YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Rabbinic Tales: In the Talmud and in *Chassidut***

**By Rav Dr. Yonatan Feintuch**

**Shiur #04:**

**The Story of the Moon – Rabbinical Narrative vs. Story of R. Nachman (2)**

In the previous *shiur*, we looked at an aggadic account of the diminishing of the moon (*Chullin* 60b):

[Rabbi Shimon ben Pazi](file:///C:\topics\rabbi-shimon-b-pazzi) notes [a seeming contradiction in the text]: It is written, “And God made the two great lights” ([*Bereishit* 1:16](file:///C:\Genesis.1.16)), but it is also written [in the same verse] “The greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night’” [implying that one was greater than the other].

(The explanation that follows presumes that originally, the sun and the moon were equally bright.)

The moon said before the Holy One, blessed be He: “Master of the Universe, is it possible for two kings to share the same crown?”

God therefore said to [the moon], “Go and diminish yourself.”

She said before Him: “Master of the Universe, just because I made a correct observation before You, I should diminish myself?”

God said to her: “Go and rule during both the day and the night.”

She said to Him: “Of what use is a candle at midday?”

God said to her: “Go; let the [Jewish People](file:///C:\topics\jewish-people) count the days and years by you.”

She said to Him: “But they will count by the sun as well, for it is impossible that they will not count seasons that way, as it is written: ‘And let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days and years’ ([*Bereishit* 1:14](file:///C:\Genesis.1.14)).”

God said to her: “Go; let righteous men be named after you [as the light that is ‘*katan’* – smaller/lesser]: there will be [Yaakov](file:///C:\topics\jacob) Ha-katan, i.e., Yaakov [our forefather; see [*Amos* 7:2](file:///C:\Amos.7.2)]; [Shmuel Ha-katan](file:///C:\topics\shmuel-the-little) [the *Tanna*, Shmuel); and [David](file:///C:\topics\king-david) Ha-katan, [[King David](file:///C:\topics\king-david); see I *Shmuel* 17:14).”

God saw that the moon was not appeased. The Holy One, blessed be He, said: “Bring atonement for Me, since I diminished the moon.”

And this is as [R. Shimon ben Lakish](file:///C:\topics\rabbi-shimon-b-lakish) says: “What is distinct about the goat offering of Rosh Chodesh, concerning which we are told, ‘For the Lord’ (*[Bamidbar](file:///C:\\Numbers.28.15)* [28:15](file:///C:\\Numbers.28.15))? The Holy One, blessed be He, said: ‘This goat shall be an atonement for Me for having diminished the moon.’”

We considered three different readings of this story. The first views the essential message as one relating to the human ego and the ability to control it – rather than acting out of jealousy and competition. The second reading concerned relations between Israel and the other nations, and the discourse between Israel and God with regard to these relations. As mentioned in the previous *shiur*, this reading is better suited to the *aggada* as it appears in *Bereishit Rabba*; it fits less well with the version in the *Bavli*. A third reading, centered around kabbalistic concepts and symbols, views the moon as symbolic of the woman and her status, which was diminished as a result of the sin in the Garden of Eden but is destined to be restored in the future.

Let us now trace further developments in the wake of this *aggada*, starting with *Sefer Ha-Zohar*.

**The story of the moon in the *Zohar***

In one of many references to the moon and its relationship to the sun, the *Zohar* uses the above *midrash* and related verses to build a different, fascinating, and even surprising story about the diminishment of the moon, within the context of its system of concepts and ideas. The main difference between the two stories is that in the *Zohar*, the diminishing of the moon appears not as God's punishment but rather as the moon's own choice.

Why would the moon choose to diminish itself? I will try to explain the idea in the briefest and simplest terms (of course, some of the meaning will be lost in the simplification), without getting involved in all the related kabbalistic concepts. In the *Zohar*'s teachings about the story of Creation in the first chapter of *Bereishit*, light or radiance is one of the metaphors describing Divinity or Divine abundance. Divinity is Infinite Light that requires constriction (*tzimtzum*) and partial concealment in order to be able to manifest itself and radiate its light in such a way that the world is capable of receiving it and benefitting from it. If the light is too great and too strong – as in its original, essential state – the world, with its limited capacity, will be unable to contain and bear it.

A simple way of understanding this is to imagine a physical light too powerful to look at directly. In order to gaze at the light, we have to use filters that diminish some of its power – like those we use to look up at the sun. The sun is therefore a useful metaphor to describe Divinity – its greatness and the tremendous amount of illumination that it radiates, which is too much for the world to absorb without some constriction of the light along the way.

We might consider in a similar way the inspiration experienced by an artist. There is a powerful burst of illumination – an abstract idea, emotion, or feeling. When the artist seeks to convey this inspiration to the world outside his head, he may translate it into words or an artistic creation. Ultimately, he undertakes his creation using tangible, physical substances and instruments. These substances and instruments will necessarily diminish some of the original flash of inspiration. They cannot truly and fully express the original idea, nor the powerful feeling that gripped the artist and the depth of his emotion. They cannot be completely accurate. Words, sounds, and physical substances have limitations, such that no artistic creation can express the original picture or idea fully and accurately. The movements of human limbs are too coarse and not sufficiently precise. On the other hand, if the artist chooses to refrain from creating anything so as not to compromise on the pure idea in his head, he offers the world nothing and leaves no legacy. His existence is barren.

The same idea applies to the Divine radiance that illuminates the world. In order for the world to be able to bear this light (in the positive sense), to enjoy and benefit from it and not be consumed by it, the light needs to reach the world in constricted form. This constriction, in the *Zohar*, is what the moon takes upon itself. In the beginning, the moon exists together with the sun. This state parallels what the *midrash* refers to as “sharing a single crown,” but in a different sense: in the sense of existing together on a higher plane (like a crown), outside of and above the world. But so long as this is the case, there is no revelation of the light in the world:

“The two great lights” – Originally, joined together. This secret is the complete name of God – Y-H-V-H and Elo-him together – even though [the latter] is not revealed, but rather is only in concealed form. (*Zohar Bereishit* 20a)

In the situation described here, the two Divine names – Y-H-V-H and Elo-him, which are sometimes represented by the sun and the moon (respectively) – are joined together. But this seemingly perfect unity allows no illumination for the world; it is all wrapped up within itself, in a closed circuit. The earth and its creatures would be unable to benefit from such a light source; it cannot provide illumination for them, and is too powerful for them.

For this reason, the moon chooses to separate from the sun, thereby diminishing itself. As the *Zohar* writes in the preceding lines:

When the moon was together with the sun in a single cluster, the moon was in the light. When it separated from the sun and was appointed over all its multitudes [lit. forces], it diminished itself, and diminished its light […] and for this reason the word *meorot* [מארות, lights, as in “the two great lights”] is written in deficient form [מארת, without the *vav* before the final *tav*]. And all of this is intended to bring repair to the world, as it is written, “to illuminate the earth” (*Bereishit* 1:15-17).

Separating itself from the sun, the moon descends and becomes part of this world. Its light is thereby greatly diminished, and the moon itself is smaller, but it is “appointed over all its forces”: there are now beings that are affected by it and benefit from it. This moon is the Divine Presence that is immanent within the world – the Divine Presence that comes down to our world from the infinite heavens. To use the language of the *sefirot*, it is known as the *sefira* of *Malkhut*, or *Shekhina*, and is represented by the name “Elo-him.” This is the Divine Presence or manifestation as it appears in our world: admittedly constricted and hidden, and mostly impossible to see or sense, but it is there. At the same time, there exists the higher, more powerful Divine representation, higher up in the system of the *sefirot*: the *sefira* of *Tiferet*, represented by the sun, and also known by the Name Y-H-V-H. The sun (in the metaphor) is not directly present in our world. Its overpowering light, in its original form, would be more than the world could bear. Man would be shriveled and stripped of any independent ability or free choice. However, man can maintain a form of communication with Divinity of the moon: smaller – sometimes exceedingly small – and merely reflecting the light of the distant sun, thereby allowing the world a degree and form of exposure that it can bear and benefit from. Now the moon has “multitudes” or “forces”: it is no longer closed within itself, but rather opens itself up, giving the light that it receives from the sun to the many creatures of the world.

This description also maintains a dialogue with a different Rabbinic source, which describes how Divinity is revealed in this world only through the name of “*Adnut*” (which is likewise connected in Kabbala to the *sefira* of *Malkhut*), and not by the name “Y-H-V-H”:

“And the Lord shall be King over the entire world; on that day the Lord will be One, and His name – One” (*Zekharia* 14:9) – what does this “One” mean? Is God’s name not One in the present?

R. Nachman son of Yitzchak said: The World to Come is not like this world. In this world, God’s name is written with a *yud* and a *heh* but pronounced as an *alef* and *dalet* [Ado-nai], but in the World to Come [His name] will be all One, pronounced *yud*-*heh* and written *yud*-*heh*…

To which R. Avina raised the following difficulty: But it is written (*Shemot* 3:15), “This is My name forever (*le-olam*)” [implying hiddenness, as explained below] and “this is My remembrance from generation to generation” [implying that the name will be proclaimed, not hidden] – ?

The Holy One, blessed be He, said: “My name is not read the way it is written. It is written with a *yud*-*heh*, but read as *alef*-*dalet*.” (*Pesachim* 50a)

What *Chazal* are teaching us here is that in this world, God is manifest in a form that is concealed (the world *le-olam* in the verse from *Shemot* is written without a *vav*, hinting at *he’elem* – hiddenness), partial, and constricted. One of the expressions of this reality is the fact that the Divine Name Y-H-V-H, even where it appears in writing, is not uttered; instead, we use a different Name, Ado-nai, which expresses a partial aspect of God – that of “mastery” (*adnut*) – and invokes a master-servant relationship, which is certainly incomplete and not the highest form of connection between man (or Israel) and God.

**Parental constriction in *Chassidut***

Coming back to the source in the *Zohar*, and using a different anthropomorphic image, we might speak of a mother figure who, in order to provide her children (“multitudes,” or “forces”) with what they need, sets aside her lofty partnered status, in which she exists in symbiosis and interaction with her husband, as appropriate to her personal level – a state of maximal receiving – and “descends” to the level of her children to give of herself to them, entailing a considerable diminution of herself. This descent or diminution is an act of self-abnegation that is vital for the existence and repair of the world.

This movement of the moon/*Shekhina* is given a new formulation and illuminated in a different light in a teaching of the Maggid of Mezeritch, which appears in several sources, concerning the constriction of Divinity in its interaction with the world and with man:

“*Yehi kevod Hashem le-olam”* )*Tehillim* 104:31) – [we might translate, in the present context, as “let God’s glory come into the world”] for the radiance of the Holy One, blessed be He, is beyond what can be borne by all the world, and so God undertakes several constrictions, in order that they will be able to bear Him… At the same time, “*yismach* *Hashem be-ma’asav*” – “God rejoices in his creations” (ibid.): We might imagine a father who has a young child who wants to take a broomstick and “ride” it as though he were riding a horse. Although in reality a horse carries the rider, while here the child is moving the horse around, as it were, nevertheless he takes pleasure in the game, and his father helps him and gives him a broomstick, to fulfill the son’s desire… (*Maggid Devarav Le-Yaakov* 8)

The blessed God constricted His radiance, as it were, in a manner that may be compared to a father who curbs his intellect and engages in childish chatter for the sake of his small child. Furthermore, all manner of playfulness is aroused in the father, who loves such playfulness in order to give pleasure to his son… and the love gives rise to the constriction… (*Maggid Devarav Le-Yaakov* 1)

The Maggid of Mezeritch formulates the concept in terms of a constriction of radiance, but at the same time, he uses the metaphor of parenthood. He presents the constriction that Divinity undergoes as an act that is prompted by love and the desire to give (“and the love gives rise to the constriction”), like a father who talks with his child in language that the child can understand. The father possesses more sophisticated language and more complex ideas and knowledge, but these are beyond the child’s comprehension. The connection between them is dependent on the father’s ability to adopt a more childish position – which requires that he simplify and “reduce” himself, as it were, forgoing his superior intellect and knowledge. Moreover, the father is portrayed as descending, “down onto the carpet,” as it were, to play with the child, with an emphasis on his enjoyment of the child and of the child’s playful games.

The Maggid emphasizes the father’s mental constriction in his readiness to embrace his son’s imaginary world. In reality, when a person rides a horse, it is the horse’s legs that do the galloping, but when a child rides on a broomstick, he has to use his own legs, imagining that they are the legs of a horse. Perhaps the Maggid’s most audacious statement is that the father’s act of constriction gives rise to playfulness within himself (“Furthermore all manner of playfulness is aroused in the father...”). The childish feeling is a development that the father merits by virtue of having lowered himself to the level of his son.

Getting back to the story of the moon in the *Zohar*, the Maggid’s teaching sheds new light on the moon’s choice to separate from its unity with the sun and to diminish its own light in order to be able to give of itself to the world and the creations. It interprets this process as a maternal act of love towards the children.

**R. Nachman’s story of the moon’s tailors**

The final stage of our journey in the footsteps of the *midrash* about the moon will be a story of R. Nachman of Breslav, who also adopts motifs from the *midrash* but uses them in a different way. As is the case with many Chassidic ideas, R. Nachman’s story has as its background the kabbalistic concepts that we encountered in the *Zohar*, but with a focus more on describing processes within the human psyche, and less on aspects of Divinity. I feel that this is more than just a development of the *midrashic* and kabbalistic symbols in a new direction in R. Nachman’s story. We can take the language that R. Nachman provides and come back to the *midrash* of *Chazal* in the Talmud *Bavli*.

The following is the story that R. Nachman offers:[[1]](#footnote-1)

The moon once came complaining to the sun that it – the sun – got to shine in the day, and during the summer, while the moon had to shine during the long, cold nights in winter.

The sun mollified the moon, promising that it would prepare a garment for the moon to wear.

The sun then called upon all the important, top-rated tailors to create a garment for the moon. The lesser tailors wanted to show up too, but they said to themselves, “If we weren’t called for, we shouldn’t go.”

The top-rated tailors came and declared it impossible to create a garment for the moon: since the moon waxes and wanes, there is no way of determining its size.

Then the lesser tailors came, and said that they could determine its size and produce the garment…

In this story, as in the original *midrash*, the moon arrives with a complaint. Here, however, the complaint concerns the cold nights when the moon has to shine, as compared to the much better conditions enjoyed by the sun, which shines when it is warm and light. Of course, the grievance is ironic and paradoxical: the absence of the sun is itself what makes the night dark and cold, not the other way around. But humor is part of the story.

There are many tailors who could be approached to create a garment for the moon, but the story emphasizes that in the beginning, only the important, top-rated tailors are invited. This is not all that surprising, in view of the fact that it is the sun that is undertaking and driving the initiative. The sun-moon dichotomy parallels the relationship between the top-rated, well-known tailors and their lesser-known colleagues. The sun symbolizes that which is larger and more complete, like the “great” tailors. The moon is smaller; much of the time it is deficient – in other words, not only inferior to the sun, but also characterized by a certain instability. It is the opposite of the sun – like the lesser tailors.

And indeed, in the beginning, the lesser tailors refrain from offering their services; they leave the project to the “experts,” who have achieved fame and radiate knowledge, fullness, and completeness. But then it turns out that it is perhaps precisely those qualities that prevent the great tailors from being able to create a garment suited to the moon. Working with the moon requires a measure of flexibility, because it is constantly changing. And flexibility is a quality that characterizes those who are still on their journey, in the process, not yet having arrived at their goal or at completion. Arriving at the goal often gives rise to rigidity. Here we discover that there are advantages to deficiency. To put it differently, we might quote the *Sefat Emet* in the name of the Seer of Lublin:

 “I am undeserving [lit. ‘small’] of all the favors…” (*Bereishit* 32:11) – I heard from my revered grandfather, in the name of the holy Rabbi of Lublin, that the fact that one is undeserving [‘small’] in his own eyes is one of God’s favors…” (*Sefat Emet, Parashat Vayishlach,* 5634)

Sometimes the fact that a person is lowly in his own sight can be a blessing. Feeling “small” is one of the “favors.” Deficiency – not necessarily on the objective level, but rather as an inner consciousness – allows a person not only humility, but also flexibility, creativity, and motivation to progress. Deficiency doesn’t mean self-flagellation or depression, nor does it mean non-recognition of self-worth or negation of one’s virtues. Rather, it means being aware not only of what I possess, but also of my deficiencies. Not as a slogan – “Nobody’s perfect”; “There’s always room for improvement” – but as a constant state of personal consciousness.

Another aspect of this reality is that a person who is “whole” and “complete” is sometimes also full of himself. He has trouble seeing beyond his own self, and even more so – actually seeing someone else. He doesn’t see where he ends and the other begins – whether it is another person or, *le-havdil*, God. The consciousness of deficiency in others, and of they experience their deficiencies or weaknesses, is foreign to him. He is also seemingly alienated from his own areas of deficiency. This makes it difficult for him to develop real relationships and to engage in open, genuine, two-way communication. A consciousness of deficiency often allows one to open up to another person, and also to open one’s heart in prayer.

In the next *shiur*, armed with the above insights, we will return to the original *midrash*, in the Gemara in *Chullin*, and see how all the above contributes to our understanding of it.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

1. Z. Mark, *Kol Sippurei R. Nachman mi-Breslav*, p.454. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)