

**A DERASHAH OF R. JOSEPH SAUL
NATHANSON ON THE OCCASION
OF THE *BIRKAT HA-HAMMAH*
WEDNESDAY, 26 NISAN, 5629
(1869)**

Introduction

Rabbi Joseph Saul Nathanson (1810–1875) was a leading halakhic authority of his time. Famed as the author of the Responsa *Sho'el u-Meshiv*, he also wrote commentaries on the Torah and the *aggadot* of the Talmud. Appointed as Rabbi of the Jewish community of Lemberg (Lvov) in 1857 to succeed R. Jacob Orenstein, he was involved in education as well as communal affairs, training many distinguished students, as well as actively working to ameliorate the plight of the poor. Opposed to the innovations introduced by Hasidism, he nevertheless respected hasidic leaders who were great Talmud scholars, such as R. Isaac Meir of Ger and R. Hayyim Halberstamm. In his responsa, the problems of modern life are fully reflected, and such questions as machine-made matsots on Passover received definitive treatment.

Although many halakhic authorities wrote aggadic works and published their *derashot*, seldom do we have an opportunity to read a *derashah* which retains something of the immediacy and oral character of the original presentation. In this case, the *derashah* was transcribed by one Hayyim Yoel Lodmerer, and submitted to the Hebrew journal *Ha-Maggid*. The transcription evidently attempted to retain R. Nathanson's emphases and stresses, for key words and phrases throughout the *derashah* are printed in bold letters. In the present translation, these emphases are indicated by italics.

The *Birkat ha-Hammah* is celebrated once every twenty-eight years, when, according to the calculation based on the Amora Samuel's value for the duration of a solar year, the sun returns to the spot in the heavens where it was suspended at the creation (see b. *Berakhot* 59b and *Shulhan Arukh Oraḥ Hayyim* 229:2).

The article as it appeared in *Ha-Maggid* is divided into three sections. The first part is the correspondent's description of the unusual scene as a large crowd gathered, on what would have been an ordinary weekday, with a very festive air. The actual *derashah* follows next, and the article concludes with a description of the *Birkat ha-Hammah* service, complete with cantor and choir.

As the year 5741 = 1981 is a year in which the rare *Birkat ha-Hammah* ritual will once again be observed (on April 8), it is hoped that the account of Rabbi Nathanson's *derashah* presented here will prove to be of more than historical interest, but will assist in transmitting a great rabbinic leader's thoughts on the significance of the event to a wider audience.

The article appeared in Ha-Maggid 15, 11 Iyyar 5629=21 April 1869, p. 119.

CONCERNING THE *KIDDUSH HA-HAMMAH* ON WEDNESDAY, 26 NISAN, 5629

Lvov, 1st day *Rosh Hodesh Iyyar*: On the aforementioned day (26 Nisan) in the morning, a great sight was to be seen in the marketplaces and streets of our great city: a large crowd, many people in celebration, were flocking to the great synagogue outside the city, in a spirit of joy and gaiety. It was neither *Rosh Hodesh*, nor *Shabbat*, nor *Yom Tov*, so why was everyone streaming to the synagogue? The time of the Solar Cycle had arrived; on that day, the sun, after its circuits around the earth, would return to the place of its origin whence it was created by God. They had gathered at the synagogue in order to recite the blessing for seeing the sun with a large assemblage of people, for at that time our great master and teacher, the great Gaon, teacher of the entire Diaspora, Rabbi Joseph Saul Ha-Levi Nathanson—may he have a long and happy life—Rabbi for our city and its district, was present for the morning services, and the building was filled from one end to the other. When the service was over he rose to the pulpit and presented a discourse to the assembled crowd, on the theme of the day. Those very words so well-considered and wise, I hereby send to you at his direction, dear editor, so that, by means of your worthy journal, they may find a permanent place and be part of the annals available to the coming generation.

[What follows is the *derashah* of R. Nathanson—N.P.]

We read in *Berakhot* 59b:

He who sees the sun at its turning point, the moon in its power, the planets in their paths, and the Zodiacal constellations in their order should say: Blessed be He Who effects creation. And when does this happen?—Abaye said: Every twenty-eight years when the Cycle begins again and the Nisan [spring] equinox falls in Saturn on the evening of Tuesday, going into Wednesday.

See Rashi s.v. *bi-tekufatah*: “The place where the sun returns to the beginning of its circuit, when the luminous bodies were first placed in the heavens.” We find this view codified as halacha in *Shulhan Arukh Oraḥ Hayyim* 229. Several points, however, require explanation: (a) what is the significance of the twenty-eight year period? (b) regarding the time limit for saying the blessing—according to *Magen Avraham* one may only recite the blessing *during the first three hours of the morning** of the appropriate day. Now *Dagul Me-revavah* differs, and states that the blessing may be recited the entire day, *or at least until noon*, and my revered and holy ancestor YAVETZ concurred. Now at first glance it would seem plausible that the blessing might indeed be recited *at any time throughout the day*, for on that *day* the Great Luminaries were placed in the heavens, or, minimally, *at least until noon*, for then the sun is at its strongest. But on what basis could one maintain that the time limit is *three hours* after sunrise?

*Key words and phrases are italicized, following the scheme of the original article—N.P.

[To resolve these questions] I humbly submit the following:

King Solomon said in his wisdom (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8), "To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven. A time to be born . . . A time to plant, . . .", *for a total of twenty-eight "times"*. Now what was the intent of this enumeration? The explanation would seem to be as follows: Solomon wished to demonstrate that all things that come to pass in the world are *subject to the domain of time*, and the One God created them all. He demonstrated conclusively that *they are all created entities*, for it is a known fact that *whatever has a beginning has an end*. Now since any entity always gives evidence of decay and incipient destruction, we can infer that the item in question had a beginning, that is to say, that it was created *at a point in time*, and came to be "under the sun", i.e., under *time's* dominion. This is the sense of the verse "To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose" which came to be *at some time*. Hence it follows that "There is a time *to be born* and a time *to die*", for the evidence of decay and mortality implies that there was *a beginning* [birth]. Examine the text and you will see that all the "times" listed have the intention of clarifying that [the activities and items] are all *created, they are bounded*, with a time for their creation as well as their destruction.

Now our Rabbis, of blessed memory, wanted to institute a blessing for the sun, in order to refute the opinions of those who worship it, thinking *that the sun is a deity*. But the very fact that the sun *returns* to the place of its inception demonstrates that it is not a divinity, for otherwise it would travel indefinitely, in accord with its own "wishes"; who *commanded* it to return to its *place*? Evidently, it must have a Commander, whose bidding it does; indeed, the Everlasting God created it in this very way, that it would return to its place, with the command "*Go this far and no farther*", after which it returns cyclically.

Now we can understand the significance of the sun's *twenty-eight year* cycle: it alludes to the fact that the sun, too, is *a created entity, just like the twenty-eight times* [discussed above]. Similarly, we are now in a position to understand why *Magen Avraham* stated the time limit for the blessing as *three hours after sunrise*. For we find the following statement of the Rabbis in *Berakhot 7a* on the verse "God has indignation every day" (Psalms 7:12):

And how long does His indignation last? One moment . . . And how do you know that He is angry one moment? . . . from the following verse: "Hide thyself for a little moment until the indignation be overpast." (Isa. 26:20) And when is He angry? Abaye says: In those first three hours of the day . . . It was taught in the name of R. Meir: *At the time of the sun's shining* and all the *kings* of East and West put their crowns upon their heads and bow down to the sun, the Holy One, blessed be He, becomes angry at once.

In other words, *the kings sleep until three hours after sunrise*, and then get up. Some may rise earlier, but *none get up later than three hours after sunrise*. (See, on this point, *Tosafot to Avodah Zarah 4* [b, s.v. *bi-telat*].) Now since the kings bow down to the sun, considering it to be a divinity, the Rabbis instituted the blessing ". . . Who does the work of creation" to show that the *sun* is like all other created entities, and it is God who does the work of *creation*, the sun being *bounded and of temporal nature*, merely a servant to the King of Glory. This thought is already expressed in Scripture:

In them hath He set a tent for the sun,
Which is as a bridegroom coming out of his *chamber*,
And rejoiceth as a *strong man* to run his course.
His going forth is from the end of the heaven,
And his circuit unto the ends of it;

(Psalms 19:5-7)

In other words, the sun is only *a messenger*; just as one might send an athlete to run a course, the sun turns about continuously in its circuit, until it reaches the *boundary*, returning from there to its starting place. This is what is meant by “and his circuit unto the ends of it”: that it ranges and travels until its boundary, *having two extremities, a beginning and an end*. In this context Scripture stated that in the time to come, when the Truth will be revealed to all the world, then “the moon shall be confounded, and the sun ashamed; for the Lord of hosts will reign in mount Zion, and in Jerusalem!” (Isaiah 24:23)

[The correspondent now resumes his narrative—N.P.]

A profound hush settled throughout the synagogue as these precious words were uttered by our esteemed leader. The congregation listened to his sweet words with silent attention. After he finished his *derashah*, however, the commotion returned, people pushing and shoving until there was no place to move. But they did make room for our teacher, and as his feet touched the path they cleared a space for him in the center of the crowd. The people began to recite Psalm 148, then the appropriate blessing, “. . . Who does the work of creation.” Then the magnificent, wonderfully melodious Cantor Aharon Shalom Shurman raised his voice, accompanied by his choir, chanting the hymn *Tovim me'orot shebara Elohenu* [“Good are the luminaries which our God has created”—Sabbath morning liturgy], followed by the chanting of Psalm 150 in a sweet and pleasant voice, which gladdened the hearts of all who heard. Then our glorious teacher the Rabbi [Nathanson], long may he live, returned home, accompanied by the large crowd which had covered the streets of his route, filled with a sense of joy and contentment over the specialness of this gratifying moment. The people took leave of one another with blessings of peace, expressing the wish that God might grant them to meet again the next time the sun-cycle blessing would be invoked.

May the good God indeed bestow on us a good and long life, until a day such as this returns, when we may once again feel those sweet and precious religious sentiments that filled our hearts today.

Hayyim Joel Lodmerer of Lvov