

Lunar “Lessens” - Learn from a Luminary

PARSHA INSIGHTS - PINCHAS (5758)

A SMALLER MOON HAS MORE POWER

“On your new moons, you must offer a burnt offering to Hashem...and one goat for a sin offering to Hashem...” (28:11 and 15). The *Gemara Shavuos* 9A wonders about the terminology. Raish Lakish asks: Why does the sin offering of *Rosh Chodesh* [the new moon/start of a Hebrew month] specifically state that it is “to Hashem”? Such is not the case concerning other sin offerings mentioned in the Torah. Another way to understand this is: The Torah is hinting that this *chatos* [sin offering] is FOR Hashem. Is such a thing possible, G-d forbid? Everyone knows that the Master of the Universe commits no transgressions! Raish Lakish answers that in fact, it is AS IF Hashem is commanding us to bring a sacrifice to “atone” for something He did. Of course, He performed no sin. Rather, He wants to comfort a certain individual for a particular decision, which was made against her wishes. Let us elaborate.

The *Gemara* tells us - it is as if Hashem says: This goat for a *chatos* should be an atonement because of the fact that I reduced the size of the moon. To what is this hinting? In *Chulin* 60A, the *Gemara* points out that at first, the sun and moon were the same size. “G-d made the two big luminaries; the large luminary to rule during the day, and the small luminary to rule at night, and the stars” (*Beraishis* [Genesis] 1:16). Did the Torah not state in the beginning of the *pasuk* [verse] that the two light-giving celestial bodies were both immense? And immediately after, the Torah says that one was large and one small! The Oral Torah in *Chulin* 60A explains that when the moon saw that she was equal with the sun, she complained to the Creator. “Is it possible for two kings to share the same crown?” Hashem responded: “Go and reduce yourself!” Since this is what transpired at *Beraishis*, Hashem informs us that the sin offering of each *Rosh Chodesh* is actually a *chatos* “for Hashem”, for the fact that He ordered the moon’s size diminished. *Rashi* on *Shavuos* 9A interprets this to mean that it is a gesture to “appease the moon”, who suffered an insult, albeit justified, during those preliminary stages of creation.

☞ In case you wonder how an inanimate object, the moon, could be “insulted”, recall the words of the *Rambam* in *Hilchos Yesodai Hatorah* 3:9. “All the stars and celestial spheres possess a *nefesh* [a sort of life-giving soul], intellect, and intelligence. They live, exist, and recognize the Creator. Every one, according to his greatness and level, praises and lauds his Creator, just like the angels do. And just as they acknowledge Hakadosh Baruch Hu [the Holy One, Blessed is He], they also recognize themselves, and they are aware of the angels who are above them. The intelligence of the stars and heavenly spheres is less than that of the angels, but it is greater than that of people.” Rav Moshe Feinstein cites this *Rambam* in his comments on *Parshas* [the Torah portion of] *Nitzavim* 30:19. There, he adds that angels and celestial bodies also possess free will. This is part of their intellect. Why do most people imagine that these beings have NO choice but to do Hashem’s bidding? It is because these lofty creations generally DO perform their tasks unflinchingly. This stems from their sophisticated grasp of what is right and wrong, which is a result of their close proximity to the Divine realm, since they are in the heavenly dimensions of the universe.

It is now easier for us to understand the above mentioned *Rashi* in *Shavuos* 9A. Hashem wants to appease the moon. Thus, He makes it seem that the monthly sin offering of *Rosh Chodesh* is actually an atonement for Him. It goes without saying that He did nothing wrong. Rather, His infinite compassion dictates that this sacrifice be a comfort to the celestial body whose size was reduced at *Beraishis*. This is truly a lesson in *derech erez* [proper etiquette], something from which humans can learn proper behavior. The *Aitz Yosef* demonstrates this, and he guides us to comprehend the *Gemara* from a different angle.

Aitz Yosef sets out to explain this *Gemara Shavuos* 9A. Before the moon expressed her discontent at being the same size as the sun, as in the above-mentioned *Chulin* 60A, her light was equal to the sun’s. The penalty for her grievance was to have that illumination diminished. In addition, she would have remained a full moon for the entire month, if not for her complaint. We said before that the two lights were BOTH referred to as “large”, and afterward this changed. It can be concluded, therefore, that they were truly identical at first, except that one was for the day and one for the night. Consequently, the moon suffered two losses: Her light was made less (she only

reflects that of the sun), plus she waxes big and then shrinks each month, not maintaining her fullness over time. From the second half of the month onward, the moon becomes smaller.

This being the case, something remarkable comes to light. Her second disadvantage actually becomes an enormous benefit for her! By the very fact that she shrinks during the second half of each month, we are able to figure out when *Rosh Chodesh* is! Through this monthly lunar pattern, the *Bnai Yisroel* [Children of Israel] establish the *Yamim Tovim* [Holidays]. Also, they sacrifice the *Rosh Chodesh* sin offering as an atonement for the preceding month's iniquities. If not for the moon's cycle, we would have no basis for all of this, says the *Aitz Yosef*. This is what the *Gemara* means, that Hashem tells us to "bring an atonement - a *Rosh Chodesh* sin offering - because I shrank the moon". It is not stating that Hashem is receiving an atonement for anything. Rather, this is the idea: Since I diminished her size, you are able to know when to bring YOUR atonement for the sins of the preceding month. "Bring an atonement for yourselves, which can only happen because I did what I did to the moon." If Hashem had not reduced her, it would be impossible to know when to request our monthly forgiveness and offer the sin offering of *Rosh Chodesh*. That is the meaning of the *Gemara*: "This goat will serve as an atonement for your sins. It is only possible to know when to bring it because of My action of shrinking the moon. At that time of the month, it is *Rosh Chodesh*."

Aitz Yosef points out that based on this, the world continues to exist partly in the merit of the moon. After all, the periodic forgiveness of sins is imperative for the survival of humankind. Since the moon becomes smaller and smaller during the second half of the month, we are made aware of the *Rosh Chodesh* atonement opportunity. Thus, the moon has a part in the world's endurance, and she feels important, just like the sun. As mentioned above, this is remarkable. Her punishment for arrogance was to diminish her. Yet, this punitive measure is the very deed, which magnifies the status of the moon! She now feels very special.

What lesson can we learn from this? *Aitz Yosef* declares that it teaches us *derech eretz*. Although Hashem obviously did what was right in diminishing the moon for disciplinary reasons, He appeased her with soothing words and compassion. Her punishment is also an impressive honor, since her shrinking action signals the *Bnai Yisroel* to sanctify the new month and get atonement for their sins. This shows that even if one is justified in his position, he should attempt to make a reconciliation with his opponent and persuade him to forgive him. In this manner, peace will be on the increase in our communities and in the world at large.

We now understand that the goat for the *Rosh Chodesh* sin offering is "for Hashem" - because of the fact that Hashem reduced the size of the moon. We are capable of calculating *Rosh Chodesh* and keeping its *mitzvos* [commandments] and sacrifices because of its gradual change in dimension. This serves to reprimand the moon for arrogance, but at the same time, she performs a function necessary for proper observance of *Rosh Chodesh* and the *Yamim Tovim*. Consequently, in a certain sense, Hashem is setting an example by bringing an "atonement" for Himself - doing something to comfort the moon - for censuring her. This is apparent because her punishment is actually her source of power and influence. If this is how the moon is treated, all the more so we must emulate Hashem and have such consideration for human beings.

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