

Birkat HaChama - 1925, 1953, 1981, 2009, 2037

By J. Simone Posner

Hashem made the two large lights the greater light to rule the day, and the smaller light to rule the night. [Hashem also made] the stars. Hashem placed them in the heavenly sky to shine on the earth, to rule by day and by night, and to divide between the light and the darkness. Hashem saw that it was good. It was evening and it was morning, a fourth day.” (Genesis 1:16-19)

Never Heard of *Birkat HaChama*? Sounds unfamiliar? It’s not surprising—it doesn’t happen very often! *Birkat HaChama* is a special blessing for the sun celebrated once every 28 years. This year is a particularly special event because *Birkat HaChama* falls on *Erev Pesach*.

Our tradition tells us to celebrate the fact that the celestial bodies return to their original created position once a year. Because the solar year is not quite even (365 1/4 days), and the Rabbi’s didn’t like dealing with fractions, they brought the cycle into alignment with the fourth day of the week (Wednesday) by calculating a cycle of 28 years.

Birkat HaChama is a celebration of creation! The central prayer for the ceremony goes “oseh ma’aseh viraysheet” (who makes the work of creation). This prayer, while central to *Birkat HaChama* is in no way unique to it. “Oseh ma’aseh viraysheet” is also said for natural occurrences like lightning, earthquakes, shooting stars, comets, etc.

According to the solar-secular calendar, on Wednesday April 08, 2009 and almost everywhere on Earth, this special blessing can be said for three hours after sunrise which means the hours from approximately 6:30am to 9:30am. Please consult your local Rabbi for more exact information or to see if there is a *Birkat HaChama* ceremony near you.

While most of Judaic life revolves around the lunar calendar this celebration depends on the solar calendar. What can someone of LGBTQI background take from this?

Almost 6 months to the day after the last *Birkat HaChama* in 1981, Diane Delia (a transsexual) was shot 4 times in the head by her husband. The story made headlines for a long time. In some newspapers, the handling of Diane Delia was so twisted that one might have mistaken her for the perpetrator rather than the victim of violence. It was definitely an early (and possibly the first) example of violence and public intolerance against transgenders.



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Since the last *Birkat HaChama* the LGBTQI community at large recognizes the need for a Transgender Day of Remembrance. 28 years ago, the world was a very different place for LGBTQI people. The time period from 1981 to 2009 was an era of unprecedented growth, awareness and empowerment encompassing all walks of LGBTQI individuals and communities. Since then, we have moved a step in the direction of repairing the world.

The tradition also tells us that since the *Birkat HaChama* marks an extraordinary event (the first sunrise) that is also a daily event (it is a sunrise like any other), it is not customary to say a Shehechianu.

I believe it is in this same sense of specialness combined with mundanity that people of LGBTQI experience proceed through their lives. We get up every day and live our lives without extraordinary boldness or fear, when other people sometimes find our journey to be extremely bold and brave or powerful. This is a powerful example of how special and exceptional we are as a people, that extra-ordinariness exists alongside the ordinary experience.

There is a loophole to not saying Shehechianu on *Birkat HaChama*. The loophole would be in the event of wearing a new outfit, which is a first that may be celebrated by saying the Shehechianu. I cannot think of a better way to greet, commemorate and celebrate life, light and warmth than by putting on a new outfit.

The Judaic take on “creation” is that all beings and all things were created out of a void. How does creation from nothingness impact people, movements and communities? Maimonides explains that creation from nothing always involves transition:

Everything produced comes into existence from non-existence; even when the substance of a thing has been in existence, and has only changed its form, the thing itself, which has gone through the process of genesis and development, and has arrived at its final state, has now different properties from those which it possessed at the commencement of the transition from potentiality to reality, or before that time. (Maimonides Guide for the Perplexed Part 2: Chapter 17)

What is Maimonides saying to us? Change is possible. More than that: he’s saying that when a part of divine creation undergoes transition, including transition of sex and gender, the change is profound and substantive. Transformation involves more than cosmetic change – it is real.

It is a well known adage “that [Hashem] doesn’t make junk”. This is a great mantra as we perform the *Birkat HaChama* as a community. LGBTQI individuals and communities have suffered greatly from oppression by people who may have a different take on Hashem’s



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Creation(s). Now is the time to make the last 28 years of struggle for a voice and for legitimacy more meaningful.

Birkat HaChama is the beginning and end of a cycle. As I put on my new outfit and greet the beauty and essence of creation I'll remember to think about what changes I'd like to see in the next 28 years.

Chazzak!



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