

Toldot

Tradition tells us that when God created the sun and the moon, they both shined with such brightness as to light up the world and bring warmth to all living things. But the moon grew haughty and jealous. She looked at the sun and thought to herself that she, so beautiful and bright, should not share these qualities with the sun, but be brighter- warmer- so all would cherish her greatness. So the moon went to God. She approached and humbly asked the creator, "God, Creator of all things, would it not be better to have only one glorious, bright orb in the sky for all to enjoy and cherish instead of two identical orbs?"

God looked at the moon and sighed.... To be so beautiful. To be capable of such goodness and greatness, and yet be overcome with only jealousy, self-centeredness, and pride.....

God answered the moon, "Perhaps you are right. Henceforth there shall only be one bright orb in the sky. And by the darkness of the second, we will appreciate the light of the first...". And with that, God took the light from the moon and SMASHED it into a billion pieces which flew into the darkness of the sky. "Your light was tarnished by greed, envy, and self-satisfaction. Your light will now come from the sun who's light comes from generosity, compassion and love".

In the darkness that followed, realization swept over the moon. Looking at the sun- her friend- she realized what she had become and wept. Regret, guilt, and remorse overcame her and at the feet of the sun and to God, she repented.

Forgiven, God bestowed upon the moon a blessing. "My people," said God, "will count their days by you. Their days and holidays will begin when they see you in the sky, and their years will be lunar years because of your great capacity for repentance and humility".

Rosh Chodesh celebrates the moon's renewal. It marks the point at which the moon wanes to the point where it disappears entirely, and then slowly, as the month progresses, we watch it grow once again.

The first commandment we were given as a people, in fact, was the mitzva of Rosh Chodesh. When we were slaves in Egypt, we were told that Nissan would be the month in which we would go free. Nissan, we were told, would be our people's first month, around which we would build our new calendar.

The moment the new moon begins is called 'Molad' or birth of the new moon cycle. In Temple times, a sin offering was brought to the Temple, and in the Musaf prayer service of Rosh Chodesh, it is called a time of atonement or "Zman Kapara".

A 19th century German Rabbi, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch writes, "Each time the moon finds the sun again, each time it receives it's rays of light afresh, God wants his people to find Him again." Hirsch says that the renewal of the moon should be a renewal for us as well, comparing the new 'birth' of the moon to a rejuvenation of the soul.

This week's Torah portion, Parashat Toldot, tells the story of Isaac and Rebecca and their twins, Jacob and Esau. Interestingly enough, we begin to see similarities between their story and Abraham and Sarah's story which we read over the last couple of weeks. We recently read about Abraham's fears in Egypt, and his decision to pass Sarah off as his sister. Abraham worried that, because of Sarah's great beauty, he would be killed by someone who wanted Sarah for himself. In this parasha, Isaac claims that Rebecca is his sister so that the Philistines, upon seeing her beauty, won't kill him in order to take her.

Two weeks ago, Sarah made it very clear that Ishmael- Abraham's oldest son- was not welcome in her home after Isaac was born. Though both Ishmael and Isaac were Abraham's children, Isaac was not only Sarah's favorite, but the only one she tolerated. And before the Akeda, God commanded Abraham to take his "Favorite" son, again showing a different level of love between his children.

This week, we learn about the relationship between Isaac and Rebecca and their two sons. Like Isaac's parents, each have their favorite. Isaac loves Esau more and Rebecca loves Jacob more. This favoritism is not a secret to the children, and in fact, both the parents and children use this favoritism to their advantage. Isaac favors Esau because he brings him food prepared from the meat he hunts. Knowing how hungry his brother will be coming in from the hunt, Jacob withholds food from Esau until he gives up his birthright. While Rebecca conceives a plan for Jacob to steal his brother's blessing from the blind and frail Isaac. Later in the Torah we will see that Jacob continues this sort of favoritism amongst his own wives and children, with devastating consequences.

Each of us carries within us the habits, mannerisms, belief systems, morals of those who raised us. Some of this is wonderful and inspiring. Things we can't wait to pass on to the next generation. And then there are those parts of our personality that are ingrained in us that are not helpful to anyone. Those character flaws we have that we can spend a lifetime trying to understand and get a handle on so that we don't unwittingly pass them on to the next generation. It is hard and painful work. Slow work. And sometimes it makes us feel helpless.

Rabbi Simcha Bunim, a great Polish rabbi and teacher, kept two slips of paper with him at all times. One in each pocket. On one read, "bishvili nivrah haolam- The world was created for me", and on the other, "v'anochi afar v'efer'- I am but dust and ashes". Two short, beautiful phrases, worn in two pockets, one on the left and one on the right. When we feel like we will never surmount the challenge before us, we are reminded that the world is built for us. We are here for a reason and we can overcome anything.

And in those moments when we are feeling so confident that we are in danger of hurting someone else--- like our friend the moon--- we are reminded from where we came.... and that we are no different than anyone else....

Even some of our biblical rivalries figure it out in the end: Our tradition tells us that Rav Yehuda HaNasi, a ruler of the Jews and a descendent of Jacob, and the Roman ruler Antoninus, a descendent of Esau signed a treaty between themselves and maintained harmonious relations. These two broke the pattern of their forebearers and lived with wealth, peace and harmony.

We humans are a work in progress. We'll give the next generation some great wisdom to pass on. And we'll no doubt, give them great reasons to seek out therapy. And that's absolutely ok. Friday night is Rosh Chodesh Kislev. We'll be given a new chance to start over, and rejuvenate our souls. May we learn from our mistakes, and seek to own and curb our own evil inclinations so with each new moon- each Rosh Chodesh- we can come one step closer to finding peace with our own history, our inner selves, and the world around us.

Shabbat shalom

Sar