

“Of What Use is a Candle in Broad Daylight?”



The Reinvention of a Myth

Myths are an age-old means of transcending the mundane and seeking higher truth. Melila Hellner-Eshed unveils the ongoing significance of a classic Talmudic story about power and love

Has the sun always been large and dazzling and the moon smaller, waxing and waning each month? Or were the cosmos different at the dawn of Creation? This question has spawned many a myth in different cultures. The Jewish view of the luminaries ranges beyond the skies, to the biblical text and its interpretive tradition. For us, the story of the sun and moon is a dynamic metaphor: it speaks of our lives and experiences as humans.

{ By **MELILA HELLNER-ESHED**

In Genesis 1:16, we are told that “God made two great lights, a greater light to rule the day; and a lesser light to rule the night.” Two “great” lights; yet one is not so great. How can this be? The apparent contradiction is explored in a classic Jewish etiological myth – a myth of origins – in which a dialogue between God and the moon results in the moon’s demotion to the rank of the “lesser light.” Over the generations, this narrative has inspired stories of rebellion, atonement, and even love, exemplifying the ongoing renewal of myth as an important element of cultural vitality. In reading several renditions of the story, we will follow its evolution from antiquity up to the culmination of mythical imagination and ingenuity in medieval Kabbalah.

We will begin with the version that has become canonical, found in the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Hullin. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi says: “All the creatures formed at the beginning [of the world] were created in their full stature, with their consent, and according to the shape of their own choice.” (BT, Hullin 60a). But is this really the case? Rabbi Shimon ben Pazzi challenges the notion of a perfectly ordered creation by pointing out the contradiction in Genesis 1:16. The story that follows suggests that not all God’s creatures consented to their assigned role in the transition from Chaos to Cosmos.

Quarrel and Atonement

The midrash in Hullin begins (on page 60b) with the words *amrah yare’ach*, which translates as “the moon said,” but in Hebrew, the grammar indicates clearly that the speaker is female. **“Is it possible for two kings to wear one crown?”** she asks. The moon’s question challenges the absolute single Monarch, Who does not share His authority with anyone else; she confronts Him about the inevitable tension arising from the existence of the two luminous rulers. Indeed, what does the single God know about such matters?

God’s reply is decisive, petulant and harsh: **“Go then and diminish yourself.”** When coming from the Creator, such words are not just a suggestion: they shape reality. Yet this response is quite baffling: Is this a punishment for merely asking the question, as if to say, “Since you asked, go and diminish yourself”? Perhaps it is the inevitable consequence of the answer: indeed two kings cannot rule under a single crown, and therefore, one of the parties must yield. Is this a God trying to fix a plan not thought through? On the other hand, the response may reveal the inscrutable wisdom of the all-knowing God: the heavens should contain two powers – one which is strong, stable and unequivocal, if a little dull; and another, smaller, reflexive and contemplative, veiled in shadows and changing cyclically.

“Is it possible for two kings to wear one crown?”

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Hullin

We may also question the meaning of the command, “Go then and diminish yourself.” The Almighty does not diminish the moon but orders her to do it to herself. Is this a conscious retraction and dimming of one’s own powers? Is it an act of self-maiming? Many women would attest to moments when they were asked by figures of authority to retract and dim themselves. These moments may, at their worst, be paralyzing and deadening – but at their best may be the constitutive, radicalizing moments of one’s identity.

This scene may be read in many ways; but the moon’s bitter reply tells us how she herself had experienced the divine decree: **“Because I have suggested that which is proper, must I then diminish myself?!”** This is the voice of the insulted party, demanding that her inner truth be heard. The

moon would not retract in shame, like a berated schoolgirl, before the tremendous power of the divine decree. The moon stands her ground. The way she sees it, her question was valid and fair. Therefore her response cannot be an obsequious surrender to the verdict of self-diminution. The moon experiences unwarranted oppression. To force her to reduce herself is unjust.

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The moon's response takes the story to a surprising turn. God begins to make gestures of appeasement and compensation. Clearly the King's word cannot be revoked, and therefore the moon shall be diminished. Yet we find here an effort (either genuine or false), of the God-father to mend the profound sorrow of the dejected moon. God's first offer to her is: **"Go and you will rule by day and by night."**

This is an interesting proposal. While the sun never enters the nocturnal realm, the moon, on many days of the month, appears in the sky in the daytime as well. But the moon doesn't take up the offer. Her appearance during the day is not satisfying, neither for herself nor for the world: **"Of what use is a candle in broad daylight?"** What impact does the moonlight have in comparison to the tremendous splendor of the sun? What need is there of the moon's entry into the sphere of her significant other, the sun?

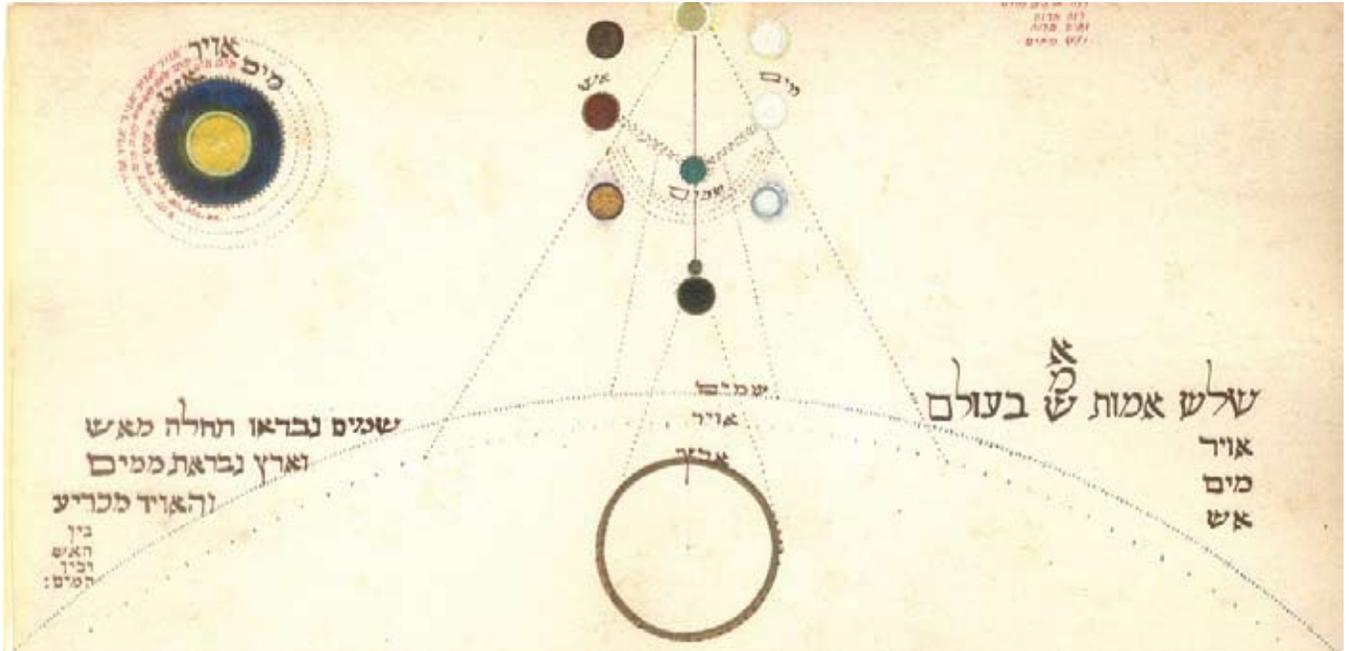
The Almighty's next offer follows: **"Go. Israel shall reckon by you the days and the years."** This is also interesting. True, God says, you will be small, but you, and not the sun, will be the light according to which the

people of Israel shall measure time. The moon objects immediately that this offer does not constitute any compensation, and perhaps is even misleading, since its apparent generosity is illusory: **"But it is impossible,"** said the moon, **"to do without the sun for the reckoning of the seasons, as it is written, 'Let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years'"** (Genesis 1:14). Here, at the dawn of time, the moon recognizes that the Hebrew calendar will be both solar and lunar. The sun determines the seasons of the year, whereas the moon determines its months. Hence, every day of the calendar constitutes a cross between the lunar and the solar. There is no solace here, certainly no satisfaction of the moon's wish to claim her own identity.

The third and final offer in this "negotiation" is as follows: **"Go. The righteous shall be named after you as we find, Jacob [the patriarch] the Small, Samuel [the Tanaaite] the Small, [King] David the Small."** This is an offer of a different order; it doesn't have to do with the bestowal of power or majesty, but an offer to trade size for status. Equality in size or power shall not materialize, but you the moon, says God, shall be the favorite. Israel, the smallest and favored among the nations of the world, will honor you as a role model. Some of their greatest heroes will earn the nickname "small." You shall be the beloved moon.

The moon is not appeased. For some reason she is still not content. But why? What can be more precious than this offer of God's love? We may conclude that the moon's stubborn refusal to accept God's offers derives from her sense that He has been ignoring her essential question, which is a quest for identity: Who am I? In what way am I different from the sun?

Here the story reaches its turning point: **"On seeing that the moon would not be appeased, the Blessed Holy One said: 'Bring atonement to Me for having diminished the moon.'"** If we pay attention we will see



that until this point in the exchange between God and the moon, He does not see her, He does not interact as a fully attentive and communicative party to a discussion. Now, for the first time, God truly sees the moon, and acknowledges her needs and wants.

At the end of the story, the rabbinic authors of our midrash reveal a deeper etiological agenda – explaining the origin of the enigmatic commandment in the Torah requiring the sacrifice of a male goat at the beginning of the month (*se'ir rosh hodesh*): “And in the beginning of your months you shall offer a burnt offering unto the Lord ... also one male goat for a sin offering unto God” (Numbers 28:11, 15). Why this act of atonement? Who has done the sinning? The Talmudic passage concludes:

This is what is meant by Rabbi Simeon ben Lakish when he declared: “Why is it that the male goat offering on the new moon is distinguished by the fact that it is written about it, “unto God?” Because the Blessed Holy One said: “Let this sin offering atone for Me for having diminished the moon.” (BT, Hullin 60b)

This final statement carries a tone of candid regret. The King’s word cannot be undone. The moon must remain smaller than she was originally, but each and every month when the moon is reborn, when she is nearly invisible, Israel shall bring a sin offering unto the Lord, a sacrifice that reminds us – and God – that not all things are as they were meant to be.

Varieties of Heavenly Experience

God may feel “guilty” in Tractate Hullin, but not in all variations of this classic myth. In some versions, the story is constructed as a celestial preview of the ascendancy of Adam over Eve in the myth of the Garden of Eden. According to this view, the inequality between the sexes is primordial and is already manifest in the forces of nature, before man and woman were created. Such a rendering often smacks of misogyny: just as Eve deserves to be subservient to her husband, owing to negative characteristics of womankind, so too does the female moon deserve her second-class status.



“Three mothers are in the world – Air, Water, Fire. The heavens were first created from Fire, and earth from Water, and Air balances between Fire and Water,” *Sefer Yetzirah*. Illustration by Metavel (Renee Koppel)

An example of such a myth may be found in *Midrash Kohen*, an anonymous work influenced by midrashim of the Second Temple period, but actually dated to the 11th century CE. The author fixes on the idea of *kitrug* – complaint or accusation – as a belligerent female trait that warrants the moon’s reduction to a lesser status:

“And God created the two great lights” (Genesis 1:16). Both were great until the moon complained [*kitrega*] against the sun and said before the Blessed Holy One: Sovereign of the Universe . . . why have You created two worlds, this world and the world to come, one small and one great? . . . Said the blessed Holy One: I know full well that you wish Me to make you the greater [light] and diminish [the sun]. Since you have complained [*kitragt*] about [the sun] go and diminish yourself to be one sixtieth of the sun’s light . . . She said to Him: Sovereign of the Universe, what shall befall the light of the sun? He said to her: are you still complaining [*mekatregget*] about [the sun]? It is your destiny that her light shall be seven times brighter than yours, as it is written, ‘and the light of the sun shall be sevenfold, as the light of seven days.’ (Isaiah 30:26) [Aaron Jellinek, *Beit Hamidrash*, part B, p. 26]

In a different interpretative orientation, already found in ancient midrashim, our story is presented as a national-political myth. Its tantalizing central question is: How is it that Israel, God’s chosen people, is relatively small and weak, compared to the powerful nations and religions who control the political reality? We find such a midrash in *Bereshit Rabbah*, an ancient commentary on the Book of Genesis, composed in the Land of Israel. It recounts our myth in a unique fashion and reads the moon as the People of Israel and the sun as Esau, the figure who traditionally symbolizes Rome (and later Christianity), which reigns supreme over the People of Israel:

. . . [A]fter calling [the lights] great [God] goes back and makes them flawed? “The greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night.” Why is that?! . . . [God acted thus] because [one] trespassed upon the realm of her fellow [luminary]. Rabbi Pinhas said: in respect of all other sacrifices it is said, “one male goat for a sin offering,” whereas in respect of the New Moon it is said, “one male goat for a sin offering unto the Lord.” Said the Blessed Holy One, “May I attain atonement because I made the moon smaller.” I am the one Who has caused [the moon] to trespass into the realm of her counterpart. If scripture casts a flaw in one who has trespassed with permission, it would all the more in one who has trespassed without permission! . . . Rabbi Levi . . . said: it is natural for the great to count according to the great and for the small to count according to the small. Esau counts [time] according to the sun, which is great, and Yaakov counts according to the moon, which is small. (*Bereshit Rabbah* 6.3)

In this version, the moon’s intrusion into the solar domain of daylight is an unexplained divine act, for which God is accountable. Something in His plan went askew and God is paying for this error with an offering. The moon is entirely passive in this story, and cannot be accused of impertinence. The People of Israel may be small and weak, but not as a result of its actions. There is no human culprit. God had made the mistake and He bears the responsibility for His actions.

The moon cannot be blamed because she is us, and we are her. Like the Jewish people, she does not acquire power in this world. By asking for an offering to be brought on His behalf, God participates in the sorrow of His people. Implicit in this national reading of our myth is the wish for the correction of this flawed condition in the world to come or at the end of days.

An Amorous Dialogue

Myths are a means by which human beings attempt to explain their world to themselves. By their nature, myths are open to a range of interpretations, each shedding light on a different facet of the story. In order to remain attuned to the unique voice of myth, its readers must beware of regarding it too literally, but at the same time should take care not to read it too metaphorically or spiritually, robbing the myth of its power. Ideally, readers must find an elusive point of equilibrium in order to grasp the significance of the narrative.

It is exactly this sensitivity to myth that we find in the *Zohar*, the mystical masterpiece composed by the kabbalists of medieval Spain. Kabbalistic literature created a new, complex conception of divinity, based upon an intricate exploration of the hidden meanings of the Hebrew Bible. According to their worldview, divinity is a complex dimension comprised of aspects and qualities, some male and some female, maintaining a dynamic, dramatic and erotic relationship among themselves. Human beings and divinity maintain a relationship that is intricate, passionate and interdependent. This literature has a keen interest in femininity and womanhood. Kabbalah in general and the Zoharic literature in particular develop a variegated and spectacular myth of the *Shekhinah*, which is the feminine aspect of divinity that maintains dynamic relations with its masculine aspect.

In a passage from the *Zohar Hadash*,* the sun and moon again represent male and female figures, but with a new emphasis. The text builds upon a famous rabbinic midrash (*Bereshit Rabbah* 8.1), which explains that man and woman were created attached at the back, or side by side. This sterile, androg-

ynous state had to be rectified; the Almighty therefore put Adam to sleep and detached Eve from his rib, enabling her to become Adam's bride. Now that the female archetype could face her male counterpart, she was able to assume a position that enables conjugal love and human reproduction:

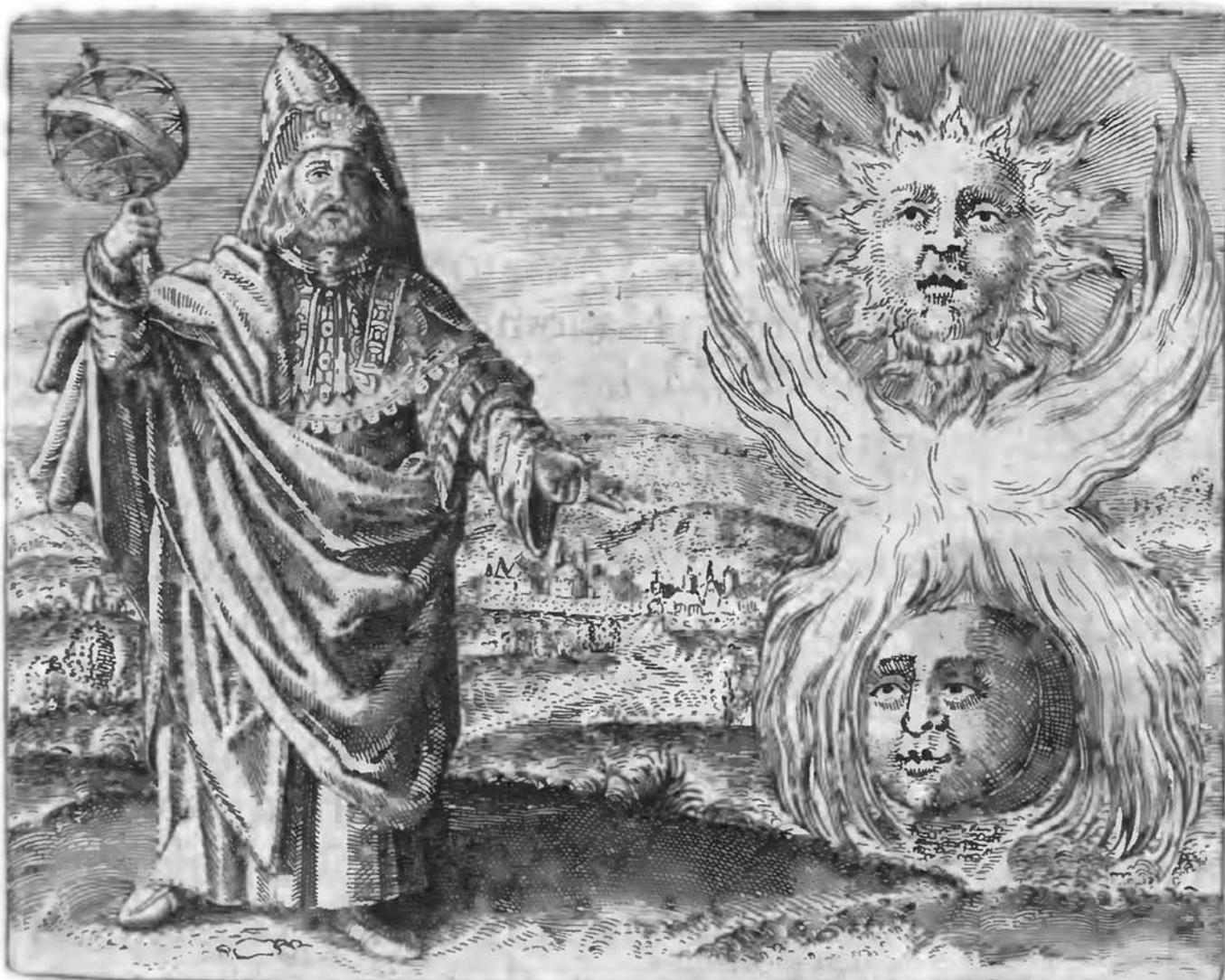
It is written: ". . . and God created the two great lights," etc.

"And God created" – at first there were two lights, commensurate with one another, as our companions have explained and so have we, that these two luminaries were equal before the One, were conjoined as one, and worthy as one to be named "great" as we have explained . . . (*Zohar Hadash* 70d)

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Now the Zoharic author unearths a fresh layer of our story from Tractate Hullin, wherein the Almighty sees the moon, understands her problem, and provides a wise and gentle solution. Grafting poetry onto myth, this reading places amorous verses from the

* In the first printing of *Sefer Hazohar* ("The Book of Splendor") in 1558, several portions of the 14th-century work were omitted. A collection of these missing materials was compiled by Safed kabbalists in the 16th century, and was published in 1608 under the title *Zohar Hadash* ("New Zohar").



biblical Song of Songs (1:7-8) into the mouths of the protagonists, God and the moon:

Said the moon before the blessed Holy One: “Can one king use two crowns as one? For each of them stands in and of itself?” . . . He told her: I see that you wish to be “leader of the foxes” [i.e., the “small fry.”] Go diminish yourself, for although you will be a head to them, you shall be smaller than you used to be . . . And the moon said as follows: “**Tell me, O one whom my soul loveth, where will thou feedest thy flocks**” – how can the world be led with two crowns as one?! . . . **Where thou liest in midday** – for the

moon cannot provide sufficient light, and it is impossible to lead with two crowns as one – the sun and the moon – for what light can the moon provide at midday?! Therefore, it is impossible to use two crowns as one. . . . **For why should I be as one that veileth herself**” – how shall I be veiled at midday when the sun’s light and brightness grows stronger. For I am veiled with shame before [the sun], and cannot serve You. And You, how can you lead and use two crowns as one?! . . . The blessed Holy One told her: I understand you, go and diminish yourself . . . **“If thou know not, O thou fairest among women**” – since you have said that I cannot



Etching of sun and moon from alchemy treatise *Symbola Aurae Mensa Duodecim Nationum* by Michael Maier, 1617. The Jewish National & University Library, Shapell Family Digitization Project

lead the world with two crowns as one, go diminish yourself and be a head to the foxes . . . **“Go thy way forth by the footsteps of the flock, [and feed thy kids beside the shepherds’ tents]”** – go and be a head to those earthly crowds and forces. Shepherd them, lead them, and be sovereign to all the [beings of the] realm below, and lead each and every one as he deserves, and rule the night . . . Certainly, leave, diminish yourself, as you deserve.

(*Zohar Hadash* 70d)

In the Song of Songs, the young woman wishes to know where her lover will be at midday, so that she can find him without the embarrassment of having to ask other shepherds of his whereabouts. The lover replies, telling her exactly where she should graze her lambs.

In the *Zohar Hadash*, the erotic conversation is transposed to the moon and the Almighty: How can you lead and shepherd the world, my love, says the moon, while the sun and I are conjoined as one? For I cannot fulfill my destiny to illumine your face when I am dull and pale, as I am cleaved to the bright sunlight.

I understand your position, says God. And you, the fairest among women, since you correctly recognized that the world cannot be led by two identical powers, diminish yourself and go with the flock; be queen and lead justly the whole of the mundane world. I accept your advice: detach yourself from the sun, reduce yourself from your primordial state, embark on your independent quest and lead the world.

The moon and the sun may be the male-female pairing in the luminary dimension, but the ultimate object of the moon’s love is the divine power from which she emanated. The moon, perhaps like the human soul, longs for her worldly partners but deep down yearns to ascend to the Godhead. The original Talmudic myth, abounding with misunderstanding and miscommunication, is now immersed in love, mutual appreciation, concord and

willful action. The Almighty acknowledges the moon, her heart and her wish. The moon also acknowledges God, and can lay out her troubles before Him. And the problem has a solution. The moon is not at all punished in this story. She embarks on her journey with God’s blessing.

A vital Jewish culture may only be sustained through the freedom to innovate, to reinterpret and reinvent its textual sources in order to sustain the genius of its religious imagery. The rabbis in the Talmud allowed themselves to adapt as they saw necessary the figures of the moon, sun and God; the authors of other midrashim drew into the story of Adam and Eve, or changed the figure of the moon from a curious daughter to a belligerent wife. Here we have a bold demonstration of the way in which kabbalists, the authors of the *Zohar* literature, found a myth from late antiquity, read it anew, and took the liberty to introduce a conceptual and poetic revision. This inspiring move allowed the story to continue its journey, charged with meaning that is relevant to their world – and ours.

The Zoharic reading is echoed in Jewish practice in *Seder Kiddush Halevanah*, the monthly ritual that sanctifies the waxing of the new moon. In its liturgy we again find the Song of Songs: the familiar verse, “*Kol dodi hineh zeh ba*” (“The voice of my beloved, here he comes”) from Chapter 2. The concluding passage of the ceremony captures best the quest and prayer for a time in which two great powers, two lights, may coexist in their true size, without hurting or diminishing each other, shining face to face in a reality where God’s creations may enjoy their original splendor.

May it be thy will, Lord my God and God of my fathers, to readjust the deficiency of the moon, so that it may no longer be reduced in size; may the light of the moon again be like the light of the sun, as it was during the first seven days of creation, before its size was reduced, for it is said: “The two great lights.”



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