

# Of Passover, Peoplehood & The Sun; JPost Cover Story

Posted April 7, 2009

Apr 7, 2009 9:40 | Updated Apr 7, 2009 9:57

## Of Pessah, peoplehood and the sun

By [YOSEF ISRAEL ABRAMOWITZ](#)

KIBBUTZ KETURA

At 6:22 a.m. on Wednesday, April 8, the sun will peak over the imposing 800-million-year-old mountains of Edom, bathing the Arava Valley below in light, and triggering one of the rarest and least-known Jewish rituals: Birkat Hahama, the Blessing of the Sun, is celebrated every 28 years in Jewish communities [around the world](#), across the spectrum of Jewish observance.

This year, the blessing dawns as we burn our *hametz* and prepare for that evening's Seder. The next magic moment in history when the blessing falls on Erev Pessah will be 532 years from now.

Sixteen [hundred years](#) ago in Babylonia, the rabbis codified the Talmud, and with it, the Birkat Hahama ritual: "Our Rabbis taught: One who sees the sun in its season, the moon in its [power](#), the stars in their paths, and the planets in their order, says, 'Blessed is the Maker of Creation.'" (*Masechet Brachot* 59b). "And when is the Sun in its season? Abaye says: Every 28 years, when the cycle resets and the Spring equinox falls in Saturn on Tuesday evening, the eve of Wednesday."

According to the Book of Genesis, the Sun, Moon, and stars were created on the fourth day (Genesis 1:14), and so the celebration of Birkat Hahama always occurs on a Wednesday morning. The Sun is traditionally greeted with a blessing and Psalms: "Blessed are You, Ruler of the Universe, who makes Creation." It is believed that every 28 years at this moment, the celestial bodies orbit back to the exact place in the heavens where they stood at the Creation.

### **Science and Wonder**

The simple ritual bursts with cosmic significance. At the heart of Judaism is a recognition and celebration that God is the Creator, and that the universal God Jews pray to, argue with, love, and occasionally ignore or fear, is - like the mysteries of the universe itself - never-ending. The Jewish revolution, baked in the deserts, not only rejects a physical God, but actually dilutes the power of any physical manifestation of God as simply yet another creation of the Ultimate Creator.

A common belief among the ancients - from the Aztecs in Mexico to the Inca of South America to our first theological antagonists, the Egyptians - all quite understandably considered the sun to be God. We Jews, as idol-smashers, have something to say about this.

Today's scientists understand the sun to be not everlasting and omnipotent, but 4.75 billion years old, which puts it about halfway through its life cycle. The actual photons that will blaze onto us Wednesday morning will be generated by nuclear fusion of hydrogen into helium at the sub-atomic

level. That set of explosions will zap light from the sun at 6:13 a.m. local time, and travel 149,600,000 kilometers through space in about the time it takes to prepare matza, landing at 6:22 a.m.

The sheer vastness of the space between the sun and humanity is startling and humbling, yet dwarfed by the position of the sun - the center of [our solar system](#) - in relation to the Milky Way galaxy. The specific sun we bless - only one of a trillion trillion suns in the universe - orbits the center of our galaxy every 225 million years, which is considered one galactic year (what's the blessing for that?).

Since the impressive astronomical comprehension on the part of the Talmudic rabbis of 400 CE, our sense of scale of the universe has grown exponentially, especially in recent years as new discoveries are made. Yet our ethical sense of purpose has not kept pace with our increased scientific understanding of the expanding Heavens. Given the increased human-caused tragedies that have befallen our planet since the last time we blessed the sun in 1981 - i.e., global warming, genocides, billions living in poverty, unprecedented greed - it could be argued that our sense of ethical purpose has actually diminished.

### **Pessah vs. the Cult of Death**

The commentators are surprisingly silent on the spiritual, revolutionary, idol-smashing linkage between Birkat Hahama and Pessah. Since Birkat Hahama falls this year on the Fast of the Firstborn - only the sixth time it does so in the past 2,000 years - the occasion can take on additional meaning and help restore a sense of purpose to the Jewish People in our era.

Twenty-eight years is essentially a generation. And in each of the 250 or so generations since the Exodus, we are commanded to retell our story of slavery unto freedom. Preceding the Seder with a rarely occurring blessing over the sun and to the sun's Creator is to openly challenge Pharaoh and all cults of death.

A cult of death defined ancient Egypt's empire, culture, and religion. The City of the Dead in Luxor and the entire mummification belief system wrapped death-worship in glory. Pharaoh's religious and political hierarchy reinforced the cult of death, the same cult that enslaved our people and drowned our infant males.

While the first eight plagues beleaguered the Egyptians, it was the final two that illuminated who was boss: Pharaoh and his Sun God, Ra, were rendered powerless in matters of light and darkness, life and death. The invisible God of the lunar-oriented Hebrews essentially extinguished the bright light of Ra. We knew and know that it wasn't Ra who proclaimed "Let there be light" on the first day of Creation, nor was it Ra who established the celestial bodies on the fourth day.

Every year, we are freed anew from Egyptian bondage in order to affirm that we are, in partnership with the Creator, the perpetual cult of life, in contradistinction to ancient Egypt or any other system that glorifies death or authoritarian rule.

Consider the role of priests. In Egypt, the priests were facilitators of the cult of death. When we escaped to these deserts, God made it clear that our priests must avoid the dead. Much in Jewish life

and belief developed so that through the annual telling of the Pessah story (and a generational sun blessing), the Jewish people would perpetually be the ultimate anti-Egypt.

Absolute truths are often associated with death cults, for the penalty of challenging these so-called truths was often the sword and more recently, the gas chamber or the suicide bomber. Judaism, for all its biblical violence and absolutes, has been tempered over time with rabbinic wisdom.