



SHEMOT

Bo

Is There Hope on the Dark Side of the Moon?

January 20, 2018

IS THERE HOPE ON THE DARK SIDE OF THE MOON?

ABSTRACT

Among the top scientific discoveries of the last decade 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, G-d, 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."

G-d agreed. In response, G-d 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.

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 scientific discoveries of the last decade¹ 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

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

¹ TIME, Dec. 9, 2010.

² Ibid.

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 G-d 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. 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 ... G-d 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 G-d show it to Moses? ... This was said to Moses just before sunset, and G-d showed him [the moon] when it became dark.⁴

Why did Moses have a problem with the moon’s renewal? And what did G-d 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 G-d to show it to him?

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

³ Exodus 12:1-2.

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

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.

5. G-d's Response

G-d agreed. In response, G-d “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.

G-d 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.

G-d, 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 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.”

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

⁶ Exodus 12:2.

⁷ Psalms 126:5.

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 tracks 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 G-d 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. G-d 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.

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.

© Copyright 2017 The Meaningful Life Center. By downloading this PDF file from Meaningful Sermons, you agree to respect the copyright of this written material. You understand that your right to this material is limited to using it to deliver sermons, classes or other oral presentations to your community. You agree not to publish this material or any part thereof, nor to email, fax, copy, scan, mail, etc. or otherwise share this material with others, nor to verbally share these ideas with others.