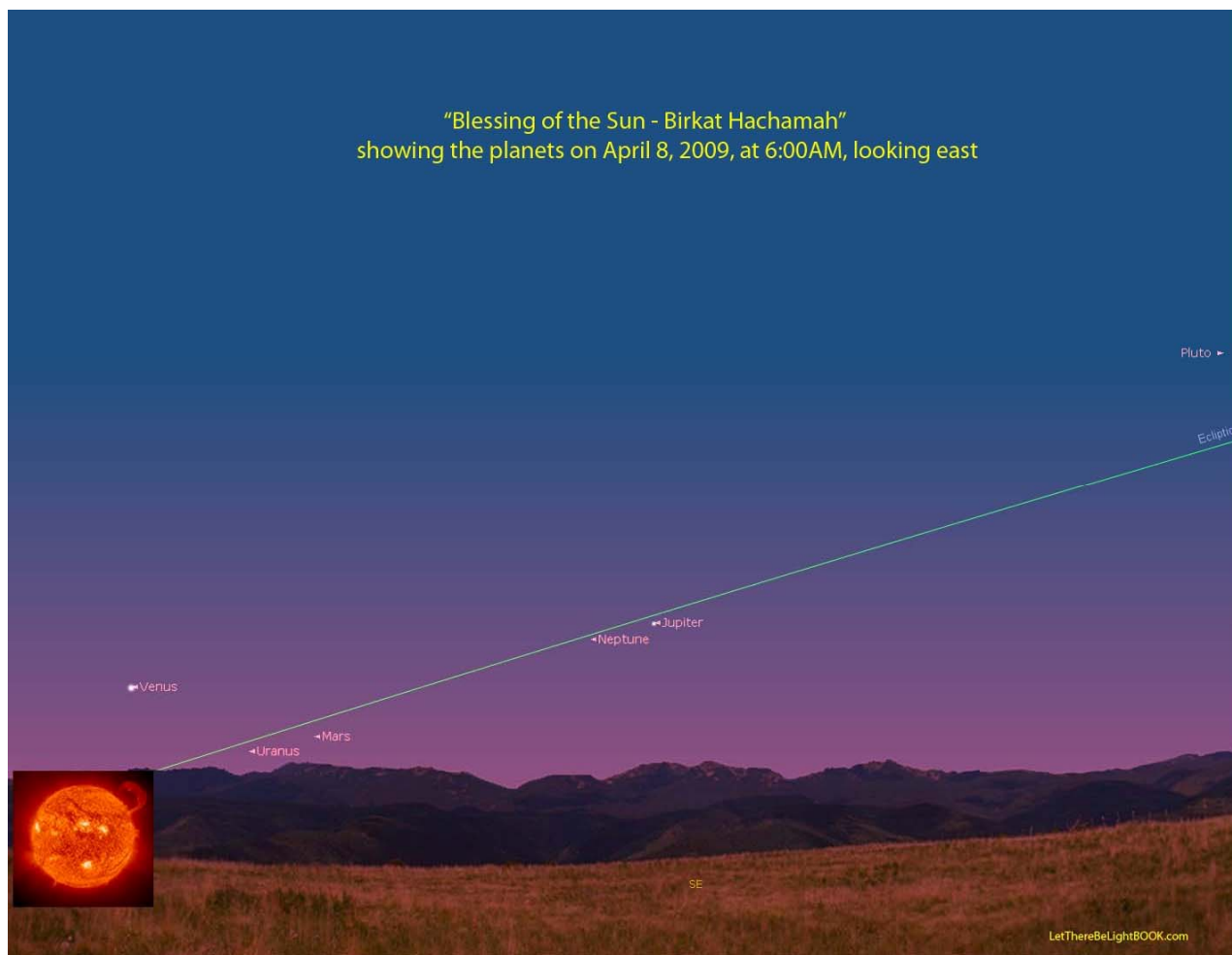


The Blessing of the Sun -- ברכת החמה



Caption: On the morning of April 8, 2009, erev Pesach and the occasion of the once-in-28-year blessing of the sun, ALL of the planets in the solar system just happen to be up in the eastern sky, as shown (Mercury is not yet in view because it is just about to rise, after the sun). All except Saturn, that is, which sets at 5:24AM. For more on this remarkable coincidence, read below. The image of the sun (still below the horizon at 6:00AM) is an ultraviolet picture taken by the SOHO spacecraft. (Credit: NASA and SOHO).

The unusual significance of the 206th cycle of Birkat Hachamah

The ceremony of uttering a blessing upon seeing the sun occurs only once every 28 years, and is based on the Talmudic passage:

"Our Rabbis taught : He who sees the sun at its turning point, the moon in its power, the planets in their orbits, and the signs of the zodiac in their orderly progress, should say: 'Blessed be He who has wrought the work of creation.' And when [does this turning point 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.' "

-- Berachot, 59b

Much has been written about the nature and meaning of the Blessing of the Sun, and interested readers can find many websites on this topic. The New York Jewish Week, for example, is carrying an OpEd piece I wrote on the subject, and which is available online. Here I want to talk about a little-known feature of the event that is unique to this cycle's celebration.

The rabbis cite four astronomical events, listed above, that warrant the blessing, "Who wrought the work of creation," namely the sun at its turning point, the moon in its power, the planets in their orbits, and the signs of the zodiac in their orderly progress. The first refers to the Birkat Hachamah event, and it comes every 28 years when the vernal equinox arrives on a Wednesday morning (as explained in conventional discussions elsewhere, and based on a year of 365.25 days.)

But there are three OTHER astronomical events that likewise merit this blessing. *Amazingly, all four of these events are present in this year's cycle.*

- 1) The moon, by virtue of the fact that it is the day before Passover, almost by definition the 15th of the month of Nisan, should be full.
- 2) All of the planets in the solar system (except Saturn) will be up in the east as shown in the figure above, with Mercury rising shortly after the sun. The exception, Saturn, is specifically mentioned in the Mishna. While the meaning of the allusion to Saturn in the Mishna is not entirely clear, Rashi on this passage says that the mention of Saturn refers to the first hours of Wednesday – namely, Tuesday night, the time when the sun appeared in the creation story. But Tuesday evening is just when Saturn *does* appear this year, and indeed it sets just before daybreak.
- 3) And finally, the zodiacal reference that, at least according to Maimonides, refers to the constellation of Aries, which also (approximately) rises at dawn at the spring equinox. *Thus all four astronomical events are present for this year's blessing.*

There is more. Anyone awake for the amazing rising of the planets before dawn will see that actually the moon is *not* full! In fact, this year the full moon is not until Thursday at about 3PM (UT). So, then, how can we make this blessing include the moon? But note: in our version of the Mishna the blessing is not said when the moon is full, but rather when it is "in its power [gevurata]." What does "power" mean? I suggest a homiletic meaning. It refers to the fact that the Bible assigns to the moon at creation a role "to set the holidays [Genesis 1:14]." Though the rabbis rely on the moon, they have authority to shift the calendar in order to insure that Yom Kippur and other holidays fall appropriately [sod ha'ibur]. This year the start of Passover is almost two days ahead of the full moon on purpose. This is precisely the "power" of the moon -- not that it is full, but that it is a sign of our authority and responsibility. Similarly, the planets and Aries (the zodiac) will not actually be visible once the sun rises, but we know that they are there (especially if we look for them before dawn).

This year, the 206th cycle of Birkat Hachamah, is therefore a very special opportunity to appreciate the wonders and blessings of God's cosmic order, and to prepare ourselves for the celebration of the "season of our freedom."

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