YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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

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**Shiur #03:   
The Story of the Moon – Rabbinical Narrative vs. Story of R. Nachman (1)**

In *Massekhet Chullin*, in the course of a discussion that includes a series of *midrashim* relating the Creation story, we find the well-known story of the creation of the great lights:

[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* 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.’” (*Bavli*, *Chullin* 60b)

This story is a *midrash* on a verse in *Bereishit* Chapter 1. Like all *midrashim*, it tells a story that is different from our ordinary, intuitive, superficial, and literal reading of the text. The difficulty is a seemingly benign inconsistency, which a plain reading of the text would not necessarily get stuck on: the first part of the verse states that God created two great lights, implying equality between them, while the latter part refers to a hierarchy, in which one is greater than the other.

Since it seems that the verse could have been formulated in simpler terms (“And God created the greater light, to rule the day, and the lesser light, to rule the night…”), the midrashic reading zooms in on this gap. Supposing that we go along with the midrashic solution to the textual difficulty, we find ourselves facing a different problem: how does the *midrash* understand the original situation and the unit as a whole? If the two great lights – the sun and moon – were originally the same size, then the degree of illumination at night should have been the same as during the day. How, then, could these great lights originally have fulfilled their stated function of “distinguishing day from night”?

We might suggest that the midrashic reading portrays the initial stage differently from how we usually read the verses: it presumes that the two lights were originally equal and both shone in the day, while the night was devoid of any light. Thus, God’s words from the first day – “and He called the darkness ‘night’” – remained in full force. The argument posited by the moon is then easier to understand: if both the sun and the moon were shining in the daytime, then it was indeed a situation of “two kings sharing the same crown,” making one of them (seemingly) superfluous. After diminishing the moon, God proposes (according to the *midrash*) that the moon “go and rule during both the day and the night.” This is a new development: the moon will radiate light at night as well (although the moon deems this solution unsatisfactory, since its light has become altogether irrelevant during the day). The night is no longer completely dark; it is lit up somewhat by the moon, which has achieved a realm of dominion of its own (albeit on a more modest scale than the sun).

**Interpretation of the story**

What is the meaning of this *midrash*? A variety of readings and interpretations have been offered over the generations.

**a. Man vs. his ego**

One straightforward interpretation maintains that the story uses the moon to talk about human attributes: the weaknesses of ego, jealousy, and competition that characterize man and cause him and his environment such suffering. Yona Frankel, for example, writes:

Man is prone to sin because he loves himself and seeks to amplify his honor and his wealth; he is therefore also prone to harming his neighbor, who is a threat to his desires and aims. For this reason, Kayin and Hevel want to divide the world between them […] *Chazal’s* view of man says: there is no need to ask why man is driven to self-aggrandization and why the idea of “diminishing oneself” is so foreign to him […] The moon […] views itself as a king and has no wish to share this honor with another.[[1]](#footnote-1)

According to this interpretation, the moon wishes to rule alone. This desire is a metaphor for the human ego, which seeks control, power, and honor, all of which prevent him from being satisfied with sharing control. According to this reading, the Divine command to the moon to diminish itself is intended to effect repair for this sin; it is an opportunity for the moon to relinquish the interests of the ago as the driving force behind its actions. The initial state in which the moon is created, in which it “shares the same crown” with the sun, is a test: it is an opportunity to set aside considerations of the ego and to act from a different perspective. The moon fails that first test and seeks to rule alone, and it also fails the second test, refusing to accept its diminishment despite God’s suggestions of ways to soften the change.

Ultimately, and rather surprisingly, God Himself declares that He needs atonement. Perhaps this is because after the fact, in view of the moon’s failure, there is a sense that the test was too hard. Admittedly, the test was not originally meant to diminish the moon, but rather the opposite: to allow it real growth, in terms of character, through relinquishing the desire for power. The test was a worthy one, but the end result is that the moon fails. However, according to Frankel, the essence of the declaration, “Bring atonement for Me” is not a statement of guilt, but is meant to offer the moon another chance by presenting a model of self-diminishment: even God Himself, the King of kings, can acknowledge failure, as it were, and ask for atonement. The moon – and the human beings represented by it – can learn how this is done.

According to Frankel, then, the *midrash* is a simple metaphor about man and his drive for power and glory. It comes to give us moral instruction and encourage us to work on our tendency towards jealousy and our desire for glory, since these traits can lead man to lose even that which he started out with.

This is a nice interpretation, but somewhat banal and predictable. Let us consider some other possible readings of the story.

**b. Israel vs. the nations**

Another perspective that has been proposed views the story of the moon and the sun as an allegory regarding Israel and the nations. At the heart of this interpretation is the reality that has prevailed throughout the duration of the exile: the weakness and negligible size of the Jewish People, and their suffering at the hands of stronger nations. It is this reality that the *midrash* seeks to address. The analogy is based on comparing Israel to the moon – an idea that appears in various sources, such as in the declaration made every month as part of the *Birkat Ha-levana* (Sanctification of the New Moon): “And to the moon [God] said that it should renew itself as a crown of glory for those He carried from the womb, who are destined, like it, to be renewed” (Talmud *Bavli*, *Sanhedrin* 42a). The connection between the Jewish People and the moon, and between the other nations and the sun, also sits well with the fact that the months of the Jewish calendar are lunar months, while the surrounding culture (Roman/Christian, at the time of *Chazal*) used a purely solar calendar, with no connection to the moon.

However, the story in *Chullin* itself contains no hint of this interpretation, and we might question the degree to which it conforms with the story as it appears in the *Bavli*. It would appear that this interpretation was originally proposed on the basis of another version of the story, one which originated in Eretz Yisrael, as recorded in *Midrash Bereishit Rabba*:

R. Tanchum [cited] R. Pinchas in the name of R. Simon: After calling [both the sun and the moon] “great,” how can it be that [God] then effects a diminishment, such that we read, “the greater light to rule the day” [and “the lesser light to rule at night”]? The explanation is that one entered the domain of the other.

R. Pinchas said: With regard to all other sacrifices, the Torah commands “one male goat for a sin offering,” while with regard to Rosh Chodesh, it says, “one male goat for a sin offering **to Me**” (*Bamidbar* 28:15). [What is the meaning of this addition?] The Holy One, blessed be He, said: Bring atonement for Me, for My having diminished the moon. For it is I whose caused it to enter the domain of the other. If the Torah looks askance at one who enters someone else’s domain with permission, then how much more so where one enters without permission! …

Esav [i.e., the Christian world] counts [the days of the year] according to the sun, which is great, while Yaakov [i.e., the Jewish People] counts in accordance with the moon. R. Nachman said: this is an appropriate symbol. Esav counts in accordance with the sun, which is great, and just as the sun shines only in the day, but does not shine at night, so Esav belongs to this world but not to the World to Come. Yaakov counts in accordance with the moon, which is small, and just as the moon shines by night and also by day, so Yaakov belongs in this world and in the World to Come. …

R. Nachman said: So long as the light of the larger luminary shines, the light of the smaller luminary is not recognized. Once the light of the larger luminary has set, the light of the smaller luminary is recognized. Likewise, so long as the light of Esav persists, the light of Yaakov is not recognized. When the light of Esav sets, the light of Yaakov is recognized, as it is written (*Yeshayahu* 60:1), “Arise, shine, for your light has come….” (*Bereishit Rabba* 6:3)

Here we find explicit reference to the real subject behind the allegory – Yaakov vs. Esav; Israel vs. Rome (which is personified by *Chazal* as Esav) – including the use of the different calendars (“Esav counts according to the sun” / “Yaakov counts according to the moon”). The description of the moon as “entering the domain of the other” also sits well with the relationship between Yaakov and Esav, with Yaakov at birth grasping Esav’s heel, then buying the birthright from him, and finally taking Yitzchak’s blessing for himself. The central idea of the *midrash* here is indeed the relations between the moon and the sun as a representation of the competition and jealousy between the brothers, which is also expressed in the long term, according to the *midrash*, in the relations between nations: Israel and the Roman Empire. In this relationship, as *Chazal* point out, Israel suffers both from the direct bullying of the nations and also from a sense of impotence in influencing the world, owing to its diminutive size and weakness. The *midrash* in *Bereishit Rabba* does not explain why the situation is as it is, but it does give expression to God’s pain over the suffering that the situation causes, and His identification and sense of responsibility for this pain: “The Holy One, blessed be He, said, ‘It is I Who caused it to enter the domain of the other….’” This statement, too, echoes the story of Yaakov and Esav, where Yaakov, at Rivka’s urging – and, inter alia, in the wake of her God-given prophecy – “enters the domain of the other” to receive the blessing in his stead, thus inflaming the conflict between them.

**c. The sun and moon as male and female**

A third direction of interpretation, which has its origins in the conceptual system of the *Zohar* and kabbalistic literature in general, is to view the sun and moon in the *midrash* as symbolizing the male and female (or masculinity and femininity) and their status and roles in the world of *Chazal*. This reading is based on the system of symbols that appears explicitly in *kabbala*, but also conforms with *Chazal’s* general outlook. In terms of chronology, too, early kabbalistic traditions were seemingly already developed by *Chazal’s* time, although they only appeared openly later on.

In kabbalistic literature, the moon is a feminine symbol. It is sometimes connected with the *sefira* of *Malkhut* – the lowest of the ten *sefirot*[[2]](#footnote-2) – which is also feminine. The connection between woman and the moon as a symbol is based, of course, on shared characteristics such as a monthly cycle.

This symbolism brings us to a new reading of the description of “two kings sharing a single crown,” as recalling the situation described in Chapter 1 of *Bereishit* concerning man and woman: “male and female He created them.” Indeed, the *midrash* teaches that they were originally created together, as a single body with two faces:

R. Shmuel bar Nachman said: When the Holy One, blessed be He, created Adam, He created him with two faces, and then sawed [them] apart, giving them backs: a back here and a back here. They argued: But it is written (*Bereishit* 2:21) “And He took one of his ribs” [suggesting that woman was created later, from man’s rib, rather than being half of the original creation]! He answered: The word *tzela* is meant here not as a rib bone, but rather as a side, as you would say “and for the *tzela* of the *Mishkan* (*Shemot* 21:20), which we translate as “side.” (*Bereishit Rabba* 8:1)

This *midrash* describes an initial state of equality and symbiosis. It reads the two first chapters of *Bereishit*, with their different and seemingly contradictory descriptions of the creation of woman, as a single continuum: Chapter 1 describes how they were originally joined together, and Chapter 2 describes how they were subsequently separated. Rashi, commenting on *Bereishit* 1:27, summarizes this reading of the *midrash* as follows:

“Male and female He created them” – But later on, the text reads, “And He took one of his ribs….” How are we to understand this? A *midrash aggada* teaches that they were originally created as a single androgynous being, and afterwards, God separated them.

The concept of the separation, or “sawing,” between the male and female is further developed in kabbalistic literature. According to this reading, it is after this separation takes place that the sin occurs, and as a result, the moon is diminished. The moon’s desire to expand into a place that is not at present her own, as a result of which she is required to diminish herself, may recall Chava’s sin in the Garden of Eden, following which God declares, “and he (i.e., the man) shall have dominion (“*yimshol*”) over you.” The root *m/sh/l* is a key word in the story of the creation of the two great lights in Chapter 1 of *Bereishit* (“to rule/have dominion [*limshol*] by day and by night”; “to rule [*le-memshelet*] by day”). Thus, the connection proposed between these concepts is not surprising.

These are the only places where the root *m/sh/l* appears in the chain of narratives about the Creation and Adam and Chava. Perhaps the *midrash* about the moon reads this diminishing of the woman, such that the man has dominion over her, as being related to the division of the great lights and their respective dominions, which are not equal.

A different *midrash*, brief but bold, describes the transition from the original state of equality to the subsequent state of inequality as follows:

When the Holy One, blessed be He, created Adam alone, He said, “It is not good that man be alone.” He created woman from the ground, like [man] himself, and named her Lilit. They immediately began to quarrel. She said, “I shall not lie beneath [you]… We are equals, since we are both from the ground.” They did not listen to each other. When Lilit saw this, she uttered God’s Name and disappeared into the thin air. (*Otzar Ha-Midrashim* [Eisenstein] 35, as per *Alef Bet de-Ben Sira* 7)

This is another exegetical-midrashic possibility for explaining the transition between the first two chapters of Bereishit: The description of equality of Chapter 1 is about the woman who was originally created together with man – Lilit. These two equals were incapable of building a marital relationship, and Lilit disappeared. God created another woman in her stead, described in Chapter 2, who is no longer man’s equal. Kabbalistic literature develops this idea of Adam’s two wives in different directions, which lie beyond the scope of our present discussion.

According to the reading that arises from the *midrash* about the moon, based on the *midrashim* and these kabbalistic symbols, the moon symbolizes the woman, and one expression of the moon’s diminishment in the physical world is woman’s inferior status with regard to man in the world and in society. The moon’s protest in the *midrash* can be understood, according to this reading, as a protest against this inferiority which has afflicted woman throughout human history. One might read God’s words in the story – “Bring atonement for Me, for My having diminished the moon” – as an assumption of responsibility for the pain entailed in the woman’s situation. Moreover, we find in kabbalistic literature that this painful state of “diminishment” is not the end of the story, but is followed by a later process of repair:

R. Yitzchak said: “It is written (*Yeshayahu* 30:26), ‘And the light of the moon shall be like the light of the sun, and the light of the sun shall be sevenfold, like the light of the seven days.” Which ‘seven days’ are referred to here? These are the seven days of Creation […] Because at that time the world is beautified [literally, perfumed] and returns to its state of completion, and the moon is no [longer] deficient because of the evil serpent […] And when will this be? At the time concerning which it is written (*Yeshayahu* 25:8), “He will destroy death forever.” And then, it is written (*Zekharia* 14:9), “On that day the Lord will be One and His Name – One.” (*Zohar*, *Bereishit* 20a)

This excerpt from the *Zohar* alludes to the sin of the Garden of Eden as the source of the diminishment of the moon: “and the moon is no longer deficient because of the evil serpent” – the serpent who incited the woman to sin. It also hints to the repairing of this reality and a return to a state where the moon is no longer diminished.

Based on this kabbalistic idea that the moon will eventually be restored to its original state, we say in the *Kiddush Levana* prayer, “May it be Your will… to refill the deficiency of the moon, so that it will not be diminished in any way, and that the light of the moon be like the light of the sun, and like the light of the seven Days of Creation, as it was prior to its diminishment.” One might view the developments in the status of women in recent generations as part of this repair, rooted in kabbalistic literature.

This reading of the *midrash* seems sound. According to this interpretation, the *midrash* is raising the issue of the inequality of women in relation to men. The *midrash* created by *Chazal* does not propose a solution, but it does pay attention to the pain of this lack of equality. It also presents the original situation of equality as unsuccessful, thereby pointing both to the difficulty entailed in complete equality and to the problematic reality of inequality.

In the next *shiur*, we will trace the developments of this story after the time of *Chazal*, in the *Zohar* and in the stories of R. Nachman of Breslov.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

1. See, for example, Yona Frankel, *Midrash ve-Aggada* vol. II, Open University, 1996, p. 318. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For the ten *sefirot* and their significance, see the Hebrew VBM series by Rav Itamar Eldar, “[*Eser Ha-sefirot*](https://www.etzion.org.il/he/series/introduction-ten-sefirot)*.*” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)