

Restoring the Moon: The Ritual of *Kiddush Levanah*

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The monthly Jewish ritual that sanctifies the new moon, *Kiddush Levanah*, is generally recited outdoors during the second week of the lunar cycle, most often at the conclusion of Shabbat. The form we now have was written in the 16th century as a response to a famous midrashic reading of the creation story: The sun and moon are both created as great lights. When the moon asks the Creator how two great luminaries can share power, God responds by diminishing the moon. She complains, but the deed is done, so God promises to atone monthly for having unfairly made her the lesser light. The sources of the prayer's first paragraph are biblical and rabbinic, but the messianic prayer that follows is pure Jewish mysticism. "...And let the light of the moon be as the light of the sun, and as the light of the seven days of creation, just as she was before she was diminished, as it is said: 'the two great lights.'"¹

Rashi understood the moon's diminution and its future restoration in the world to come as a veiled reference to women, and that in the world to come, women will be renewed like the new moon.² This prayer, introduced by R. Yitzhak Luria, is chanted before a waxing moon, and imagines that the moon's feminine light will someday be restored to its full equality with the sun's masculine light. If God atones for diminishing the moon and for the subjugation of Eve to Adam after the sin in the garden, then the way things are is not the way things ought to be or ultimately will be. The disharmonies and fractures are just the beginning of a great drama, the last act of which will include God's joyous restoration of the moon.

In time, two will be able to rule with one crown, and power will be shared without the imposition of an embedded hierarchy. Only the fullest of loves makes that possible and this midrash offers such an image where equality and partnership sustain the love. Might it be that gay relationships are perhaps a harbinger of the moon's restoration, a forward guard to the coming redemption?

Remarkably, this text provides a narrative that also carries us back to both themes of creation and redemption. While gay unions may

not recapitulate creation and redemption as do heterosexual unions, it appears that the same two tropes are present. Heterosexual unions are about the love of Adam and Eve that bears new life; homosexual unions are about the flaws of the creation that we are called upon to fix, the invention of a love that shares a single crown.

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While straight unions offer a promise of a future redemption in flesh and blood, gay unions help to pave the way for us to heal the very problem of difference, and in a gesture no less redemptive than the rebuilding of Jerusalem, to restore the moon to her former glory.

In practice, the ritual of *Kiddush Levanah* includes the giving and receiving of peace. Under the moonlit sky, each of those assembled sanctifies the new moon and then turns to one another and says, "*Shalom aleichem*," peace be unto you, to which a reverse greeting is returned, "*Aleichem shalom*," unto you be peace. This greeting of peace is shared with three different people and often with a clasping of hands. This overtly mutual interplay between giving and receiving could be an ideal moment to articulate how the love of two can radiate out toward the whole community; it could be an ideal setting for a gay wedding.

The mystical prayer for the restoration of the moon serves as a foil to the degradations of the biblical creation story that unconsciously inhabit the traditional wedding. Before the first couple leaves the garden, Eve's destiny is set in both desire and subjugation, "Your urge shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you."³ For thousands of years, the ongoing subjugation of Eve has become Adam's abiding interest, prettified by gowns and flowers. *Kiddush Levanah* reveals the fractures of the story, grasps them as a challenge to God's goodness that will in time be fixed, and calls upon us to ensure that the love we honor at a wedding will be shared with the wisdom of heart by which two can rule with a single crown.

¹ In *Siddur Abodat Israel*, p. 338, Yehuda Baer suggests that this addition to the *Kiddush Levanah* is a tradition from the medieval German pietist, R. Yehuda HaHasid. However, in the five-volume commentary on Jewish liturgy, *Netiv Binah*, the author, Issachar Jacobson, admits to not being able to find the origins of this prayer. He believes that it derives from a mystical source. *Netiv Binah*, vol. 3, p. 343.

² Rashi on Megillah 22b, dh. *roshei hodashim*. I thank Rabbi Pinchas Klein for bringing this source to my attention.

³ Genesis 3:16b

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