

## **On Becoming Moonies**

**Kol Nidre Sermon, 5781/2020**

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The Torah, the sacred scripture of the Jewish people is filled with commandments. There are a lot of stories in it, of course, but there are lots of laws, too – 613 laws, to be precise, and they speak to every element of our lives – holidays, ethics, food, and much more.

Now, if you were God, and you were giving this Torah to the Jewish people, where would you begin? Which of those commandments would you give first? Would it be an ethical commandment, such as being kind to the stranger? Maybe. Might it be a ritual commandment – like something about Shabbat? Perhaps. Maybe you'd start with something about how people should treat their families? That might be a good idea, too.

As it turns out, the first commandment to appear in the Torah is the commandment to be fruitful and multiply, which can be a pretty fun place to start. But the first commandment that God gave the Jewish people in particular, is, I think, far more interesting. The first commandment that the Jewish people received as a people doesn't come until the book of Exodus – chapter 12, verse 2, to be precise. God is talking about the Hebrew month of Nisan, which begins in the spring, and God says to Moses, “This moon [or this month] shall be for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you.”

*That's* the first commandment that God gave all of us? Think of all the other places that God could have begun. Did God choose to begin with a commandment about a joyous religious holiday? No. Did God choose to begin with a commandment about friendship? No. Did God choose one of the great ethical precepts of our tradition to begin with? No again. Instead of any of these great starting points, God chose to begin commanding the Jewish people with a commandment about the moon. “This moon shall be for you the beginning of months.”

Why did God choose to begin there? Why start with the moon?

In order to answer that question, I'd like to invite you to imagine with me what it must have been like to be Adam, the first human being, when he first observed the moon. According to our tradition, Adam was created on Rosh Hashanah, a time when there was no moon showing in the sky. But then, after a couple of nights, all of a sudden, one evening he saw a slender, sliver of light shining from on high through the darkness. The next night, that sliver became a bit thicker, and the next night thicker still. Imagine what it must have been like to be Adam back then. Every night, this beautiful orb in the sky glows more fully and more brightly than it had ever been before. He must have been in awe, and maybe he even said, “Wow! This might continue forever. Maybe, for the next umpteen millennia and beyond, the moon will grow brighter and brighter and brighter each successive night!” Conceivably, it was a time of ultimate possibility, of ultimate potential. It was a time when all humanity knew was that each passing day brought more and more light.

That process continued...for two whole weeks, until, on the fifteenth night, Moses saw the full disc of the moon illuminating the sky. And because there probably wasn't that much light pollution back in those days, it must have lit the whole world in its glow.

But then, something unexpected happened. On the sixteenth night, the glow in the sky diminished a bit. And on the seventeenth, it grew dimmer still. This great, growing light had begun to shrink. Maybe the world wasn't filled with ultimate potential, after all.

For the next two weeks, night after night, the light in the sky diminished, until, about a month after he had first seen it, it was gone completely. This must have been crushing for Adam – the light that had once brought him such hope by its constant growth had simply disappeared.

But then, after a couple nights of such darkness, the moon reappeared, only to grow for the next two weeks. Then it started to dim again, but this time Adam knew that it would eventually reappear, and so it did – month after month, year after year.

And it's that very moon, even with its constant waxing and waning, that determines the rhythms of Jewish life. "This moon," God said to Moses, shall be for you the beginning of months." The Gregorian calendar is a solar calendar. The solar year is the primary unit of time – the time it takes for the earth to revolve around the sun. It then divides that year into twelve more or less equal units that it calls months. The Jewish calendar, however, is mostly a lunar calendar. Each month begins with the new moon – always. And while there are some correctives in our calendar to keep it in sync with the solar year, the lunar month is its primary unit of time.

The western world, in other words, counts time by the sun; we Jews count it by the moon.

That's not an insignificant difference. The sun, as you know, rises every day. Sometimes we can't see it because of the clouds, of course, but it's always there. It's always the same shape, it always rises in the morning and sets at night, its energy is constant and unchanging.

The moon, however, always changes – that's what makes it unique. Some nights it doesn't rise at all, and every night that it does rise, it takes a different shape than it did the night before. It fades, but whenever it does, we know that it's coming back, and that the darkness it leaves behind is only temporary. The moon may always be on the verge of disappearing, but that's just because it's always on the verge of rebirth, too.

Rebirth – that's the focus of the Jewish calendar. In fact, in Hebrew, the new moon is called the *molad*, which means rebirth. That's when our months begin – at the moment of renewal, of growing light, of rebirth itself.

The moon can also teach us something about darkness – that darkness might not be darkness at all, but instead simply a pause before the growing light. I learn this from the idea of the new moon. If you think about it, it's not really clear what we mean when we talk about the "new moon." After all, what is it that you see when you look up into the sky at the time of the new moon? Some would say that you don't see anything – that the new moon is the darkness that comes after one month's moon vanishes and before the next one appears. When other people use

the term “new moon,” however, they refer to the first visible sliver of the moon in the sky as it begins to glow. For some people, in other words, the new moon is a moment of invisibility; for others it’s a moment of luminosity.

Early Jewish law vacillated on this issue, sometimes declaring the new month to begin when the moon was invisible, and sometimes when it could first be seen. Eventually, the invisible new moon took precedence, but what’s important is the realization that these two events are almost simultaneous. Darkness, in our tradition, is all but nonexistent. Instead, darkness is a prelude to light.

That’s important for us to remember, these days, because for many of us, these days are awfully dark. Disease is sweeping across the land, and many of us fear that it will reach our own homes. Only a few of us in our Temple community have gotten sick, thank God, but all that could change at the drop of a mask. In the meantime, many of us know people who have become ill, and even people who have died because of it, and it’s scary. Furthermore, in its wake, the disease has brought horrible economic upheaval – the worst of its kind in most of our lifetimes. Some of us have lost our livelihoods; some of us might lose our homes. All of the security we have spent so many years building up is now in danger of getting torn down. The dark clouds of need are beginning to loom heavy in the distance, and they’re drawing nearer.

Additionally, the streets of many North American cities recently erupted in racial violence. George Floyd yelled “I can’t breathe” and millions of caring people gasped as they realized how many others were suffocating. Some leaders responded decisively to this new awareness of racial oppression; others denied the very existence of a problem. Rocks flew; buildings burned; caring people everywhere cried out for the change that the world so desperately needs.

Dark clouds loom elsewhere, too. Smokestacks belch out their contents; the clouds they create change our climate, and millions will soon be displaced. Corruption looms large in many lands, and the recent explosions in Lebanon and elsewhere show what it can yield. In America, and even here in Canada, the light that science can bring to many of the challenges we face is obscured by dark clouds of misinformation, political nonsense, and hokum.

The darkness grows, and we feel lost as we try to make our way through it.

But we Jews know that this darkness is only temporary. Think about it. Every dark period in our past has yielded fruit for us, often because of the very pain created. This is not to diminish the reality of the pain, of course, but only to remind us that darkness points us toward the light. When the Temple was destroyed in Jerusalem, Jews created the magnificent world of Talmud and all the wisdom it brought. When the Jews of Spain were expelled in 1492, the refugees from that once great culture formulated the shimmering, gleaming imagery and teachings of Jewish mysticism, Kabbalah. When darkness descended on our people as never before during the Holocaust, the smoke cleared, and soon the pioneer returnees to our ancient homeland succeeded in creating a Jewish state there – Israel.

For Jews, darkness is never permanent. Like the darkened sky at the end of the month, it’s always a prelude to the light of rebirth.

As a Jew, I'm confident that the darkness we face in the world today will lead to light, too. I'm confident that before long there will be a vaccine to combat this horrible disease. I'm confident that the economy will improve, that most people will see the antiscientific charlatanry sweeping through the world today for what it really is, and that slowly but surely, corruption will yield way to integrity. As a Jew, I can't believe it would be otherwise.

I think the moon carries another message for us, too, for the moon – at least part of it – never goes dark, only our vision of it does. Think about what the new moon means from an astronomical perspective. When the moon disappears, we know – and we Jews have known this for many centuries – that the reason we can't see it is that it's completely facing the sun, and not us. That period of darkness between the months? It's only dark for us. From the moon's perspective, it's a time of continued light. In other words, what we experience as dark isn't truly dark, it's just a time when we can't see the light that's always there, always shining, always bright. The darkness is only dark because of our own narrow view of the universe. Looked at more broadly, the darkness is simply a time when the light grows dormant.

The light is there, even when we can't see it. It is an astounding reality. When our world turns dark, it's not because it's become a dark place, but only because the light has gone into hiding. When you suffer, the light is still there. When life becomes difficult, the light still shines, albeit in places not visible to us. When evil reigns, the light is still there, too. Even then. Even then.

I've sat with many of you in past months as you've gone through very difficult experiences, and the darkness you've faced is real. But don't think for a second that the darkness is the sum-total of reality, because it isn't. It never is. For while you suffer, joy remains possible. While you grieve, happier tomorrows offer themselves up to you. While you despair, hope invites you to persevere.

Similarly, the difficulties we face together are not the sum total of our experience. These times are not utterly dark – they are a time of growing if still imperceptible light. Even as we worship here together, researchers are moving us ever closer to having a vaccine. Staying home can be difficult, but many of you have shared stories with me of the blessing of spending time with your loved ones, and with yourselves. The violence that recently broke out in cities throughout North America is leading to renewed work toward racial justice.

In terms of our own experience, the darkness can be scary. In terms comprehensive reality, darkness is often a time of gathering light.

As your rabbi, my plea to you is always that you remain active and engaged Jews. But tonight, I'd also like to encourage you to remain moonies, as well. Remember, even at times of darkness, that the light will soon return. It might take some time, but it always shines bright once again.

At times such as these, it is this that we need to remember. May doing so give us the strength we need to face the darkness.

Shanah Tovah