

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [60]

Go and Make Yourself Smaller! (Insights into Babylonian Talmud, Chullin 60b)



Background to Our Story

Etiology (Etiological Story)

[ENCYCLOPEDIA.COM](https://www.encyclopedia.com)

The word etiology is derived from the Greek *aitia*, which means cause. In the field of literature, a narrative is said to be etiological when it attempts to explain the origins of some custom or institution, some monument or natural phenomenon; when it tries to answer the question why or how does it come about that such and such a thing is what it is today. The subject material ranges from the banal ("How did the pig get a curly tail?") to the basic problems concerning human and cosmic origins. The explanation given is often of a popular, unscientific nature.

The Sun and the Moon



Genesis 1:14-19

14. And God said, Let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years;

15. And let them be for lights in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth; and it was so.

16. And God made two great lights; the large light to rule the day, and the small light to rule the night; and he made the stars.

17. And God set them in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth,

18. And to rule over the day and over the night, and to divide the light from the darkness; and God saw that it was good.

19. And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

The Jewish Calendar



<http://www.wikipedia.org/>

The Hebrew calendar (Hebrew *ha'luach ha'ivri*) or Jewish calendar is a lunisolar calendar used by Jews. Today, the calendar is predominantly used for religious observances, but is also employed by Jewish farmers in Israel as an agricultural framework.

The calendar is used to reckon the Jewish New Year and dates for Jewish holidays, and also to determine appropriate public reading of Torah portions, *Yahrzeits* (dates to commemorate the death of a relative), and daily Psalm reading, among many ceremonial uses. Originally the Hebrew calendar was used by Jews for all daily purposes. Following the conquest of Jerusalem by Pompey in 63 BCE (see also Iudaea province), Jews began additionally following the imperial civil calendar (which was decreed in 45 BCE) for civic matters such as the payment of taxes and dealings with government officials.

The principles of the Hebrew calendar are found in the Torah, which contains several calendar-related commandments, including God's commandment during the Exodus from Egypt to fix the month of Aviv as the first month of the year. The Babylonian exile in the 6th century BCE influenced the calendar, including the adoption of Babylonian names for the months.

During Temple times and through the Tannaitic period, the Hebrew calendar was observational, with the beginning of each month determined by the high court based on the testimony of witnesses who had observed a new crescent moon. Periodically, the court ordered an extra month added to keep Passover in the spring, again based on observation of natural events. Through the Amoraic period and into the Geonic period, the purely empirical calendar was displaced by calendrical rules, which finally became systematically arranged into a computed calendar. The principles and rules of the current calendar are fully described by Maimonides in the *Mishneh Torah*.

Because of the roughly eleven-day difference between twelve lunar months and one solar year, the year lengths of the Hebrew calendar vary in a repeating 19-year Metonic cycle of 235 lunar months, with an intercalary lunar month added according to defined rules every two or three years, for a total of 7 times per 19 years. Seasonal references in the Hebrew calendar reflect its development in the region east of the Mediterranean Sea and the times and climate of the Northern Hemisphere. The Hebrew calendar's year is longer by about 6 minutes and $25\frac{25}{57}$ seconds than the present-day mean solar year, so that every 224 years, the Hebrew calendar will fall a full day behind the modern fixed solar year, and about every 231 years it will fall a full day behind the Gregorian calendar year.

Years in the Hebrew calendar are labeled with the era designation *Anno Mundi* (Latin for "in the year of the world"), abbreviated AM and A.M., and are numbered from the epoch that, by Rabbinical reckoning, is a year before the date of Creation. 30 September 2008 through 18 September 2009 corresponded to Hebrew year 5769; the Hebrew year 5770 began at sundown on the evening of 18 September 2009 and will end on 8 September 2010.

Numbers 28:15

And one kid of the goats for a sin offering to the Lord shall be offered, beside the continual burnt offering, and its drink offering.

The Text: Babylonian Talmud, Chullin 60b

רבי שמעון בן פזי רמי, כתיב: "ויעש אלהים את שני המארות הגדלים", וכתיב: "את המאור הגדל ואת המאור הקטן"! אמרה ירת לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא: רבוננו של עולם, אפשר לשני מלכים שישתמשו בכתר אחד? אמר לה: לכי ומעטי את עצמך!

אמרה לפניו: רבוננו של עולם, הואיל ואמרתי לפניך דבר הגון, אמעיט את עצמי? אמר לה: לכי ומשול ביום ובלילה. אמרה ליה: מאי רבותיה, דשרגא בטיהרא מאי אהני? אמר לה: זיל, לימנו בך ישראל ימים ושנים. אמרה ליה: יומא נמי, אי אפשר דלא מנו ביה תקופותא, דכתיב: "והיו לאתת ולמועדים ולשנים"! זיל, ליקרו צדיקי בשמיה: יעקב הקטן, שמואל הקטן, דוד הקטן.

חזיה דלא קא מיתבא דעתה, אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא: הביאו פפרה עלי שמיעטתי את הירח! והינו דאמר רבי שמעון בן לקיש: מה נשתנה שעיר של ראש חדש שנאמר בו "לה"? אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא: שעיר זה יהא פפרה על שמיעטתי את הירח.

Rabbi Shimon ben Pazi raises a contradiction: It is written: "*And God made the two great lights*" (Genesis 1:16), and it is also written in the same verse: "*The greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night,*" indicating that only one was great.

The moon said before the Holy One, Blessed be He: Master of the Universe, is it possible for two kings to serve with one crown? One of us must be subservient to the other. God therefore said to her, i.e., the moon: go and make yourself smaller!

She [the moon] said before Him: Master of the Universe, since I said a correct observation before You, must I diminish myself?

God said to her [to the moon]: go and rule both during the day along with the sun and during the night.

She [the moon] said to Him [to God]: What is the greatness of shining alongside the sun? What use is a candle in the middle of the day?

God said to her [to the moon]: Go; let the Jewish people count the days and years with you. She said [the moon] to Him [to God]: But the

Jewish people will count with the sun as well, as it is impossible that they will not count seasons with it, as it is written: "And let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days and years" (Genesis 1:14).

Go; let righteous men be named after you. Just as you are called the lesser [*hakatan*] light, there will be Ya'akov HaKatan, i.e., Jacob our forefather (see Amos 7:2), Shmuel HaKatan the *tanna*, and David HaKatan, i.e., King David (see I Samuel 17:14).

God saw that the moon was not comforted.

The Holy One, Blessed be He, said [to the Jewish people]: Bring atonement for me, since I diminished the moon. And this is what Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish says: What is different about the goat offering of the New Moon, that it is stated with regard to it: "For the Lord" (Numbers 28:15)? The Holy One, Blessed be He, said: This goat shall be an atonement for Me for having diminished the size of the moon.



Explaining the Story - What is going on in our story? (Explain the sequence of events)

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? Rabbi Shim'on ben Pazi raised a contradiction within Genesis 1:16. What is the contradiction? What could be an easy way to explain it?

? What did the moon mean by the question: "Master of the Universe, is it possible for two kings to serve with one crown?"

? How is the moon ruling by day and by night?

? What did the moon mean by its reply: "What use is a candle in the middle of the day?"

Bonus ? Why isn't the moon appeased when God tells her: "Go; let the Jewish people count the days and years with you"?

? The rabbis ascribe the following statement to God: "Bring atonement for me, since I diminished the moon." Why could their move be considered bold?

Extra Bonus ? Our story starts with the two lights being the same size. Why do you think the moon said before the Holy One, blessed be He, "Master of the Universe, is it possible for two kings to serve with one crown?" What do you think the moon had in mind?

? What do you think is wrong with the moon's question?

Bonus ? Why do you think God replied to the moon: "go and diminish yourself!"?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Extra Bonus ? What do you think God is trying to hint to the moon by telling her: "Go; let righteous men be named after you. Ya'akov HaKatan, Shmuel HaKatan, David HaKatan"?

Extra Bonus ? God attempts three times to appease the moon by making her three different offers, which the moon rejects. What can we learn about the moon's agenda from her three rejections?

Extra Bonus ? Why do you think the sun remains passive throughout the story?

Extra Bonus ? Why do you think God prefers to ask Israel to bring an atonement sacrifice on His behalf rather than to make the moon bigger again? What can we learn from God's decision?

"The Twist" – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from These Texts

! When you find problems that don't exist, you end fixing them at your own expense.

! "Big" is "small" and "small" is "big" – The lesson the moon did not get!



Our story uses the excuse of a seemingly minor contradiction within one verse in the Book of Genesis, to create an imaginary story that has the moon as its main character. Our story begins in an idyllic past, in which two rulers

share a crown, not unlike children sharing toys, couples sharing chores, and friends and co-workers sharing a common space in equality and harmony.

This idyllic reality is broken when the moon is "bothered" by the equality. After presenting its logical argument in front of God, the moon is told to solve the problem it created at its own expense.

The reader cannot help but to feel sorry for moon, which pettiness is depicted in our story. God Himself feels for the moon (when God fails in His attempts to teach the moon the greatness of humility, he asks the Children of Israel to bring an atonement in His name), like a tender father who sees his conceited son suffering again and again the blows of the world.

"Go and make you yourself smaller," while it is taken by the moon as a punishment, it is actually a good advice not only for the moon but for all of us, who by diminishing our egos, will be able to find joy and contentment.

An Alternative Reading



Kolel The Adult Centre for Liberal Jewish Learning

<http://www.kolel.org>

When we use our imaginations to connect with God, it's good to be bold. None of our preconceived ideas about God should be sacrosanct. It's spiritually important to let imaginative encounters with images and ideas shake you up and pull the rug out from under your feet. This Midrash can do that.

It begins in a typical way -- pointing out a seeming contradiction in the Torah. The same verse talks about the sun and the moon as "two big lights" and then it calls the sun "big" and the moon "small"! Of course, to us this probably didn't seem like a contradiction at all. They can both be big and one can still be bigger than the other; also, the Hebrew "gadol" can mean "great" as in "important" as well as "big". But deciding that there is a contradiction turns the whole verse into a story -- there were two big lights, then one of them was made smaller.

The story spun out by the Midrash is that the moon complained to God about being the same size as the sun -- "two kings using one crown" -- how would anyone tell them apart? God responded by making her smaller. This probably refers both to the fact that the moon usually looks smaller than the sun, and the fact that the moon's light is not her own but a reflection of the sun's (this was known to ancient astronomers), and to the waning of the moon in the course of a month, into darkness.

The moon was deeply hurt -- after all, God evidently agreed with her that one should be smaller; why should she be punished for bringing it up? God gave her various gifts and promises to make up to her, but she was still hurt.

The story concludes by using another Torah verse and another midrashic technique: playing with missing information. The Torah (Num. 28:15) says that a goat should be sacrificed in the Temple on every New Moon (Rosh Chodesh) as "an atonement sacrifice, for HaShem" but it doesn't explain what sin is being atoned for. The Midrash answers the question by reading the verse literally: "an atonement sacrifice _for HaShem_" must mean "for HaShem's own sin"! God asks us to atone for God's sin in making the moon smaller. This is the boldness of this Midrash, undermining preconceptions. Since when can God sin?! But according to this story, God committed the first sin -- before Adam and Eve! -- and it's so serious that it needs constant atoning for and is constantly visible in the smallness of the moon.

There could be many interpretations of this sin of God's. One which I heard from Rabbi Sammy Intrator of the Carlebach Shul in New York has stayed

with me. There seems to be a contradiction in life between expressing ourselves fully and giving room to other people to be themselves. Very often a person who takes centre stage arouses resentment in others. Or, even without resentment, people may be so attracted to a person's charisma and so much want to hear what that person has to say that they don't end up expressing themselves. On the other hand, if we're quiet and attentive to others we boost them but our own light doesn't shine. This Midrash is a protest against this existential situation. It's not right that things should be this way; it's a sin -- God's sin! We have to find a way to both be great and help others be great, to let our own light shine and open to the light of others, simultaneously. If we could do that, we would be healing God's original sin.