



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SHEMOT > Bo

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

January 7, 2011

Bo

Two Sermons

- 1) What Are We Afraid Of? Page 1
- 2) Is There Hope on the Dark Side of the Moon? Page 12



Meaningful Sermons

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Shemot > Bo > What Are We Afraid Of?

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What Are We Afraid Of?

ABSTRACT

"Terror Fears Put Mumbai on Alert" ... "Amid Holiday Terror Fears, Embassies Hit By Bomb Blasts" screamed the headlines last week, the latter reporting on bombs exploding at Swiss and Chilean embassies in Rome. And when they did, no one was surprised. After all, over the last decade we have been in a constant state of alert, as our world has grown increasingly volatile. We are always afraid of what may be coming next.

Plug in the word "fear" into the *New York Times* search engine, and you begin to see what we are Americans are afraid of: we fear higher taxes, we fear global warming, we fear losing our jobs, we fear China, Russia and Iran (not necessarily in that order), we fear the collapse of the Social Security system, we fear another terrorist attack, we fear further economic woes, we fear for our children, we fear for our soldiers overseas. You name it, we fear it.

Fear has become a pervasive force in our lives, permeating everything from the long security lines at airports, to the police presence at our synagogues and Jewish Centers.

Fear is perhaps our greatest enemy. Not because it is loud and aggressive, but because it is invisible. Is there a person alive that does not suffer from some fear, known or unknown? Fear is always with us, because it is a by-product of our attachment to the material world. After all, materialism by its nature is fleeting, and when our lives are built on such a temporary foundation, how can we expect to feel secure?

Though fear has been with us throughout history, today it has taken on acute proportions, both globally and personally.

This week's Torah reading, in its opening words, provides a clue to the best antidote to fear: "And God said to Moses: 'Come to Pharaoh...'" Seeing that Moses was afraid to confront the very essence of evil inside Pharaoh, God told him, "*Come to Pharaoh. Come with Me. Don't be afraid, for you are not going there alone. I am coming with you, and I will help you eradicate the evil at its source.*"

Realizing that we are not alone, and God is always with us is the ultimate antidote to fear. This sermon examines the steps necessary for connecting to God and offers some concrete advice how to implement them.

WHAT ARE WE AFRAID OF?

1. Quick Phobia Cure (Joke)

-A man came to see a psychiatrist, reporting that every time he went to bed he could not sleep because he feared there was someone hiding under it. "It's driving me crazy," he wailed. "Can you help me?"

-"Just put yourself in my hands for two years," said the psychiatrist, "Come to me three times a week, and I'll cure your fears."

-"How much will that cost?"

-"Two hundred dollars per visit."

-"I'll sleep on it," said the man.

Six months later the doctor met the man on the street.

-“Why didn’t you ever come to see me again?” he asked.

-“You were too expensive, and besides a rabbi cured my problem.”

-“Is that so? How?”

-“He told me to cut the legs off the bed!”

2. Our Greatest Enemy

“Terror Fears Put Mumbai on Alert”¹ … “Amid Holiday Terror Fears, Embassies Hit By Bomb Blasts”² screamed the headlines last week, the latter reporting on bombs exploding at Swiss and Chilean embassies in Rome. And when they did, no one was surprised. After all something awful was bound to happen this holiday season. We were all afraid of that.

Plug in the word “fear” into the *New York Times* search engine, and you begin to see what we are Americans are afraid of: we fear higher taxes, we fear global warming, we fear losing our jobs, we fear China, Russia and Iran (not necessarily in that order), we fear the collapse of the Social Security system, we fear another terrorist attack, we fear further economic woes, we fear for our children, we fear for our soldiers overseas. You name it, we fear it.

Though fear has been with us throughout history, today it has taken on acute proportions, both globally and personally.

Fear is perhaps our greatest enemy. Not because it is loud and aggressive, but because it is invisible. Is there a person alive that does not suffer from some fear, known or unknown? And what effects do our fears have on our lives – what impact do they have on our choices and ambitions, on our behavior and other emotions?

¹ *New York Times*, Dec. 24, 2010. See also Dec. 28, 2010

² TIME, Dec. 23, 2010.

And there are so many other questions: Is our drive for success a way to mask or compensate for some of our fears? What critical mass effect does fear have on society? Can it even be measured?

Above all, what are we exactly afraid of and what is the root of fear? We must find the answer, because without getting to the core of our fears, we can hardly expect to alleviate them.

This quest is more compelling today than ever as we face fears of all sorts, as national and international tensions continue to escalate, unleashing underlying emotions in this climate of global uncertainty.

No one is immune, yet we see that there are individuals – as has always been the case in history – that do not get paralyzed by fear. What is their secret?

3. One God and Two Worlds

The people who are not paralyzed by fear see a greater reality.

Most fear springs from the fear annihilation. We fear losing the world to which we are accustomed. Think of a baby who draws its security from a pacifier – take it away, and it will surely cry. Similarly, if we draw our security from the material world and think of it as the only world that exists, we are bound to fear losing it, because it is all we know.

In 1927, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak was summoned by the Communist commissars in Moscow. When he refused to cooperate, one of them lifted a revolver and pointed it at him. “This toy makes people cooperate,” he said. “Fear of it has opened a many mouth.”

“That toy frightens only someone who has but a single world and many gods,” responded the Rabbi. “But not someone who has but a single God and two worlds.”

By two worlds, he meant this material world and the other, spiritual one.

4. The Snare of the Material World

Being attached to only one world – the material world – underlies our fears. Materialism by its nature is fleeting, and when our lives are built on such a temporary foundation, how can we expect to feel secure?

When we allow our life to be defined by the standards of this world – by its standards of success – we are constantly trying to keep up with the Joneses. And we become intensely afraid of not measuring up and not being accepted by others.

But accepted by whom? People whose standards are ever shifting? People who themselves are worried about being accepted by others?

When we are so worried about being accepted by others, we are placing our happiness and security in the hands of unpredictable people – a moody boss, a difficult client. We are constantly investing great amounts of energy into pleasing first one person then another. We are trying to be one person in the morning, another during the day, and yet another at night. No wonder we have no peace of mind.

A story is told about a young girl from a poor family who was having terrifying dreams. Her parents consulted their rabbi about this problem. He said, “The sages say that we dream at night what we think about during the day.³ So ask your daughter, what she is afraid of during the day.”

When the parents asked her, she replied: “I often see how you both worry about money. Of everything, I am most afraid of your fear.”

When we are driven by fear, we run the risk of compromising our values and principles out of fear of how others will perceive us. This is one of the most difficult challenges in life, because none of us wants to be shunted aside, the wall-flower at the party, standing in the corner, friendless and alone. We all want to be loved and accepted.

How do we break this cycle of fear?

³Talmud, *Brachot* 55b.

5. Antidote to Fear

This week's Torah reading, in its opening words, provides a clue to the best antidote to fear: "And God said to Moses: 'Come to Pharaoh...'"⁴

Moses had already visited Pharaoh many times before this commandment, "Come to Pharaoh." But this time around, says the Zohar, the chief work of Kabbalah, Moses was suddenly frightened. Yes, the great Moses was also afraid.

This is why God said to him "*Come* to Pharaoh" instead of "*Go* to Pharaoh."⁵ What did that mean, and how did it assuage his fear?

Up till now Moses dealt with Pharaoh in his various archetypal manifestations. But this time, he was told to enter into the core essence of Pharaoh's evil, what the Zohar describes as "the supernal serpent" - the epitome of evil. This terrified Moses.

To assuage his fear, God responds: "Come to Pharaoh. Come with Me. You are not going there alone. I am coming with you, and I will help you eradicate the evil at its source."

6. The True Nature of Fear

And here we gain an insight into the true nature of fear and its antidote.

Why do we yearn for the acceptance of others? Why do we fear being shunted? Why are we willing to conform and compromise our values just to be part of the group?

Because at the core of all our insecurities lies the fear of being alone. Fear's true power lies in the loneliness that it imposes upon us.

Loneliness is an inherent part of life. It is not possible to be alive and not to feel lonely to some extent.

⁴ Exodus 10:1.

⁵ Zohar II:34a: "God brought Moses into a chamber within a chamber, to the ... mighty serpent from which many levels evolve ... which Moses feared to approach himself because he saw that he was rooted in supernal roots..."

This existential loneliness is a by-product of cosmic detachment, which the mystics call *tzimtzum*. The *tzimtzum* – the withdrawal of divine light which made creation possible so that we could exist independent from God and exercise our own free will – causes us to feel all alone, isolated in a desolate universe, disconnected from any source of sustenance.

This existential loneliness is the root of fear. And this is what so terrified Moses as he prepared to confront the core evil of Pharaoh, the “supernal serpent.” He was afraid of confronting this great evil *alone*.

Obviously, Moses’ fear was relative to him and to the unprecedented challenge he was facing. But fear is also relative to each of us and our situation, the difficulties we face and the strengths we possess. What frightens one person may not even stir another. Yet, the common denominator – and this is the relevant lesson we derive from Moses – is that our fear (whatever it is) results from our sense of isolation.

7. God is Always With Us

And therefore God’s response to Moses’ terror was, “Come with Me. You are not alone. I go with you.”

This is the powerful message that each of us must take from this Torah reading. No matter how lonely we may feel, especially in our loss and pain, we are never alone.

When the Baal Shem Tov was a little boy, his father died. The death of parent is a very traumatic thing, especially at the young age. Many who have had this experience are never able to shake the feeling of abandonment and insecurity which such a loss inevitably imprints upon a child. However, the Baal Shem Tov’s father left his son a powerful legacy in the words he spoke to him on his deathbed, and that made all the difference.

What did he tell him? “Remember that you’re never alone. You’re with God. And you must fear nothing except God.”

You can imagine the powerful effect this had on the little boy. It instilled in him the confidence that nothing can stand in your way because God is always with you. You don't need to be disturbed or intimidated by other people's opinions because God's opinion of you is all that matters.

The Baal Shem Tov went on to found the Hassidic Movement, working against the opinions of prevailing elite of his day, and opened up a new dimension of Judaism to all the people who were in danger of assimilating en masse.

And he had the courage to do so because of the message that his father conveyed to him: You are not alone. God is always with you.

The only answer to the invisible power of fear – the fear of being alone – is to recognize that it is an illusion. You are not alone. You are never alone.

You just have to realize it. And therein lies the challenge.

8. Connecting to God

Connecting to God is the only way to truly free ourselves from fear. By recognizing that we are an integral part of God's plan, that our existence is significant and our participation is vital, we can wean ourselves from the doubts and insecurities that feed our fears.

As long as we place the highest premium on the material world, we will continue to be fearful and anxious. We will remain a victim of circumstance, subjecting ourselves to the mercurial nature of materialism.

But when we have but one God and two worlds – the material and the spiritual – there is nothing to fear. The problems that loomed so large just a moment ago begin to seem eminently manageable. When money, status and acceptance stop being the primary forces that drive our life, we gain confidence that we are working for a higher goal and God is with us all the way.

Such confidence will spill over into our entire life. And when we have learned to focus on what truly matters in life, we will no longer need to worry about meeting the standards of others. God's standards are higher than man's, but they are actually easier to meet. While man's values are constantly shifting, spiritual values are fixed and eternal. When we connect to them, the trivial matters of life no longer frighten us. We are no longer like children afraid of the dark. Our fears are no longer crippling forces, but simply challenges that must be overcome.

9. How to Get There (Call to Action)

Easier said than done, you say? That's definitely true, but here are some concrete steps we can all take.

First, get rid of confusion in your life. This is an essential first step as confusion breeds confusion, clarity breeds clarity, so as you take one step in a positive direction, you gain momentum to travel whatever distance is necessary. Towards that goal, write down and examine the five highest proprieties in your life. Are they material goals or eternal ones? Are money and status more important than your family and helping others? If so, then this is one of the reasons why you are riddled with fears.

Second, get involved in projects that are profoundly gratifying and that bring to light your innate abilities or which connect you more deeply with the people you love. Soon enough your life will be full of meaningful activity, and there will be less time to focus on your fears.

Third, and most important, discover God within your life. Recognize that since you are a soul created in the divine image, God is always with you – because God is within you. And because God is always with you, there is nothing to fear. If you only follow His instructions – as set forth in the Torah – you will make of yourself a channel for His blessings.

Imagine coming to a place where money and power and vanity have no value. That place is here and now. The moment you look fear in the eye, it begins to crumble. Use your intellect to harness your emotions

and use your spirit to conquer your fear. Above all, let joy and enthusiasm – and God – come into your life, and let the brilliant light of your soul shine into every dark corner where fear might flourish. Amen.



Meaningful Sermons

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Shemot > Bo > Is There Hope on the Dark Side
of the Moon?

January 7, 2011

ABSTRACT

Among the top ten scientific discoveries of 2010 was the amazing fact – proved once and for all – that the moon is not a dry desert as we always thought. The moon is wet! It is one more fascinating thing about a heavenly body that is endlessly intriguing to us.

Yet, in this week's Torah reading – which anchors the Jewish calendar to the moon – we learn that Moses was troubled by it, not fascinated. Why?

The mystics explain that Moses was struggling with some of the fundamental dilemmas of existence as they are reflected in the birth of the new moon – in particular, how to deal with pain and loss. Moses understood that the waxing and waning moon reflects the ups and downs of life and history. But Moses was disturbed because he knew that this powerful symbol of death and rebirth was not enough. Moses in effect was saying: "If You, God, want man to grow through the dark challenges, You must give us the power of hope – the strength to forge ahead despite the inability to see the light at the end of the tunnel."

God agreed. In response, God showed Moses something that is otherwise impossible to see – the birthing itself. The point when the darkness turns into light, the exact moment when the seeds of suffering yield the fruits of greatness.

A moving story of a young boy's hope during the Holocaust, as well as an inspiring story of a paralyzed Israeli poet, illuminate for us what Moses was able to see.

Birth means something new. Therefore, we can never see the exact moment when the old becomes new. But Moses did see – once for all times. And we can draw enormous strength from his vision as this sermon explains.

Shemot Bo

Is There Hope on the Dark Side of the Moon?

IS THERE HOPE ON THE DARK SIDE OF THE MOON?

1. Moon Jokes

How do you know when the moon is going broke?
When it's down to its last quarter.

What do you call a clock on the moon?
A luna-tick.

Did you hear about the restaurant on the moon?
It has great food, but no atmosphere.

You guessed it, our topic today is the moon.

2. The Endlessly Fascinating Moon

Among the top ten scientific discoveries of 2010¹ was the amazing fact – proved once and for all – that the moon is not a dry desert as we always thought. The moon is wet!

This is how TIME magazine reported this remarkable finding:

The lunar surface is nothing if not predictable. You've got dust, you've got rocks, you've got bigger rocks. One thing you definitely don't have is water – which has always made the idea of homesteading the place a challenge.

As it turns out, however, the moon is a lot wetter than we ever knew. NASA's LCROSS (Lunar Crater Observation and Sensing Satellite) mission made that discovery when it crash-landed a spent rocket booster near the moon's south pole and then directed the LCROSS satellite itself to analyze the plume that was blasted up ... the surprise was how much [water there was]: about 50% more than astronomers anticipated, making the moon roughly twice as wet as the Sahara Desert.²

¹ TIME, Dec. 9, 2010.

² Ibid.

Okay, that's not exactly beachfront property, but it changes our view of the moon and increases the possibility of future settlement there, which is what scientists have yearned to do ever since the first man set foot there.

Who here is old enough to remember that day? July 20, 1969? That was when astronaut Neil Armstrong first walked on the moon and uttered the famous words, "One small step for man. One giant leap for mankind."

Armstrong's moon walk brought victory for the United States in the hotly contested space race with the Soviet Union. When the news broke, the Soviet premier, Leonid Brezhnev, was very upset. He called in all the Russian scientists and demanded that by the year's end they put a man on the sun.

"But Comrade," they objected, "if we try to land on the sun, we'll burn up."

"You fools!" he shouted. "Do it at night!"

The moon is endlessly fascinating to us all. Ever travel with small children on a dark night? They are bound to be peering out of the car window trying to keep up with the moon in the dark sky.

Nearly every culture has its moon lore and some version of the "Man in the Moon" story; there are poems and songs about his drinking habits (hence the term "moonshine"), and even nursery rhymes: "the man in the moon came down too soon..."

Many calendars of ancient history were built on the moon cycle and, of course, the Jewish calendar still is (though it makes adjustment for the sun so that the various holidays take place in their designated seasons).

The origins of the Jewish lunar calendar are found in this week's Torah reading where God issued the very first commandment to the Israelites through Moses: "This new moon shall be the head of the month (*rosh hodesh*) to you."³

³ Exodus 12:1-2

3. The New Moon

Commenting on this verse, the Midrash reveals that Moses – rather than being fascinated by the moon like everyone else – was troubled by it. As the Midrash reports:

Moses found difficulty with the renewal of the moon ... God therefore showed him with His finger the moon in the sky and said to him, "You will see a moon like this and you will then sanctify [the new month]." Now when did God show it to Moses? ... This was said to Moses just before sunset, and God showed him [the moon] when it became dark.⁴

Why did Moses have a problem with the moon's renewal? And what did God show him? If there was a moon in the sky, Moses could have looked up and seen it on his own. And if there was no moon yet – which is more likely because the new moon was just being born – there was nothing to see. For how can a new moon be seen with the naked eye?

Various reasons for Moses' difficulty are posited by the sages. Some explain that Moses was unclear as to the exact criteria necessary to determine when we must sanctify the new moon. Others suggest that Moses was unsure how to determine whether he was actually seeing the new moon or perhaps the final stages of the old moon. But all these explanations seem inadequate for several reasons: Moses, who was quite an educated man, could have figured out, like any astronomer, the factors that constitute a new moon. Why did he need God to show it to him?

Clearly, Moses was disturbed by something that only God could resolve. Additionally, as mentioned, the new moon does not yet have any shape and form, so what exactly did Moses see?

The mystics explain that Moses was struggling with some of the fundamental dilemmas of existence as they are reflected in the birth of the new moon.⁵ In particular how to deal with pain and loss.

⁴ Rashi, from Midrash Mechilta. Talmud *Menachot* 29a.

⁵ See Ohr HaTorah on this chapter, vol. 8 pp. 2902.

4. Dilemmas of Existence

And this brings us to why the first commandment given to the Jews - who are about to be freed from 210 years of bondage in Egypt - is to mark the moon's renewal each month.

The waxing and waning moon reflects the ups and downs of life and history. The waning moon represents difficult times, periods that get darker and darker, like the fading moon. But just as the moon disappears, when all seems bleak and lost, we experience rebirth, newfound life - a new moon is born.

The long Egyptian exile was among the worst instances of institutionalized oppression perpetrated by one nation against another. Multitudes of Jews were killed, tortured or worked to death in forced labor. The moon was dark indeed.

By commanding Moses to sanctify the new moon God was in effect imparting to Moses the power of renewal. Just as the moon is reborn right after it disappears so, too, will the Jewish people experience a renaissance following their darkest moments.

Moses, however, was disturbed. He was happy to hear that the time of redemption - the birth of the new moon - had arrived. But he was bothered by the concern that we mortal human beings may not be able to hold on when things get completely dark, when the moon emits no light at all. How do we gather strength when we don't see any glimmer of hope? If we don't have the energy to see it through, we can be consumed and destroyed by the darkness, and then never reach the new light.

Philosophically, Moses understood that a mortal human being will never fully fathom the mystery of pain and suffering. He also understood and believed that, at the end story, we will endure and prevail over all our adversaries. Indeed, the Egyptian oppression forged a nation with enormous power, an eternal nation.

But Moses was disturbed because he knew that this was not enough. Moses in effect was saying: "If You, God, want man to grow through the dark challenges, You must give us the power of hope - the strength to forge ahead despite the inability to see the light at the end of the tunnel."

5. God's Response

God agreed. In response, God “pointed His finger” and showed Moses something that is otherwise impossible to see – the birthing itself. The point when the darkness turns into light, the exact moment when the seeds of suffering yield the fruits of greatness.

God said: “This new moon shall be the head of month for you.”⁶

When we cry over a disappointment or loss, we feel pain and sorrow. Yes, we may understand that – as the Psalm says – “those that sow in tears will reap in joy.”⁷ But while we weep and taste our bitter tears, we cannot at the same time see the joy that will come. The seed by its very nature conceals its future fruit.

God, therefore, divulged to Moses the mystery of transformation, how darkness turns into light. And He revealed it as the sun was setting in order to show Moses that even darkness yields light. He showed him the moon as darkness was falling.

This vision of Moses has a perpetual effect for all generations to come, giving us the power to make it through any challenge, no matter how difficult.

A elderly Holocaust survivor testifies how his father communicated this lesson to him when he was a teenager:

“The night before he was taken to the gas chamber, my father whispered to me: ‘Look up to heaven. What do you see?’ ‘I see nothing,’ I replied. “I only see a pitch black sky.’ ‘Yes,’ my father said, ‘Exactly. You see only darkness. You see exactly what Moshe saw when he looked up into the Egyptian sky thousands of years ago. And the same thing that many suffering Jews saw when they turned their eyes up to heaven.’ And then he looked deeply into my eyes and said: ‘But know and always remember, tonight the sky is dark, but though we don’t see it, the moon is being reborn, and tomorrow night you will begin to see a glimmer of the new moon’s light. And if not tomorrow night, the next

⁶ Exodus 12:2.

⁷ Psalms 126:5.

one. And if not then, the following night. My son, never ever give up hope...”

“These words,” concluded the survivor with tears in his eyes, “have remained etched in my pained soul all my life. They have saved my life countless times. They have given birth to my family, my children, my grandchildren, all my successes – all thanks to my father showing me a dark sky that could not be seen.”

All birth in this world comes only after a moment of darkness. Growth is always preceded by a void. Creativity is a child of frustration. But when things seem bleak we get demoralized, and that in turn makes things far worse. If only we were able to see the birthing to come, we would be able to endure the hardest times. The problem is that, beneath the rubble, we cannot see the light outside.

So, once in history, a man was shown the moment of rebirth. Once in history, the invisible became visible.

That one vision has given us strength even as our lives have waxed and waned like the moon. Even as we have stood at the abyss, at the brink of extinction, something deep inside us reminded us that all was not lost.

Where does such conviction come from? How does a mother have strength to fight for her child even when all doctors have given up hope? Where did the Jews herded into the gas chamber have the power to sing *Ani Maamin* (“I believe”)? How is it possible that against all odds, in situations that were absolutely hopeless, a nation has not just survived but thrived?

Let me cite just one more inspirational example:

Dr. Rahamim Melamed Cohen is a prolific Israeli writer and poet who also paints and composes songs. The amazing thing is that he does all that without using his hands or speaking. Dr. Cohen is completely paralyzed and cannot even breathe on his own power. He communicates, composes, writes and paints by blinking his eyes; the blinks are registered as messages by a specially designed computer screen which then translates them into

words, symbols or images.

Fifteen years ago, Dr. Cohen stood at the brink of an abyss. Israel's leading expert on special education, active in government and social causes, Dr. Cohen was stopped in his tracts by Lou Gehrig's disease, a disease of the central nervous system which causes a rapid paralysis of the entire body. But instead of succumbing to the darkness, Dr. Cohen looked at the night sky and saw the birth of a new moon – a new future pregnant with new possibilities.

Today, in addition to his many creative projects, Dr. Cohen also maintains a voluminous email correspondence advising and inspiring countless others who are struggling to believe in the light.

6. Moses' Vision

Such enormous, superhuman power to triumph over adversity is rooted in Moses' vision one lonely night in Egypt. As he looked up into the skies, Moses saw nothing. The moon had completely disappeared. But then God pointed his finger and directed Moses to look closer: "Here, look at the secret of rebirth, here I show you the moment that no man has ever seen and no man will ever see – the moment of transition, when one state is about to end only to open up a new state. Here is the invisible intersection where dark meets light, pain meets joy and exile meets redemption."

Birth means something new. Therefore, we can never see the exact moment when the old becomes new. But Moses did see – once for all times. God showed Moses the new moon at its moment of rebirth, and said to him: "When the moon is reborn, mark the beginning of a new month."

As we now read the Book of Exodus – the story of Israel's journey from darkness to light, the story of its process of loss and renewal, suffering and growth, death and birth – we can gather in our own lives much fortitude from the events that took place more than 3,300 years ago.

Shemot > Bo > Is There Hope on the Dark Side of the Moon?

The moon carries volumes of memories and stories. The moon is a witness to the tragedy and the glory of our people.

So, when the next new moon arrives, go outside and look up into the sky. If you look hard enough perhaps you may get a glimpse of what Moses saw. But even if you can't, your very gaze into the dark heavens, looking, searching, yearning, for the sliver of the new moon's birthing, carries immense power – strength that can help you through any challenge. Amen.