

Why are They Taking Flying Leaps at the Moon?

By: Yitzhak Zuriel

When I was a teenager, I went to a Jewish summer camp in New England. During one of those summers, I had a counselor who introduced me and my friends to many mitzvot that we had not heard of before. He showed us, young people from non-religious homes, that keeping these mitzvot could be both fun and meaningful. To this day I remember my first Kiddush Levana, the Blessing for the Moon. As we were enthusiastic and energetic adolescents, we decided to literally demonstrate the statement in Kiddush Levana that says that we cannot reach the moon, and we took turns in the dark in an open field running and then leaping up into the air towards the moon, only to fall into the grass.

Kiddush Levana has recently been featured in a best-selling book and movie. Rav Haim Sabato made Kiddush Levana the opening scene, and motif, of his book *Adjusting Sights*.

What is Kiddush Levana?

At its core, it is a blessing known as the Blessing for the Moon (*Birkat HaLevana*), mandated by the Talmud for recitation once per month. Over the centuries, a number of Biblical verses and Rabbinic sayings and prayers have been appended to it, so that the Kiddush Levana service takes up 3 to 4 pages in a typical prayer book (*siddur*).

The text of the Blessing for the Moon can be translated as follows:¹

Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, who created the heavens by Your command and their entire host by Your mere word. You

1. This translation is adapted from *The Daily Prayer Book – Ha-Siddur Ha-Shalem*, translated and annotated by Philip Birnbaum, Hebrew Publishing Company, New York, 1949. I have slightly revised the original by replacing archaic English usages.

have subjected them to fixed laws and time, that they not deviate from their set function. They are glad and happy to do the will of their Creator, the true Author, whose achievement is truth. He ordered the moon to renew itself as a glorious crown for those he sustained from birth, likewise will they be renewed in the future, and worship their Creator for His glorious majesty. Blessed are You, Lord, who renews the months.

Kiddush Levana is said any time during the period of the month when the moon appears to be growing in size (approximately during the first two weeks of the Hebrew month). However, it is customary to say it on Motza'ei Shabbat immediately after the evening prayer (*Arvit*), when everyone is still dressed festively from Shabbat.

What Does It Have To Do with Receiving the Divine Presence?

Rabbi Yohanan is quoted in the Gemara Sanhedrin 42a saying: "Whoever makes the blessing for the new moon in its proper time, it is as if he receives the Divine presence [and what follows is the proof]: It says here (Exodus 12) 'This (*zeh*) month will be to you...' and it says there (Exodus 15) 'This (*zeh*) is my God and I will glorify Him.'"

According to Rabbi Yohanan, the act of sanctifying the new moon (by saying the Blessing for the Moon) is somehow connected with the experience of the Divine that Israel had at the Red Sea. Just as the children of Israel felt the immediacy of the Divine presence during their experience at the Red Sea – so much so that "even a simple maidservant saw things (at the Red Sea) that the prophet Ezekiel ben Buzi could not see" – so, says Rabbi Yochanan, the simple act of saying the blessing for the new moon can create a feeling of nearness to God.

The Gemara goes on to quote a *baraita* from the school of Rabbi Yishmael: "If Israel were to merit greeting their Father in heaven one time per month, it would be sufficient for them."

What in this blessing for the new moon gives it such power?

Rabbenu Yona of Girondi, in his commentary on the *Sefer Halachot* of Rav Yitzhak Alfasi (the Rif), offers the following explanation (in the name of his own teacher)²:

“...it is as if he receives the Divine presence.” Because God, even though He does not appear to our eyes, does appear [i.e., make Himself known – YZ] through His mighty acts and wonders, as is said (Isaiah 45:15) “Indeed, You are God who hides, the God of Israel, who rescues.” Understand the verse thus: Even though You hide, You are the God of Israel Who has done many wondrous deeds for them, and You rescue them at all times and at every moment. And by Your rescuing them, people see You, and You are revealed to them and they come to know You. And so it is here (with Kiddush Levana) as well: by renewing the moon each month, He reveals Himself to people, and it is as if they are receiving Him each time.

Kiddush Levana focuses on a natural phenomenon that we see in our monthly experience: the apparent waning, followed by the waxing, of the moon. We understand these observed changes as being our view from the earth’s surface of the lit and dark parts of the moon at different angles during the course of the month. Nonetheless, the sight is impressive, and the change over 4 weeks is dramatic. The Jewish Sages felt that witnessing this change is a strong reminder of Divine Providence in the world.

Demonstrations of Togetherness

Many of the customs of Kiddush Levana emphasize togetherness and communality. To recite the blessing and all the accompanying verses and sayings, we exit to outside the walls of the synagogue. But even outside the synagogue, the blessing is said in a group, standing closely together in the courtyard or in the street.

The Gemara (Sanhedrin 42a) tells us that the two amoraim Mareimar and Mar Zutra, when they said Kiddush Levana, “*mechatfei ahadadei*,” that they would

2. This comment is found on the page of the Rif at the very end of Chapter 4 (“Tefilat HaShahar”), Masechet Berachot.

lean on each other's shoulders. One of the talmudic commentators (Menorat HaMaor) explains this to mean that they would rest their hands on each other's shoulders. The Ba"r³ explains this as follows:

What it means is that neither of them stood by himself to make the blessing. Rather, they joined their shoulders together [as we might say in modern English "they stood shoulder to shoulder" – YZ] and they made the blessing together, to express the greatness of this opportunity to welcome the Divine Presence.

These explanations see one of the strongest human physical gestures of camaraderie as underscoring the momentous occasion of greeting God's presence.

Kiddush Levana also gives verbal expression to togetherness and friendship. After reciting the main blessing, a few biblical verses are said, and at some point each person turns to three different people in the group and greets each of them with "Shalom Aleichem!" to which each responds "Aleichem Shalom!" In this way, the entire group is verbally brought together, onto a higher level of social cohesion.

Tradition has also added a halachic impetus to the recitation of Kiddush Levana in a minimum community setting of ten men (a minyan). At the conclusion of all the additional verses and talmudic quotations, Aleinu is said and then Kaddish. Aleinu is a hallmark of the end of a public prayer, and Kaddish requires a minimal quorum of ten men. This makes it very clear that Kiddush Levana is a public act of worship and should ideally be done in a group and not by oneself.

All the above customs show that the blessing of the moon strongly relates to the communal dimension of the Jewish people. Why?

3. *Bayit Hadash* on the *Arba'a HaTurim* 426, in the segment of commentary beginning with the words "*Tana de-R.Y. (de-Rabbi Yishmael)*". *Bayit Hadash* is a halachic work written by R. Yoel Sirkis (who is hence known as "the Ba"r"), one of the leading rabbis in Poland in the early 17th century. It is a commentary and elucidation of the *Arba'a Turim*, the precursor of the *Shulhan Aruch*.

The Moon as a Representation of the Jewish National Experience

The monthly cycle of the moon's light and dark phases is seen from our perspective on earth as an initial growing of the illuminated moon up to full size, then a diminishing of it until it disappears, and this repeats each month.

The blessing for the moon hints at a connection between this cycle and the fortunes of the Jewish people through history. As the blessing itself states:⁴

...He who is the Doer of Truth, and Whose doings are in truth⁵, and Who commanded the moon to renew itself as a crown of glory to those who are borne in the abdomen, who in the future will renew themselves like her (the moon), and to glorify their Creator for the glory of His kingdom...

The *Aruch HaShulchan*⁶ explains that the phrase "those who are borne in the abdomen, who in the future will renew themselves like her (the moon)..." refers to the people of Israel, the Jewish people.⁷

Indeed, the history of the Jewish people displays vicissitudes that resemble the monthly changes we see in the moon. The Jewish people have experienced periods of greatness in history (e.g., the time of King Solomon and the First Temple of his day), and subsequent eclipse and darkness (the long exile from the land of Israel and the accompanying loss of Jewish national sovereignty).

Almost immediately after finishing the blessing, we customarily recite a number of verses from various sources in the Torah and Bible. These are introduced by the following statement, which is usually said while jumping a bit in the

4. This is my own translation (YZ).

5. Explained by Tosafot (Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 42a) to be referring to the Midrash (found in Talmud Bavli, Hulin 60b) in which God diminished the size and power of the moon after it complained that it is impossible for the moon and sun to share the glory of having been created with equal size and power.

6. *Aruch HaShulchan Orach Hayyim* 426:3. The *Aruch HaShulchan* contains in-depth elucidations and halachic rulings on the topics of the *Shulchan Aruch* (of R.Yosef Karo). Written in the 19th century by R.Yehiel Michel ben Aharon Halevy Epstein of Novordok.

7. The expression "who are borne in the abdomen" comes from a verse in Isaiah (46:3), where God describes how, in the early part of their history, He carried and bore Israel like a newborn baby, and will continue to protect them in the years when they are feeble and weak.

direction of the moon: “Just as I am dancing towards you (the moon) but cannot touch you, so my enemies will never be able to touch me to do me harm.”

The comparison between the moon and Israel is here taken in an even stronger way than in the blessing. Just as the moon is protected from man by the great distance through space and we cannot touch her, so is Israel protected by God’s providence from being harmed by her enemies.

From all the above, we can easily understand the undercurrent of joy, and the expressions of camaraderie and togetherness in Kiddush Levana as it has been recited since talmudic times, and as we still recite it today. Throughout the long, dark centuries in which the Jewish people could do nothing but yearn for a return to Eretz Yisrael and for freedom as a nation to pursue their unique mission in the world, the monthly blessing for the moon provided a chance for that yearning to nearly burst to the surface, to just barely show its strength. The references to Jewish kingship (“David the king of Israel, lives on”), the strengthening of Jewish communal bonding (the “Shalom Aleichem” greeting and the standing together “shoulder to shoulder”), the expressions of confidence that the Jews will not be harmed by their enemies (“Just as I dance toward you [the moon], and I cannot reach you, so will my enemies not be able to reach me”), and the references to future redemption by God (quoting of verses from Chapter 2 of Shir HaShirim) – all of these point towards a resolution of Jewish history with the Jews regaining their independence and control over their collective life.

Without a doubt, the experience of saying this blessing must have given renewed hope and a kind of “recharging” of the batteries of faith that sustained the Jews throughout the ages.

Yitzhak Zuriel has been at NDS since 1994, and has been involved as an author or an editor in every issue of Chiddushei Torah @ NDS since its inception. He works in the DRM Products division as the software QA manager. He also teaches a gemara class in WebYeshiva.org.