

# A Lesson from the Eclipse

Category: Shmini, Vayikra

*In the first moments of creation, the sun and moon didn't have the same relationship as they do now. What lesson can we take from them?*

## The Eclipse

On Monday, April 8th, our city will be experiencing a rare solar eclipse. The preparations have been ongoing for months, and the anticipation is mounting as the big day draws near.

We're expecting 200,000 guests to flock to Cleveland. Everyone's hoping and praying that the skies remain clear on that day, so that all the eager visitors will be able to witness one of nature's wonders firsthand: the moment when the moon blocks the sun for several full minutes.

The story of the sun and the moon began on the fourth day of creation. The Torah states: "And G-d made the two great luminaries; the greater luminary to govern the day, and the lesser luminary to govern the night, and also the stars."

Everyone notes that this verse seems contradictory. Initially, it says that G-d made two "great" luminaries, and immediately afterward it calls one the greater luminary and the other the lesser one.

To resolve this contradiction, Rashi explains that initially, the moon was as luminous as the sun, but the moon argued that two rulers couldn't share the same space, and—as the Midrash continues—G-d agreed with the moon's argument and therefore diminished its size; in order to appease her, He gave her the stars.

One thing which is implied by this story is that jealousy is something that G-d does not favor. Song of Songs says, "Jealousy is cruel as purgatory" (Song of Songs 8:6). Just as a consuming fire burns in purgatory, so does jealousy burn a person up from within. The Mishnah famously says, "Jealousy... drives a person from the world." (Avot 4:21).

So, if there is one lesson to be learned from the relationship between the sun and

the moon, it is to avoid jealousy at all costs.

## When Is Jealousy encouraged?

However, if G-d created us with an emotion of jealousy, there must be occasions where it can be brought out in a positive way. When is that the case? When is jealousy a positive trait?

The answer lies in Torah study. Our sages specifically encourage envy among Torah scholars, "The envy of scholars increases wisdom" (Baba Batra 21a). Why? Because this is an envy that doesn't seek to bring others down, but rather inspires and encourages the envious one to strive for those same heights.

In halacha, there's a prohibition called "Hasagat Gevul" (encroaching on another's territory). For example, if someone owns a grocery store, it's forbidden for someone else to open a competing store nearby. But when it comes to studying and spreading Torah, halacha dictates that the concept of "Hasagat Gevul" doesn't apply. Why? Because "The envy of scholars increases wisdom." When there's competition among teachers, the teacher will strive to be the best, and the students will all benefit.

In Montreal, there was a non-Chabad Rosh Yeshiva named Rabbi Kaufman who wanted to open a yeshiva in the city. At one point, he approached the Rebbe with concerns about his plan, fearing it would compete with the Chabad yeshiva in the city.

To his astonishment, the Rebbe showered him with warm blessings.

He asked, "Won't this interfere with the Chabad yeshiva?"

The Rebbe replied, "There's a clear halacha in Shulchan Aruch that permits opening a Talmud Torah next to an existing Talmud Torah, and this doesn't constitute encroaching on another's territory because 'Yagdil Torah V'Yaadir, it will increase Torah and its honor.'"

This final line, "Yagdil Torah V'Yaadir, it will increase Torah and its honor," is cited by Maimonides.

In the Laws of Torah Study, Maimonides writes: "If one teaches children and his

colleague comes and opens another school next to his, so that more children will come to him... he cannot prevent him, as it is said, 'Yagdil Torah V'Yaadir, it will increase Torah and its honor.' (Hilchot Talmud Torah 2:2).

Here, Maimonides takes a step forward, stating not only that competition is not only permissible in Torah study because "The envy of scholars increases wisdom," but moreover, it's a mitzvah.

The verse comes from the prophet Isaiah, who said that it was our obligation to increase and honor Torah. The Rebbe explained that this means to increase in quantity and in quality; an additional institution will increase competition, and more students will receive Jewish education as a result, because everyone will do their utmost to ensure the success of their institution. (See Purim 5733, Toras Menachem 67:322).

## **Fins and Scales**

This concept of "increasing Torah and making it honored" can also be found in this week's Torah portion, Parshat Shemini. In the second half, the Torah discusses the laws of kashrut, specifying which animals are permitted to be eaten and which are forbidden. It provides two clear signs: any animal that "chews the cud and has split hooves" is permissible for consumption. Then, the Torah continues regarding fish, stating that any fish with "fins and scales you may eat." Any fish possessing both of these signs is kosher.

Now, our sages (Chulin 66b) make an interesting assertion: if a fish has scales, they say, it certainly has fins as well. This established principle from the Mishnah remains true to this day. Since the days of the Talmud, countless additional species of fish and aquatic creatures have been discovered, yet all of them adhere to the Mishnaic rule that "if it has scales, it also has fins."

However, this raises a simple question. When someone wants to check the kashrut of a fish, they don't need to examine the fins at all; it's sufficient to check whether the fish has scales or not. So, why did the Torah need to specify two signs for the kashrut of fish? Wouldn't scales alone suffice?

The Talmud addresses this question and answers with "Yagdil Torah v'Yaadir." It's true that to determine if a fish is kosher, it's enough to know if it has scales.

However, the Torah wants to convey to us the full scope of the idea. It doesn't just want to tell us signs of kashrut which are *evidence* that the fish is kosher; it wants to teach us what *makes* the fish kosher. What *makes* the fish kosher isn't just the scales but also the fins.

There is also another message here.

The Torah is not just a book of dry laws telling us what to do, like a manual that comes with a refrigerator. The Torah contains immense richness, with layer upon layer of meaning, and this section is no different. By mentioning fins and scales, the Torah wants to teach us a lesson.

Fins provide the fish with the ability to swim against the current of the water. So too, the Torah gives the Jew the power to swim against the current. These are our fins. When a Jew studies Torah, he isn't influenced by the fact that everyone else is doing something; he knows what the Torah expects from him, and he acts accordingly. The mitzvos are the scales that protect us. The Torah therefore wrote both signs, fins and scales, to teach us our connection to Torah and mitzvos.

## **Why Are There So Many Mitzvos**

The principle of "Yagdil Torah v'Yaadir" also explains all the other mitzvos. People often complain why there are so many mitzvos. Why couldn't we remain with the simple Ten Commandments? After all, belief in G-d and refraining from idolatry are things one can readily accept and fulfill. "Honoring parents" is also agreeable. "Not stealing" or "not killing" are straightforward, and "do not covet" is a bit harder to grasp, but still understandable. The only thing which we wouldn't have chosen on our own is Shabbat. But why 613 commandments?

This question isn't new. There's a famous Mishnah in Makkot that says, "G-d wanted to benefit the Jewish people; therefore He gave them a lot of Torah and mitzvos many commandments... Yagdil Torah v'Yaadir." (Makkot 3:16). What's the meaning of this Mishnah? Maimonides explains that G-d gave us so many mitzvos to enable every Jew to connect to at least one mitzvah that he can fulfill perfectly.

But it goes deeper. The deeper meaning of the word "mitzvah" is "connection." A mitzvah is much more than a good deed; it's a bond, connecting us to the Creator

of the universe. G-d could have given us only one rope, one mitzvah through which we could connect to the Infinite, to the supernatural. But because G-d loves us, He threw us many ropes, connecting different parts of our lives to Him.

Every Jew, in the most ordinary actions he does, connects to G-d. Not only when fasting on Yom Kippur or doing a bris for his son, but also when he calls his mother to ask how she's doing, or when he smiles at another person, and even when one morning he inexplicably wakes up feeling good and happy, he is already fulfilling a commandment. At every given moment, he can connect to G-d - "Yagdil Torah V'yadir." (Likkutei Sichot 17, p. 409).