The Eclipse

Rosh Hashanah I: TIJCC 2017

On August 21st, exactly a month ago today, I felt like time stood still. It lasted for close to two minutes. I was at Great Smokey Mountains National Park in Tennessee, standing with Alla, Laurence and Ariel and maybe ten thousand other people, staring up at the sky experiencing the total eclipse of the sun. Todd and Molly Bakal were there too among those thousands in the Great Smokies. Josh, Suzie, Ethan and Aaron Holden saw it in Oregon. My brother Josh and his family saw it in Nebraska. Rabbi Gloria and Marty Rubin travelled to Nashville to see it, but an unfortunate cloud came along at the wrong time. Did anyone else here travel to see the totality? Brain Dellatore, though he did not go himself, put the idea in my head so he gets extra credit. Many planned the journey months in advance, so much so that there were no hotel rooms available if you decided to go last minute, as I did. Alla and I were hosting the Sunday morning minyan at our house on Woodbine Court, and then we packed up the left-overs and the extra coffee, I told the kids to take pillows for the back seat, and into the car and off we went. The plan was to go to South Carolina, which was the closest point to us where one could witness the totality. But South Carolina had clouds and rain in the forecast, so I made a quick right turn onto I-78 into Pennsylvania, and then continued with I-81 through the Shenandoah valley of western Virginia and eventually Tennessee. We arrived by the entrance to the national park just before sunrise on Monday morning, and soon after followed the slow traffic to the viewing place that the National Park Service were directing people toward. The way home was even more taxing. Took close to two hours to just get out of the park and back on the highway. By 11pm I pulled

over to take a couple hours nap. Woke up at 1am and kept driving, and we got back to Ridgewood by about noon on Tuesday. Kept taking five minute breaks at the highway rest stops to stretch my legs, and I have to tell you, every one, from Tennessee through Virginia into West Virginia and Maryland, was filled with hundreds of cars all on the same trek. Each time we had to find a creative parking spot, as car after car had kids and pillows in the back seats, coolers of food in the trunks, a van of college students here, a couple in a convertible over there, moms taking their little charges to the bathroom at 3 in the morning. 1500 miles later as we pulled back into our driveway, after several tanks of gas, probably more liters of coffee and Coke Zero, and in great need of sleep, I never stopped once to question if it was all worth it.

People say that witnessing a total solar eclipse can be a life-changing experience. My brother who drove from Denver to somewhere in Nebraska to see it set up a special Facebook group to share eclipse stories and thoughts, as if we are now groupies in some odd international cult. There are "eclipse-chasers" who travel the globe to witness totality wherever it may be. And yes, I imagine I may try to see it again when it next comes nearby in 2024. I'll have to remember to make a reservation.

The emotions are complicated when you look up at the sun and see only the moon and the corona of light struggling to burst out around its circumference. In the Talmud (Sukkah 29a) we find the following discussion:

> Our Rabbis taught: When the sun is in eclipse it is a bad omen for the whole world.
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> To what can this be compared? To a flesh and blood king who made a banquet for his servants and put a lamp in front of them. When he got angry with them he said to his servant, "Take the lamp away from them, and let them sit in the dark.

> Our Rabbis taught, When the sun is in eclipse it is a bad omen for idolaters; when the moon is in eclipse, it is a bad omen for Israel, since Israel reckons by the moon [that is, we use a lunar calendar] and idolaters by the sun [that is, they use a solar calendar]. If it is in eclipse in the east, it is a bad omen for those who live in the east; if in the west, it is a bad omen for those who live in the west; if in the midst of heaven it is a bad omen for the whole world.

Eclipses are wondrous and extraordinary, but also scary and confusing. Just after we witnessed the totality in Great Smokey Mountains National Park we saw two dogs barking like crazy at each other, despite how hard their human masters tried to calm them down. Clearly, they were unnerved by the two minutes night followed by day again. My colleague Rabbi Joshua Heller, whose father served this congregation decades ago, wrote a responsum from the Rabbinical Assembly on the question of what brakhah, what blessing, we should say upon seeing an eclipse. There are many rabbinic opinions that say no brakhah should be said because an eclipse is a bad omen, a sign of bad luck, as the Talmud suggested, and so why would we say a brakhah over something like that? Others disagreed, arguing that we should say a brakhah, some holding because it can't be an omen at all if it is completely predictable, while others holding that it may be a bad omen, but we say brakhot over the bad as well as the good, so as to still recognize God's sovereignty. And then they disagreed over which brakhah to say, either praising the beauty of the creation or the power of Gods' might.

Lots of different views, as is the nature of rabbinic culture. I brought my friend's paper with me to Tennessee, planning to read it there, as it would have been appropriate reading material for a rabbi watching an eclipse, and I would have then known what brakhah to say. But

as we got out of the car and set up our lawn chairs on the meadow a few hours before the event, taking out the cooler with the food and drinks to enjoy a pleasant afternoon in that sunny meadow, under the shade of a grove of tall trees with thousands of others, surrounded by rolling hills of green, quiet and peacefulness, I promptly fell asleep, only to wake up just in time to get my special eclipse glasses on and witness the event, as the sun started to look like the crescent we think of the moon as, but much brighter, and then over the course of the hour the crescent diminished and diminished.

So there were two possible brakhot to say. Not having read the paper on time, I chose one of the two. When I read the paper later that week I saw that Rabbi Heller suggested saying the other brakhah. Oh well. He did say that the one I chose was not incorrect, just not as optimal. Good enough.

Since the eclipse, over the last month, I have been thinking more about the theological rather than the halakhic implications of what I saw. No, I do not believe that an eclipse is an omen, good or bad. For that matter, I don't believe in omens anyway, so I'm not the rabbi to speak to that issue. Eclipses are predictable to the exact detail of where and when they will occur. There is nothing supernatural about them. They are a part of the world, an element that we celebrate today on Rosh Hashanah, recognized in Jewish tradition as the birthday of the world, the day that God began to create.

What interests me more is the metaphor of an eclipse, and the emotions of faith and despair and hope that it evokes by those who experience it. Martin Buber, the great twentieth century Jewish theologian of existentialism, gave a series of lectures in American universities in the fall of 1951, and the collection, published in 1952, is called *Eclipse of God.* I had studied

Martin Buber when I was in rabbinical school, but I spent the last couple weeks reading this book cover to cover, and I understand him in a radically new way. Buber's theology is all about the personal encounter with God. He challenges the philosophers, arguing that faith is not about postulates and idea, dogmas and creeds, but about what burns in the heart, what one feels I the soul. Buber, a product of German Jewry, is best known for his *I and Thou.* He argues that our relationship with God cannot be an objective relationship, what he calls an I-It, relationship, but rather an I-Thou relationship, an experience of intimate encounter. It does not translate well into contemporary English. You need to know that the "thou" of old English is the *informal* you. The distinction between the formal and informal second person is a nuance preserved in many other languages but lost in English today. Just this past Monday, the clue for 16-across in the New York Times crossword puzzle was "You in the Bible" four letters. I'm good at the Monday puzzle! But "thou" was the way you said "you" in old English if you were speaking to your spouse or child or parent or friend. But never to your boss or employee, and not I suppose to your rabbi, where we use language to maintain distance. But the editors of the King James Bible in the early seventeenth century used "thou" as the second person pronoun between us and God. Hebrew makes no such distinction. (Hebrew is a very easy language despite all our complaints about it!) Knowing when to say "thou" is one of the hardest parts of learning a language that makes that distinction, as I found when I started to learn German. *Ich und Du,* is what Martin Buber said in his native tongue. We need to close the distance between us and God. We need to relate to God intimately, in our hearts and souls. That was the great lesson he taught.

Buber left Germany as the Nazis came to power, and settled in Jerusalem, finding a home in the new secular Zionist university, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. I spent my junior year

of college there, and I remember visiting Martin Buber's office. He died in 1965. That was before my junior year. But the university preserved his office as it was when he left it. I remember the spacious room. The walls lined with books. The large desk with book and papers piled on it. The comfortable chair. Even from beyond the grave he wanted us, his students, to encounter him as a "thou." But I understand his words so differently now than I did back then.

Allow me to share some of his words from *Eclipse of God.* Let's encounter Martin Buber together. He writes: "Eclipse of the light of heaven, eclipse of God—such indeed is the character of the historic hour through which the world is passing. But…an eclipse of the sun is something that occurs between the sun and our eyes, not in the sun itself….When, as in this instance, something is taking place between heaven and earth, one misses everything when one insists on discovering within earthly thought the power that unveils the mystery. One who refuses to submit oneself to the effective reality of the transcendence as such—our vis-à-vis—contributes to the human responsibility for the eclipse" (pp. 23-24). What a powerful metaphor! What Buber is teaching us is that when we look for the sun in an eclipse, we do not see it, for it is blotted out. But of course we know that there is nothing wrong with the sun at all. The problem is that it is hidden by the moon. Something between us and the sun has interfered with our otherwise intimate relationship. And yet the sun strives to break through, both concealing and revealing itself to us at the same time.

Buber points to the Bible, where Isaiah says: "Truly, thou art a God who hidest thyself" (Isa. 45:15, Buber p. 66). Note the "thou" there: God is close to us and yet we cannot find God, or at least not now. Buber knows about the Jewish theological concept of *hester panim,* that God often hides God's face from humanity in times of trouble. Theologians offer that idea as an

explanation for God's apparent absence in the Holocaust, for example. But Buber takes this idea in a different direction. It is not the sun that hides itself from the earth, but the interference of the moon that causes the eclipse. But ultimately it is we who are responsible for the eclipse. I had to drive 750 miles to Tennessee in order to put the moon completely in the path of the sun.

We place obstacles between ourselves and God. It might be our own vanity, our selfishness, or merely the distractions we create for ourselves. Buber goes further on a philosophical level, teaching us that when we try to look upon God we must use the symbols and constructs of our imagination, much as we all learned last month that it is only safe to look directly at the sun through special glasses. We go to great efforts to perceive God, and yet those ideas can at times create distance between us rather than the immediacy of the I-Thou encounter. In Buber's words: "For the idea of God, that masterpiece of humanity's construction, is only the image of images, the most lofty of all images by which one imagines the imageless God. It is essentially repugnant to recognize this fact, and remain satisfied. For when one learns to love God, one senses an actuality which rises above the idea" (p. 62). Buber is here critiquing both the rational philosophers and the religious fundamentalist. Any idea of God, whether reasoned or inherited, is an idea about God and as such serves to block the true essence of God. When we objectify God through an I-It relationship, Buber argues, we put our own imagination between ourselves and God, causing God's eclipse. The believer will find it repugnant to see that his or her own belief causes God's eclipse, and yet that is the truth that Buber calls out for us. "And now that one we well," Buber continues, "who is seemingly holding fast to God becomes aware of the eclipsed Transcendence. What is it that we mean when we speak of an eclipse of God which is even now taking place? Through this metaphor we make the tremendous

assumption that we can glance up to God with our 'mind's eye,' or rather being's eye, as with our bodily eye to the sun, and that something can step between our existence and God's as between the earth and the sun. That this glance of the being exists, wholly unillusory, yielding no images yet first making possible all images, no other court in the world attests than that of faith. It is not to be proved; it is only to be experienced; humanity has experienced it. And that other, that which steps in between, one also experiences, today. I have spoken of it since I have recognized it, and as exactly as my perception allowed me" (p. 127).

Buber words are personal. "I have spoke of it since I have recognized it." I was never able to truly understand Buber until a month ago today. I understood the concepts of I-It and I-Thou, the difference between a relationship of objectification and one of true encounter. I was taught that Jewish sexual ethics demand that we approach our intimate relationships as I-Thou relationships not I-It relationships. That I was able to understand. But I could not understand what it means to say that God cannot be understood, only experienced. Buber wrote that the I-It approach to God "steps in between and shuts off from us the light of heaven" (p. 129). How can it be, though, that the more we think about God, the more we study theology, the more we put the moon between us and the sun? But Buber's answer is personal. He tells us what he experienced. He speaks to us as his Thou. He describes the yearning, once the eclipse is perceived, to find the light of the sun again. In the words of his student Emil Fackenheim, "The modern believer works and waits for an end to this eclipse" (*Quest for Past and Future,* p. 243). Or in Buber's own words: "The eclipse of the light of God is no extinction; even tomorrow that which has stepped in between may give way" (p. 129).

That yearning for the moon to step away is how Buber explained the yearning for God. It is not a philosophical deduction, a tenet or doctrine, but rather an emotion, a feeling of connection in relationship with that which is being blocked from sight.

I could not understand Buber before last month because I had not experienced what he describes, the metaphor he employs. He must have witnessed a total eclipse. This is what it was like for me:

We had all waited patiently, after travelling great distances, to see the eclipse. We put on the glasses and watched in awe and wonder as the sun gave way to the moon. We would walk out into the meadow and watch with the eclipse glasses for a few minutes at a time, and then retreat back to our chairs in the shade as it was a hot day. But then, when the eclipse was close to totality, we were able to stay longer out of the shade, because the sky was getting darker and the temperature had dropped. A chilly breeze blew by as we watched the last sliver of the sun disappear. Then everything was black, because the only thing you could see through the glasses was the sun. So we all took our glasses off, looked up with the naked eye, and saw the corona, the black sphere of the moon with the sun's light struggling to escape beyond it. Our mouths all dropped and we stared and stared. Never had I seen anything like that. Nothing that I read or pictures I had seen could have prepared me for that. I looked around and everyone, tens of thousands of people, were staring up, speechless, mouths dropped in awe. It was the middle of the day and I looked around the sky and could see a star. Well, it was Venus. We stood like that for what I know was just under two minutes, though it felt as if we were out time, out of place, as if the universe stood still. And then, just like that, a sliver of the sun appeared on the other side of the moon. Everyone instantly cheered. That was the thing I was most unprepared

for. The sense of longing and relief at the return of the sun. We take it for granted. We vary from hiding from it to basking in it. But at that moment, I was myself quaking in relief that the sun came back. Completely irrational, I know. Because we knew exactly when the sun would return down to the second. And because we knew where it was all along. And because we could see its glow from behind the moon. And yet, the emotion of the encounter was something else. The sun is something we relate to intimately. We need it. We are incomplete without it.

Once when I was five years old I was sitting on the front steps of my house crying. A family friend who happened to have been a rabbi happened to have come by just at that moment and he asked me what was wrong. I explained that I had learned that the sun is going to explode in a few billion years and then all life will end. He sat down next to me and suggested I not worry so much about it, that that was a long time from now. I think it was about the same time that I became a Star Trek fan. If we can figure out how to travel at warp speed, I thought, we'll just go someplace else when the time comes. Our friend agreed that that was a good idea. But I was still crying. So the rabbi told me that it was good that I was crying about that. If grownups could cry about that, he thought, the world might be a better place, as we would all be more sensitive about meaning and life. I never cried about the sun's mortality since that day. But I remembered what that felt like last month, on August 21st.

Thank God *hayom harat olam,* that today the world was born. May we have a good year. Shanah tovah.