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The Mystery of the Minimized Moon

Diminish Yourself

In *Maseches Chullin* (60b) we find the following mysterious story (*aggadeta*).

R. Shimon ben Pazi asked: In *Bereishis* (1:17) the *pasuk* begins, וַיַּעַשׂ אֱלֹהִים אֶת שְׁנֵי הַמְּאֹרֹת הַגְּדֹלִים - *And Hashem made the two great sources of light*, then the *pasuk* continues, but continues אֶת הַמְּאֹרֹת הַגְּדֹלִים לְמִשְׁכֶּלֶת הַיּוֹם וְאֶת הַמְּאֹרֹת הַקְּטָנִים לְמִשְׁכֶּלֶת הַלַּיְלָה - *the great luminary to rule the day, and the small luminary to rule the night*. First, both luminaries are called great; but then, the *pasuk* refers to the sun as great and the moon as small. What changed, and why?

The moon asked Hakadosh Baruch Hu, “*Ribbono shel Olam*, is it possible for two kings to utilize a single crown?”

Hashem said to the moon, “Go and make yourself small!”

The moon protested, “Because I presented a proper argument, I should minimize myself?” (Why should I be punished?)

Hashem said to the moon, “Go and rule in the day and in the night.” For the moon can sometimes be seen during the day as well as at night.

“What is the advantage of that? A candle in the daylight provides no benefit.”

“Go, and Yisrael will count days and years according to you.”

“But the sun is also in their calculations, as it says, וְהָיוּ לְאֹתוֹת וּלְמִצְוֹת וְלַיָּמִים וְלַחֲגֻגִים וְלַיָּמִים וְלַחֲגֻגִים - *And they (both sun and moon) will serve as signs and holidays and days and years.*”

Hashem said, “Go, and tzaddikim will be called after you: Yaakov *Hakatan*, Shmuel *Hakatan*, Dovid *Hakatan*.”

Hashem saw that the moon was still not at peace. Hashem said, **“Bring a *kapparah* on My behalf, because I made the moon small.”**

This is the meaning of R. Shimon ben Lakish’s statement: Why is the goat of Rosh Chodesh, unlike other *korbanos*, referred to in the *pasuk* as חטאת לה? It is because Hakadosh Baruch Hu says: “This goat will be an atonement for My making the moon small.”

This entire *aggadah* is so puzzling that we know it must contain very deep secrets.

The most difficult part is the ending, which implies that Hakadosh Baruch Hu needs *kapparah* for minimizing the moon. How can the concept of transgression and atonement apply to Hakadosh Baruch Hu?

He Said to the Universe, “Enough!”

Throughout the generations, tzaddikim have explained this *gemara* in a variety of ways. Let us learn the explanation of the *Ma’or Vashemesh* (הפטרה לשבת ור"ח).

Ma’or Vashemesh begins with the concept of the chain of worlds that extends from the highest world down to our lowly physical world. Hashem’s light becomes constricted, more so in each descending world, until it lends existence to even the most physical aspects of our world. **Thus His light is present even in the most physical aspects of the world – and this enables a person to do *teshuvah* for anything he has done in this world.**

The presence of Hashem’s light in the lowest and darkest aspects of our world limit how deeply our world and its inhabitants can descend into physicality. Had the *hishtalshelus* continued until our world got to an even lower, more material state, *teshuvah* would have been impossible. That is what Chazal meant when they explained that

Hashem's Name ש-ד-י stands for שאמר לעולמו די – *He said to his universe, "Enough."*

This concept provides great *chizuk*. Sometimes a person feels sure he has descended to such depths that *teshuvah* is no longer possible. The *Ma'or Vashemesh* teaches us that this is never so. It is simply impossible for someone to descend to a place that he cannot rise from by doing *teshuvah*. If the *aveirah* was possible, then *teshuvah* must be possible as well.

Tzaddikim Will Be Called by Your Name

The *Ma'or Vashemesh* applies this idea to understand our *gemara*. When the moon asked how two kings could utilize one crown, her question was: "If there is only light and clarity in the world, how can man have free will?" (And without darkness and *nisyonos*, man would never experience the glorious victory of overcoming those dark aspects of life.)

Since the moon had pointed out the problem, Hashem told the moon to minimize herself. This would enable choice, free will, reward and punishment. When the moon asked, "Because I said something correct, I should minimize myself?" that means she feared that by her becoming small, the world would contain such darkness and weight of *gashmiyus* that *teshuvah* could sometimes become impossible. "If people view the sun as a successful source of light, and the moon as a failure, they will feel that someone who sins and falls into darkness has failed."

When Hakadosh Baruch Hu told the moon, "Tzaddikim will be named after you," He declared that although darkness is necessary for the world, people need not think that *teshuvah* is impossible after a fall. **There will be tzaddikim, illuminating the darkness even in the final generations, and inspiring others to rise and do *teshuvah*.**

And by reassuring the moon that Am Yisrael would count days and years according to the moon, Hashem explained that Shabbos and Yom Tov will help everyone do *teshuvah*.

The Kapparah

When Hashem saw that the moon still was not appeased, He said, "Bring a kapparah for me for minimizing the moon." What does this mean?

The Sforno writes (Bamidbar 28:12),

The Jewish custom has been to consider Rosh Chodesh something of a holy day... The reason for this *minhag* is that Yisrael's success in the world resembles the moon, which has no light of its own, only that which it receives from others.

We can connect this to the moon's argument. On one hand, diminishing the moon allowed Bnei Yisrael to reach their destiny. On the other hand, if they transgress, what are they to do? Hakadosh Baruch Hu answered: One day each month shall be your *yom tov*. On that day, you will bring a *korban*, חטאת לה, which will provide *kapparah* for all *aveiros* that result from the darkness.

Every Erev Rosh Chodesh, Bnei Yisrael will do a *cheshbon hanefesh* and realize that they must mend their ways. Then, on Rosh Chodesh itself, they will bring a goat as a *korban chatas*, and all their *aveiros* will be cast into the depths.

To Illuminate the Darkness

Let us now return to the first principle we learned in the *Ma'or Vashemesh*, and appreciate the gift that we received with the diminishing of the moon.

Hashem acknowledged the moon's concern that the darkness would lead to disaster, but explained that He would provide the moon with the power of *tzaddikim*, and the power of Shabbos and Yom Tov, to help Bnei Yisrael do *teshuvah*.

At first glance, it would seem that without the assistance of the *tzaddikim* and *moadim*, the moon alone would not be able to help Bnei Yisrael. However, a careful reading of the Gemara reveals that the *tzaddikim* and *moadim* are portrayed as not assisting the moon, but

deriving their power **from** the moon. Hashem told the moon, "Go, for tzaddikim will be called by your name. Go, for they will count days and years according to you."

Hakadosh Baruch Hu said, "**I will darken the world, but not totally.** I will illuminate it, to an extent, with the light of the moon, which will allow *teshuvah*."

Anyone who follows the light of the moon will know exactly what to do in all situations. Someone who finds himself in a dark house, but has a flashlight or a candle, won't bump his head on the wall; he knows exactly where to go.

The moon is the first teacher of a lesson that Hakadosh Baruch Hu wants us to learn: It is possible to function at night just as you do in the day. There are lights that illuminate our streets at night, and headlights on our cars. Every night, people travel at night and successfully reach their destinations. Does that mean that it is not dark at night? Of course it is dark! **Hakadosh Baruch Hu gives us the means to find our way in the dark.**

That is the power of the moon. Someone who walks by the light of the moon is not frightened by darkness.

It Is My Plan

The moon argued, "In *Ikvesa d'Meshicha*, the last generations before Mashiach, it will be so dark. How will they find their way?" Hakadosh Baruch Hu answered, "You will provide them with light." But the moon still was not satisfied.

Hakadosh Baruch Hu said, "I will give them tzaddikim who will reveal the light that is hidden in the Torah, and I will give them Shabbos and *yamim tovim* that will project a great light.

"This will be especially true if they celebrate those days together with the tzaddikim. They will celebrate Purim with the *Kedushas Levi* and Pesach with the Maharal. This will help them find solutions to all of their difficulties. **The tzaddikim will be part of**

the moon. The tzaddikim and the *moadim* will project the moon's light into each Jewish heart, even during times of darkness."

The moon continued to object. "It will still be dark, and it will still be possible for Bnei Yisrael to fall."

"If that happens, their transgressions will be atoned for by the שְׁעִיר לֵה, as long as they return to Me. I know that I will have to pay a price for diminishing your light, and I will pay it. **It is part of My plan.**"

Erev Rosh Chodesh is a time for *cheshbon hanefesh* (introspection), and Rosh Chodesh is the time to focus on Hashem's love for Am Yisrael. This will help us discover that both light and darkness are integral parts of the perfect world Hashem created.

Don't worry about the price of the darkness. Hakadosh Baruch Hu will cover the cost, because this is exactly the way Hakadosh Baruch Hu wanted the world to work.

National and Individual

This teaching of the *Ma'or Vashemesh* applies not only to darkness in the world of individuals, but to darkness experienced by Klal Yisrael as a whole. We look at the state of our generation and see *aveiros* and *machlokes* which leave us in darkness and confusion. It is important to know that the darkness is part of Am Yisrael's journey. We have to live with it, and remember that Hakadosh Baruch Hu sees all that will occur till the end of time, and that the darkness that confronts each generation is part of His plan. We should even rejoice in the knowledge that everything we experience is part of Hashem's perfect plan.

The Light of Love

When we understand the message of the moon, we will realize how much Hashem helps us.

When someone builds a new house, he hires a lighting expert. The expert asks about the size of the rooms, the number and placement of

windows, the color of the walls; and then, he determines the optimal lighting for each room.

Hakadosh Baruch Hu illuminates the night with the moon and stars, tzaddikim and *moadim*. **He knows exactly how much light the world needs in each and every generation.** The *Ma'or Vashemesh* explained that the light is Hakadosh Baruch Hu's way of saying יד - *Enough!* The world will never descend to a level of darkness that makes it impossible for a Jew to do *teshuvah*.

Hakadosh Baruch Hu has given us exactly what we need. If we will only be wise enough to utilize the *sefarim* of tzaddikim and the tzaddikim in our own generation, and to welcome the light of Shabbos and Yom Tov, we will have all the light we need to navigate the darkness of this world without injury.

Tzaddikim Who Make Themselves Small

It happens many times that Hakadosh Baruch Hu creates a moon whose light is initially very bright, but then it dims. This dimming will allow it to illuminate very dark places.

Hakadosh Baruch Hu places tzaddikim in each generation who have some form of interaction with *aveiros*. That experience enables them to illuminate the lives of others who struggle with challenges in those areas. Without that understanding, they could not help others in this unique way.

Of course, there are tzaddikim who arrive in this world in a state of perfection, and they live among us only to help Am Yisrael. These tzaddikim have no connection to *aveirah*. But there are also tzaddikim who had to struggle and do *teshuvah*, finding their way from darkness to light. Hakadosh Baruch Hu prepares for each generation the types of illumination that the people of that generation need in order to continue their journey.

For example, Hakadosh Baruch Hu provides each generation with *melamdim* who are able to lower themselves to the level of little children

and understand their world. Hakadosh Baruch Hu created people who understand little children, and are not embarrassed to sing with them, play games with them, and even change diapers when necessary.

Similarly, like every other generation, we benefit from tzaddikim who are able to lower themselves to our level. Hakadosh Baruch Hu gave them the ability to take care of even our foolishness, to speak our language, and to guide and support us through the ups and downs of life. Hakadosh Baruch Hu wants each of us to taste the sweetness of Torah. That is why He gave us tzaddikim who can descend to our level, who can bring the light of Torah to even the simplest Jew.

We can see Hashem's great love for Am Yisrael in the way He matches *chavrusos*. A *bachur* with a certain personality needs to find an *avreich* whose style of learning resonates with him and helps him love learning. **How many times do we see this in action, without realizing how miraculous these pairings are?** Who is able to understand what is going on in the heart of this teenager? Usually, his *maggid shiur* does not. They share no common ground.

Hakadosh Baruch Hu has created the *chavrusa* that is right for this boy. That *avreich* never understood why, when he was a teenager, he went through two years of unbearable difficulty. Now he understands. He realizes that he was destined to illuminate the dark world of struggling teenagers. Without those two difficult years, he would not have been able to understand what they are going through and help them discover the joy of learning Torah.

Descent that Leads to Ascent

We must internalize this. Hakadosh Baruch Hu sometimes arranges for people to fall and descend to lower levels so that they will be able to illuminate the world of others. This is the message of the smaller moon. Even though darkness is a necessary part of Hashem's creation, He did not leave us totally in the dark. He gave us the moon to illuminate the darkness. The moon was concerned that its diminished light would not be sufficient to help people navigate the darkness.

Hakadosh Baruch Hu responded, “Go and diminish yourself. **Only by your light being dimmed will you be able to light the way for those who have fallen and seek to return.**”

To be sure, one who has sinned needs to do *teshuvah* and cleanse himself. *Mefarshim* explain that *kapparah* literally means wiping off. Nevertheless, even sins have a very important role to play in Hashem’s world. *Chovos Halevavos* states: “The most effective form of *teshuvah* is to help others to do *teshuvah*. Then, it will become clear that a person’s sin has served an important purpose and that he has achieved *kapparah*.”

It is not a coincidence that many successful mentors in the world of *kiruv* did not grow up Torah-observant. Because they can relate to the challenges encountered by *baalei teshuvah*, they are uniquely qualified to support and guide them to a path of healthy, successful *teshuvah*. That is just one of the many ways that the darkness in our lives is illuminated by the unique light of the moon.



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