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 #05:**

**The Story of the Moon – Rabbinical Narrative vs. Story of R. Nachman (3)**

The previous two *shiurim* examined the *midrash* about the moon’s diminishment in *Massekhet Chullin*, and various developments in the *Zohar* and in R. Nachman of Breslav’s story. In this *shiur*, I would like to return to the *midrash* and read it in light of the language and concepts that emerged in the kabbalistic and Chassidic developments:

Rabbi Shimon ben Pazi notes [a seeming contradiction in the text]: It is written, “And God made the two great lights” (*Bereishit* 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 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).”

God said to her: “Go; let righteous men be named after you [as the light that is ‘*katan’* – smaller/lesser]: there will be Yaakov Ha-katan, i.e., Yaakov [our forefather; see *Amos* 7:2]; Shmuel Ha-katan [the *Tanna*, Shmuel); and David Ha-katan, [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 says: “What is distinct about the goat offering of Rosh Chodesh, concerning which we are told, ‘For the Lord’ (*Bamidbar* 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)

**Chassidic/existential interpretation of the *Bavli*’s story**

In the first shiur on this *midrash*, I compared the above version to its parallel in *Midrash Bereishit Rabba*, and noted that the *midrash* in *Bereishit Rabba* seems to have a more national orientation, pertaining to Israel and the nations, Yaakov and Esav. But this interpretation sits less well with the *midrash* as presented in the *Bavli*. Here, there is no mention of Israel, Yaakov, or Esav, and the language seems to focus on the individual rather than the nation: the moon speaks as an individual, with an individual’s thoughts and feelings. We might therefore propose an interpretation for the *midrash* in the *Bavli* that speaks the existential language and insights that we gained from the *Zohar*, and from R. Nachman in particular and *Chassidic* thought in general. It seems from the later developments of the *midrash* in the *Zohar* and in *Chassidut* that this is how these sources understood the story, even if *Chazal* did not give the interpretation explicit expression.

In the *midrash*, God sends the moon off to diminish itself. In contrast to the “*mussar*-style” direction of the interpretation that I quoted in the name of Prof. Yona Frankel in the first *shiur*, we may posit that this was not meant as a punishment for the moon’s jealousy, a test of her ability to overcome it, nor a struggle against the ego. Rather, it gave the moon an opportunity to exist with a consciousness of deficiency and partial-ness – as opposed to a sense of completeness and fullness – and everything this awareness can facilitate from a spiritual and developmental perspective.

Every person has areas of deficiency. No one is, nor can be, perfect. The only question is the state of mind. A person can go about life with a ‘sun’ consciousness of completion, or he can accept his deficiency, recognize it, and live with a ‘moon’ consciousness. This is an opportunity for diminishment that is ultimately an opportunity to grow inwardly. A state of completion, or fullness, often means being closed and impenetrable. Deficiency, on the other hand, leaves room for the other – whether it be another person or God. It allows for open channels through which one can absorb from the outside, and an opening for discourse and relations with God and with one’s fellow man. In this sense, it is an advantage. The moon in the story is forced to constrict itself, but only the moon engages in ongoing dialogue with God. The sun, in its fullness and completeness, fulfills its role, and illuminates more powerfully, but we do not hear of it engaging in dialogue with anyone.

Of course, constriction also comes with pain and difficulty. The deficient, partial nature of human existence is not an easy reality. It encompasses sickness, pain, loneliness, frustration and disappointment, and the major and minor setbacks that one experiences during one’s life. I have no wish to romanticize and idealize this reality, nor to ignore pain and suffering. Perhaps this is the meaning of the ending of the *midrash*, where God asks, “Bring atonement for Me.” This rather strange request might be understood as an expression of sensitivity, empathy, and identification; a recognition of the pain entailed in the difficult path of deficiency that characterizes human existence. At the same time, while empathizing with His human creations, God does not retract the diminishment of the moon or the creation of man with imperfections. Perhaps there is something inescapable about contraction, since this seems the only way of allowing man his ongoing journey and his quest for connection with those around him and with God. Often, a person’s own deficiency is the crack through which the pain and suffering of others, and the good in them, will get through to him, along with the light of Torah.

We might add here that the original instruction to the moon, “Go and diminish yourself,” echoes the first and most fundamental action that God Himself undertook, according to Kabbala and *Chassidut*, when He created the world. The moon is a miniature reflection of God, as it were, with Whom it is in dialogue. Similarly, as we saw in the previous *shiur*, the *Zohar* describes the moon’s *choice* to diminish itself – which is essentially a variation on the constriction of the Divine Presence and the descent of the *sefira* of *Malkhut* to our world. I shall elaborate on this idea and explain it further below.

**The broader context of the *midrash* in *Massekhet Chullin***

Echoes of the interpretation that I have proposed for the *midrash* may be found, I believe, in the broader context of the *sugya* in *Massekhet Chullin* in which it appears.

The *sugya* discusses the signs of ritual purity in animals, and starts by identifying the signs that are specific to *chayot* (wild animals, as opposed to *behemot* – domesticated animals), since some slightly different laws apply to them. (For example, fats that are forbidden for consumption in the case of *behemot* [*chelev*] may be eaten from *chayot*.) Reference is made to an animal called a “*keresh,*” and the Gemara goes on to identify it as a single-horned mythological creature. This leads the Gemara to mention another mythological animal, a type of lion, with a series of related stories about R. Yehoshua ben Chanania and the Roman Emperor. What is common to these stories is the Emperor’s wish for an encounter of some sort with the God of Israel – through sight or some other means – and R. Yehoshua’s proof that the encounter he desires is impossible. One of the stories is particularly interesting in our context:

The Emperor said to R. Yehoshua: “I wish to see your God.” He said to him, “You cannot see Him.” He said, “Truly, I shall see Him!” (R. Yehoshua) caused the Emperor to stand facing the sun [literally, ‘day’] in mid-summer. He said to him, “Look at [the sun].” He said, “I cannot.” He said to him, “You say that you cannot look at the sun – which is [merely] one of God’s servants. All the more so, then, the Divine Presence itself!”

The invocation of the sun, which is also referred to in the story as the ‘day’ – as in the midrash about the moon (“they will count days by the sun as well, as it is impossible that they will not count time that way…”) – serves to connect the two sources. The sun is depicted as blinding: its light is too great and too powerful; one cannot look at it and there can be no encounter with it. This depiction recalls the way in which the story about the moon appears in the *Zohar*. Of course, there is some development, too: in the story in the Gemara, the sun does not represent God Himself, but rather one of His servants, while in the *Zohar*, the sun is one revelation of God – the *sefira* of *Tiferet*.

A similar idea appears in a different story, about the mythological lion:

The Emperor said to R. Yehoshua: “Your God is compared to a lion…” [Rabbi Yehoshua](file:///C%3A%5Ctopics%5Crabbi-yehoshua-b-hananyah) said to him: “…God is compared to the lion of Bei Ila’ei.” The Emperor said to him: “I ask that you show it to me.” [Rabbi Yehoshua](file:///C%3A%5Ctopics%5Crabbi-yehoshua-b-hananyah) said to him: “You cannot see it.” The Emperor said to him: “Truly, I shall see it!” [Rabbi Yehoshua](file:///C%3A%5Ctopics%5Crabbi-yehoshua-b-hananyah) prayed for mercy, and the lion of Bei Ila’ei set off from its place [towards Rome]. When it was four hundred parasangs away from Rome, it roared once, and all the pregnant women miscarried, and the wall of Rome fell. When it was three hundred parasangs away, it roared again, and all the men’s front and back teeth fell out from fear, and [the Emperor] himself fell from his throne to the ground. He said to [[Rabbi Yehoshua](file:///C%3A%5Ctopics%5Crabbi-yehoshua-b-hananyah)]: “I beg you, pray for mercy with regard to it, that it should return to its place.” [[Rabbi Yehoshua](file:///C%3A%5Ctopics%5Crabbi-yehoshua-b-hananyah)] prayed for mercy with regard to it, and it returned to its place.

In this story, the lion symbolizes God Himself (“the lion of Bei Ila’ei”), but the idea is a similar one: God’s power is too great to contain, even destructive, and therefore there can be no encounter with Him. An important point in this story is the Emperor falling from his own throne at the lion’s roar; this too may recall the diminishment of the moon.

These two encounters – with the sun and with the lion – express the same idea that appears in the *Zohar* with respect to God’s radiance before the constriction: it is too strong; the world cannot enjoy and benefit from it. The story of the moon, which appears further on in the *sugya*, expresses the other side of the coin: diminishment and constriction, which, according to the story in the *Zohar*, facilitate an encounter. The presence of these stories in the broader context of the *sugya* offers support for the reading that I have proposed above: the broader context presents the “sun” state, which has its own disadvantages, since its light is too strong and precludes any encounter. The *midrash* presents the other option – the moon – which is smaller and offers much less light, but which allows for communication and encounter. These advantages of deficiency are true and apply whether we interpret the moon in the *midrash* as representing a certain aspect of Divinity, which can appear in the world and which man can encounter in different ways, or whether the moon represents man, who lives with a consciousness and acceptance of his deficiency and is therefore better able to communicate and connect with God.

**Constriction and deficiency in Chassidic sources**

Chassidic sources deal explicitly and in detail with the ideas of constriction and deficiency that – as stated above – may be hinted to in a preliminary way in the *midrash* about the moon. For example, we might cite R. Nachman’s teaching no. 64 in *Likkutei Moharan*, in which he talks about the point of departure for contraction: “For the blessed God, in His compassion, created the world, for He wanted to reveal His compassion, and if there was no creation of the world, to whom would His compassion be shown?” The word “compassion” (*rachmanut*) is not meant here in the usual sense in which we use it – such as when we see someone in unfortunate circumstances and we feel sorry for him – but rather refers to a more primal movement of presence, empathy, and connection. When someone close to us is in distress, sometimes there is no practical help that we can offer, but there is a lot we can give through simply being present with him.

God constricted and diminished Himself so there would be “room” for the world and for man. There is both meaning and a price to this constriction: God chooses not to control everything that happens in the world, for this is the only way to enable Creation, and man in particular, to have any sort of existence that is on some level independent and separate from God, including the possibility of free choice. Of course, the freedom that is extended to nature and to man also comes with a price, in the form of natural disasters and harmful actions on the part of human beings. But this separateness, this state in which man has a level of independent existence, also makes it possible for God to engage in dialogue with him, and facilitates a bond of love and compassion.

When all of the above is taken together with the teaching from the *Zohar*, we see that if we understand the diminishment of the moon in the *midrash* as symbolic of a person undergoing constriction, we might view this constriction as a reflection of God. The constriction that is undergone by both God and man allows them to be in dialogue. God’s constriction has advantages in terms of His connection with man. Admittedly, man needs the “sun-like” aspect of Divinity, but he also needs communication, and therefore he needs the moon-like aspect of Divinity too. The latter is better able to perceive his areas of deficiency, as illustrated by a different – and very daring – passage from R. Nachman (*Likkutei Moharan Tanina* 1,14) that also makes mention of our *midrash*:

And we see God’s compassion in His establishment of Rosh Ha-shana, which is the Day of Judgment, on Rosh Chodesh. That is a great kindness, for how could we lift our faces to ask atonement from Him? He therefore performed kindness with us and established the Day of Judgment, Rosh Ha-shana, on Rosh Chodesh, such that we feel no shame asking for atonement on the Day of Judgment, since God Himself seeks atonement then, as it is written…. Thus we see the extent of His compassion, [and] therefore He alone is worthy to judge the world, for He knows the place of each and every individual, for all places are with Him… therefore God can declare a Rosh Ha-shana, which is the Day of Judgment, for He fulfills the precept, “Do not judge your fellow until you are in his place…”

R. Nachman’s teaching here is based on the *midrash* in *Massekhet Chullin*, and indeed, the quote, “Bring atonement for Me…,” is in itself a rather audacious and unusual statement. There are few comparable sources, and as *Chazal* write in similar contexts, “Were it not written, we could not suggest it.” As mentioned, one option for understanding this statement is to interpret it as being connected to the constriction of Divinity, as we saw in the kabbalistic/Chassidic model. The constriction of Divinity from its Infinity was the only way to facilitate Creation and man’s independent existence with free choice. But this constriction has ramifications as to God’s partial and hidden presence in this world, and what it allows to happen. The fact that God’s presence is partial and hidden allows evil to exist and evil choices to be made. That is the necessary price of Creation, and God takes responsibility for it, even though the world could not exist at all otherwise.

This Chassidic perspective also has an impact on the psychological worldview of Prof. Mordechai Rotenberg. One of the central principles in his theory is utilizing self-contraction as a means of treatment and healing: the subject learns to contract himself and make room for the other in a way that is ultimately for his own good, too. We might view the *midrash* in which God tells the moon to constrict itself as a source in which *Chazal* appreciated the full depth contained in the movement of self-contraction. Rotenberg presents this movement and develops it into an entire approach for comprehending and healing the psyche.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Another interesting development in the idea of *tzimtzum* appears in a teaching by the Seer of Lublin (R. Yaakov Yitzchak ha-Levi Horowitz, a prominent spiritual leader in the 4th generation of *Chassidut*, late 18th century) in the name of his teacher, R. Zusha.[[2]](#footnote-2) In a sermon on *Parashat Lekh-lekha* (*Zot Zikaron*, Munkacz 5522, p. 117), he writes:

And we interpret the verse, “Go forth from your country and from your birthplace and from your father’s house” accordingly. For I heard from my revered teacher [R. Zusha] that one should live in accordance with the verse, “If the place is far from you….” Meaning, a person who serves [God] out of love and fear, and proceeds from one level to the next, until he perceives the loftiness of God, like the ministering angels who constantly declare, “The entire world is full of His glory,” but then go on to say, “Where is the place of His glory?” Were they then lying in their previous declaration, heaven forfend? Surely not. In truth, there is no place that is devoid of Him, Who surrounds all the worlds, and Who fills all the worlds, and is under all worlds, and above all worlds, and in every place. But in truth we have no concept of His glory, for the contraction of God’s light in order that the world might exist, is as perceived by the creations. But this is not so for God’s essence, where there is no change at all.

And behold, on a low level, it seems that we feel and understand that His glory fills the world, as is the case in reality, while on a higher level, we understand that the light of the blessed God cannot be perceived, for it obtains from higher worlds, where it is more spiritual.

The Seer teaches us here about the elusive nature of spiritual accomplishments and progress in building our bond with God. A person who arrives at some spiritual insight, and feels that he has progressed in his relations with God, must undertake a dual movement. On one hand, it is good for him to be at the level that he has attained and to feel joy in his connection with God as he experiences it in the present, without being skeptical or critical regarding this experience. This should be his main consciousness, 99% of the time, with 99% of his energy – even though there is a different, higher perspective, which dwarfs the place where he is currently standing. If he does not give himself over and invest himself in his present state, focusing instead only on a critical view of what he has yet to comprehend, he may find himself frozen in place, incapacitated, and caught in an endless, unhealthy vacillation. On the other hand, he should leave a small place in his consciousness open to something else, to knowledge that is still to come. When he progresses further, he will understand the incomplete and illusory nature of the insight that he had previously attained – because Divinity is indeed beyond our capacity to understand. It is a very delicate task to hold both movements – to avoid belittling the joy and vitality of one’s present position, the ‘here and now,’ while at the same time remaining conscious of its incompleteness, in order to allow for the aspiration for progress.

The Seer cites R. Zusha’s surprising interpretation of the verse, “If the place is distant from you” – not as a condition (*ki* = if), but rather as an operational mental movement (*ki* = that): to leave part of oneself understanding *that* “the place is distant from you” – even more distant than you had known previously. The deeper your insight into Divinity, the more you will understand its greatness and how far removed it is from you, in a way that you could not have understood when your level of insight was lower. The more we know, the less we know. As R. Nachman teaches, the purpose of knowing is to know that we don’t know.

This might be compared to two good friends, or a couple, who start off their relationship with a rather superficial level of acquaintance. Their initial bond involves some external elements and perhaps a hint of a bond deep down in their psyches that is beyond their consciousness or understanding. As they get to know each other better and draw closer, they discover the depth of their differentness. And at that point, they need to maintain love and closeness along with an awareness of an otherness that will not always be possible to ignore or to bridge. This differentness can be a source of pain, but it can also be one aspect of a most profound and courageous bond.

This too is a moon-consciousness, with its inherently cyclical nature. Every waxing of the moon comes with the understanding that it will be followed by a waning. Not in the sense of a simple withdrawal or constriction, but rather a new contraction of the consciousness, where I understand better with hindsight, after I have grown bigger. A new understanding of my smallness and limitedness, which was always there but which I wasn’t aware of, is crystallized and clarified. I come to understand that the purpose is not the attainment of some final objective, that might be portrayed as a sun, but rather continued movement that includes both growth and contraction.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

1. See for example, M. Rotenberg, *Mavo le-Psichologia shel ha-Tzimtzum*, Jerusalem 5770; *Kiyum be-Sod ha-Tzimtzum: Model Hitnahaguti Lefi ha-Chassidut ha-Kabbalit*, Jerusalem 5750. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. My thanks to Roee Horn, because of whom I became acquainted with this source. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)