia contributors. Spörer's law. In Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Sp%C3%B6rer%27s_law&oldid=1062556238

[13]See Wikipedia contributors. Starspot. In Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Starspot&oldid=1170036737>.

[14]Chasdei Dovid, Sukkah ibid. p. 120 s.v. *Mipnei arba'ah dvarim*.

[15]Toras Ha'olah (Prague 5614) *cheilek* 1 *perek* 8 pp. 34a-35a.

[16]Be'er Hagolah, Be'er 6 (the author is responding to the comments of Azariah dei Rossi (Min Ha'Adumim) in Me'or Einyaim (Vilna 5626), Imrei Binah *perek* 54 p. 445); Shnei Luchos Habris, *cheilek* 3, Torah Shebichsav-Migdal Oz; Aruch Laneir, Sukkah ibid. s.v. *Sham tanu Rabanan bizman shehachamah lokah*.