

The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

Bo 5781

The first commandment given to the Jewish People through Moshe and Aharon was the mitzva to sanctify the new month (12:1-2). The fact that the sanctification of the Moon was the very first mitzva clearly underscores its importance and suggests many important lessons to be derived from its details. Among them: the value of time as a precious gift, not to be "killed" but invested in good deeds, noble accomplishments, and service to and intimacy with HaShem. And how the waxing and waning of the Moon has become a powerful metaphor for understanding the historical vicissitudes of the Jewish nation - her glory and defeat - culminating in her ultimate redemption.

There is however, another, perhaps less obvious message that the Moon can also convey. Let us begin with how the Torah (B'reishit 1:16) originally denominated the Moon. There, both the sun and the moon are called: M'OROT HA-G'DOLIM, the great lights. At first blush, this seems to be a misnomer. True, the Talmud (Chulin 60b) relates the well-known aggadic tale of the Moon being diminished because she argued that both she and the Sun could not rule as co-equals. And yet, this did not prevent both Ibn Ezra and Malbim (ad

loc) from asking: In what sense was the Moon initially called a great light when, compared to the Sun, she was quite minuscule? They answer that the GADOL modifier does not refer to actual physical size, but rather to the benefit that both luminaries serve the Earth. In this regard, the Earth evidently profits from both the Sun and the Moon.

What then can this astronomical reality teach us? Quite an uplifting and empowering moral message. When considering the Moon, not only is she hardly a speck in the vast cosmos, but even her light is not her own, but rather derives from the Sun. And yet ... she is rewarded with the title of "great". Rav Avraham Pam zt"l (Darchei Noam, p. 94), has employed this insight to bemoan what he has seen in some yeshiva circles where the barometer of success in Torah study is determined exclusively by the chidushei Torah (novel Torah interpretations) that students can offer. That this should not be the case is illustrated by the example of the Moon herself which, while having no intrinsic light of her own, by reflecting the light of the Sun, is still called great. So too, as Rav Chaim Soloveitchik is reported to have said: "Our job is not necessarily to be a M'CHADEISH (generator of Torah novella); it is [enough] to understand what the Rishonim (e.g., Rashi, Tosafos, Rambam, etc.) had to say on the topic." Indeed, to successfully share with others what our glorious Mesorah has to teach, merits the appellation of

greatness no less than the brilliant Rosh HaYeshiva, even if that rebbe has nothing new to add to that sacred tradition.

Another illustration: The wealthy among us can and do fulfil the mitzva of tzedaka with their generous philanthropy, and they certainly merit our deep gratitude. But what of those who do not have the wherewithal to be that giving. Are they to be excluded from the appellation "great lights" of charity? Of course not! They can "reflect the light" of tzedaka by working for and encouraging others to support worthwhile causes. They can find jobs for the unemployed, help singles find their bashert (their destined spouses), and assist in the welfare of the sick and poor, just to list a few of the many opportunities for chesed. And their "lights" - the contributions of these anonymous souls - are no less great than the lights of the renowned and celebrated.

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Only three Biblical figures were deserving of the rare distinction of being called EVED HASHEM, servant of Gd. Two of them were Moshe and Yehoshua (the third being David). About Yehoshua, the Talmud states (Bava Batra 75a): "The face of Moshe was like the Sun, [while] the face of Yehoshua was like the Moon." Was Yehoshua considered any less an EVED HASHEM because he only stood in the shadow of

his great master? The Bible declares (Yehoshua 24:31, Shoftim 2:7): "Israel served HaShem all the days of Yehoshua ... who had known all the deeds of HaShem which He had done for Israel." And again, "On that day, HaShem exalted Yehoshua in the eyes of all of Israel and they revered him as they had revered Moshe all the days of his life" (Yehoshua 4:14). And again, "There was not a word of all that Moshe commanded that Yehoshua did not read to the entire congregation of Israel ..." (Yehoshua 8:35). Certainly, in terms of prophetic greatness and spiritual consequence, Yehoshua was the lesser, but that fact should never detract from the greatness of Yehoshua as an EVED HASHEM. That Israel remained loyal to Gd all the days of Yehoshua was in no small measure due to the extraordinary ability of Yehoshua to transmit and inculcate the ethos and observance of the Torah within the Jewish nation. No wonder the Mishna states: "Moshe received the Torah from Sinai and handed it over to Yehoshua (Avot 1:1).

Every generation is blessed with a few great rabbinic luminaries upon whose shoulders the Mesorah is passed down. Each advances new and exciting paths in the understanding of our sacred texts which help to apply the wisdom of the Torah in resolving the difficult halachic and hashkafic questions that arise. The vast majority of us will never attain this preeminent and accomplished status - one marked by singular originality and

genius. We will be much like the Moon. But basking in the light of these great Suns, we can still be proficient and distinguished within our own abilities and serve our community in ways that even the great ones cannot.

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When HaShem commanded Moshe to sanctify the moon, the Midrash (Mechilta 12:1) states that Moshe was somewhat perplexed about how much of the Moon must appear for it to be sanctified. Gd responded: KAZEH R'EI V'KADEISH - See it like this and sanctify it. The appearance of the New Moon is not much more than a tiny sliver of light in the evening sky, imperceptible to the untrained eye, and yet, it is enough for sanctification. The message should be clear. It's not the initial size of the deed that matters, but the faith and persistence to find even in the smallest of righteous efforts enough significance to stand back and declare: "I see it and will sanctify it!" And when you can do just that, then that little something will grow and wax to brighten up a dark night and shed its goodness far and wide.

There is a prayer we recite when we bless the New Moon which contains the following supplication: "May it be Your will, HaShem my Gd ... 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 before it was diminished ..." Considering what we

have said above, perhaps the meaning of this prayer might also be this: That at some future time, may the true significance of the small "lights" of our own "moons" - of our Torah wisdom, of our tzedaka and chesed - be recognized for their own greatness so that they may stand proudly alongside the great "lights" of the famous "suns" and remain undiminished in their beneficence forever!

And may that time come soon!