

Distinguishing the Light from The Hate:
The Eclipse, Charlottesville, the King, *and Shof'tim*

Do you remember May 10, 1994? Where were you? Were you even alive then?

What even is that date?

That was the date of the last solar eclipse viewable in America. I was living in Israel so I missed it, but I was in Lexington center at 2:40 PM on Monday with the cereal box viewer that Talya and I had carefully made, following a [YouTube video's instructions](#).

We pointed it away from the sun, lining up the pinhole with the sun –



we looked in and all we could see was a fuzzy circle of light. Not that cool. We were kind of disappointed.

The special glasses were sold out or available only for hundreds of dollars by the time we got to it on the last days before Monday.

Luckily, there were many people on the sidewalk across from Rancatore's Ice Cream shop and they were more than

happy to share. One nice man said, “You know, I have to go back inside to work, so just take mine.”

We were grateful.

We looked through these ISO-approved sunglasses and could see it all – the moon lining up in front of the sun, blocking its light. It was awesome. The majesty of nature. Quietly, I recited a blessing to the Creator of All as we marveled at this wonder.



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This week's *parashah* is truly an amazing reading filled with laws that create the judiciary, require two witnesses for public legal acts like getting married, discuss the power of prophets, protect people who commit accidental manslaughter in asylum cities, list the laws of warfare that protect nature (you cannot take down your enemies' fruit trees!), protect your defeated enemies, and how to deal with an unsolved murder.

Many of these ideas were revolutionary at the time of the Torah's inception.

In fact, this *parashah's* environmental laws are the first of this kind in human history!

But this year, I was particularly struck by the laws that pertain to the king. The Torah is quite ambivalent about the entire institution of a monarchy.

Only after the people beg the prophet Samuel a few hundred years later does he appoint King Saul as ruler.

And in *Parashat Shof'tim*, we learn that the king is not above the law. The king is subject to the Torah's commands – he is not above the law.

In addition, the king had other restrictions:

The king was not allowed to have a lot of horses. The only reason to have horses was for military purposes. Therefore, we learn of an early form of arms control.

The king could not have multiple wives.

The king could not amass huge riches.

The king must write a *sefer Torah* – his own Torah scroll – not an easy task to say the least. [“The king is not the author of the laws; he is a student of the laws.”](#) Most basically, we learn that no one is above the Torah.

The founders of America were quite familiar with these texts from our Torah and fashioned our democracy in the same spirit – our government contains a system of checks and balances, so hopefully, the leader cannot accumulate too much power or wield it inappropriately. We have seen presidents brought up for impeachment, we have seen presidents resign, we have seen laws repealed by the Supreme Court.

Imagine if every president had to actually sit there and write (or type,) or at the very least, read the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, the Declaration of Independence, and all the Amendments.

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But, let me return to the eclipse. Many asked on Monday what *brakhah* – blessing – should be recited for such a natural wonder. My old friend, roommate and colleague, Rabbi Joshua Heller of Atlanta, wrote that there is a complicated history to Judaism’s understanding of eclipses. Since ancient peoples’ understanding of astronomical events was not as advanced as ours, they were afraid of this phenomenon, which they could

not understand. They thought that an eclipse was a bad omen. And therefore, no blessing should be recited.

Rabbi Heller states that now that we understand this natural occurrence and know it is not a bad omen, but a regular, actually pretty cool phenomenon, we should recite a *brakhah*.

[He writes](#) that we should say: “*She’Koho U’gevurato Malei Olam* – that God’s strength and power fill the universe.

Seeing this awesome process reminds us of the Creator of All – the source of all power that lies beyond and within everything.

Watching the moon cover the sun was incredible, reminding us of boundaries and distinction.

This connects powerfully to Shabbat: eighteen minutes before the sun sets on Friday, we light the candles and feel the difference – Shabbat has descended upon us. And tonight, when the stars come out, forty-two minutes after sunset every Saturday, we will recite *havdalah* – the prayer that concludes Shabbat. Havdalah comes from the word *l’havdil* – to make distinctions. We distinguish between Shabbat and the other six days of the week.

We make distinctions between the sun and the moon especially when they are lined up. But making distinctions is often more essential than that. We must distinguish between right and wrong and when we are unable to do so, these consequences can be terrible.

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An inability to make distinctions between right and wrong lies at the root of the horrific events that took place in Charlottesville two weeks ago.

[The video](#) (YOU MUST WATCH THE ENTIRE 22 MINUTES!) of white supremacists chanting Nazi slogans and their defiant screams of “Jews will not replace us” haunts me, as I am sure it haunts many of us – whether we are Jewish or not.

These ugly words along with cowardly actions, and murderous violence, offer a terrifying wake-up call to recognize the danger in divisive rhetoric and in racist, xenophobic, and hateful politics.

Thankfully, hundreds of people of good will gathered to protest this hate and lack of moral clarity from the leadership of this country. I was so proud to gather with persons of so many different ethnicities, religious, and socio-economic backgrounds at rallies in Waltham, Arlington, and in Lexington last week.

So we must state things that we thought we could take for granted – there are NO TWO SIDES to hate.

The inability of a leader to make correct moral distinctions is glaring and horrifying. [There is a reason that the Reform, Reconstructionist, and Conservative rabbinic organizations will not hold a High Holy Day phone call with him.](#)

And we who know that we must remember the horrors of the Holocaust must all pledge that 'Never again' is not just a promise for Jews, but for all peoples – a promise to protect every threatened person, regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, immigration status, sexual orientation, gender expression, physical ability, or economic and social reality.

Hopefully, now, we have the opportunity to examine and face head-on the racial and religious divisions that bedevil us. The United States has not owned up to its history of violence towards Native-Americans and African-Americans.

We should follow the model of Modern Germany, which has spent decades engaged in deep introspection about its sins of the past.

Expulsion, slavery, and subjugation are woven into the DNA of our nation alongside the great and lofty ideals of liberty, freedom, and justice for all.

As a way to begin to face our history, we need our government, which cut the funding to stop hate groups, TO RESTORE IT, so we can investigate and root out white supremacists and other violent right-wing extremists.

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All of these events can lead us to be somewhat depressed, demoralized. Where are we as a country?

How can we have such open hate walking through the streets of our great and diverse land that includes people from all over the globe, speaking different languages, introducing different cultures, believing in different faiths, yet finding a common path – a path of decency?

Fortunately, we have a path out of this morass. It begins with each of us holding on to the light of goodness that exists in each of us.

On Wednesday, we celebrated *Rosh Hodesh Elul*, the beginning of the last month of the year. It is a time of deep introspection for us as individuals, for us as a community, and for us as part of a nation.

Where have we done well? And where did we miss the mark?

This process is so intense that our tradition girds us with a special Psalm, the 27th that we recite every morning and evening during this season of repentance. It opens: *L'David, Adonai Uri V'Yishi, Mimi Ira* – A psalm of David: Adonai is my LIGHT and my salvation, from whom shall I fear; *Adonai Me'oz Hayyai – Mimi Efhad* – Adonai is the strength of my life, from whom shall I be afraid.

There is light – there is the literal light from which the universe was born in The Big Bang, and a great light, our sun that provides energy to our solar system, and then there is a greater light, a spiritual light that lies beyond and within all – a light that binds us to this fundamental Oneness.

That light, which we call: *Adonai*, has allowed us to come up with ideas, laws, and systems like our Torah and its *mitzvot*, its commandments that guide us through all times – even challenging ones.

As we begin this month of introspection, let us hope that we lead the way towards helping everyone in this country appreciate the distinctions between right and wrong, leading us and them away from paths of hate, towards love and light.

