

Rabbi Yaakov Taubes

# Moonlight Shows Us What We Really Believe: Kiddush Levanah and Kabbalat Penei Ha-Shekhinah

The *berakhah* commonly known as “*Kiddush Levanah*” or “*Birkat Ha-Levanah*” is generally recited today as the focal point of one of the more interesting prayers in our liturgy. By its very nature, its recitation is mandated on a regular (i.e., monthly) basis, but it is not directly attached to any specific day or date. Further, it has numerous other practices associated with it, many of which lead to various halakhic quandaries and questions. One such aspect of *Kiddush Levanah* is its identification with *Kabbalat Penei Ha-Shekhinah* – accepting, or welcoming, so to speak, the Divine Presence.

The text of and the source for saying *Kiddush Levanah* appears in the *gemara* in *Sanhedrin* (42a). But before presenting the text, the *gemara* records the following statement:

R. Acha ben Chanina also said in the name of R. Assi in R. Yochanan’s name: Whoever pronounces the benediction over the new moon in its due time welcomes, as it were, the Presence of the *Shekhinah*, for one passage states [regarding the new month], “*ha-chodesh ha-zeh*” – “this month” (*Shemot* 12:2); whilst elsewhere it is said [regarding those who perceived the Divine Presence], “*zeh Keili ve-anveihu*” – “this is my God, and I will glorify Him.” (*Shemot* 15:2)

The *gemara* thus adduces by means of a *gezeirah shavah* that making the *berakhah* upon seeing the new moon is like accepting the Divine Presence.

Leaving aside the halakhic issue of precisely what “in its due time” refers to,<sup>552</sup> the obvious question is what this particular *mitzvah/-berakhah* has to do with accepting the *Shekhinah*. The *berakhah* does contain -passages which acknowledge God’s mastery over Creation, suggesting that the Divine Presence can be perceived through the universe, and thus touches upon the theme of God’s kingship; however, there are other *berakhot* whose recitation is not compared to *Kabbalat Penei Ha--Shekhinah* despite their containing similar themes of God’s omnipotence.<sup>553</sup>

The *Pilpula Charifta*, a commentary to the Rosh written by R. Yom Tov Lipman Heller (1578–1654, author of the *Tosafot Yom Tov*), quotes the students of Rabbenu Yonah who explain that God is not visible to the human eye but His glory is rather revealed through His wondrous deeds and through the salvation which He provides; similarly, He reveals Himself through bringing the new moon back each and every month. Hence, when one recognizes and recites a blessing concerning the new moon each month, one is reminded of God’s revelation and can thus be likened to one engaged in *Kabbalat Penei Ha-Shekhinah*.<sup>554</sup> The Me’iri, in his commentary to that *gemara*, notes that one who recites this *-berakhah* reflects a deep understanding of and relationship with the on-going renewal of Creation.

Along similar, but more metaphorical lines, the Maharsha (R. Shmuel Eidels, 1555–1631) writes in his commentary to our *gemara* in *Sanhedrin* that nowadays, because we are in exile, the Jewish people do not merit to witness God’s Presence. The return each month of the new moon, however, suggests the idea that the Jewish people

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<sup>552</sup>. The *gemara* itself there goes on to explore this.

<sup>553</sup>. Compare, for example, the *berakhot* of *Keriyat Shema*.

<sup>554</sup>. *Sanhedrin* 5:1.

too will one day return, will be renewed as a nation, and will once again experience the revelation of the Divine Presence. The recitation of *Kiddush Levanah* on the new moon is thus a reminder that one day, the Jews will once again be able to stand in the splendor of the *Shekhinah*. At that point we will literally enjoy *Kabbalat Penei Ha-Shekhinah* – whereas our recitation of the *berakhah* nowadays is only as if we have already done so.

The *Anaf Yosef*, cited in the *Siddur Otzar Ha-Tefillot* on *Kiddush Levanah*, as well as R. Yaakov Emden, both learn that this -practice -represents a polemical idea. The *Anaf Yosef's* claim is that we are counter-ing those who affirm that God cannot control the world because the world predates Him. By highlighting the moon's constant shift, we demonstrate that God in fact continues to guide nature, which is thus indeed part of His dominion. In R. Yaakov Emden's commentary on the *gemara* in *Sanhedrin*, he asserts that the moon itself is compared to *Shekhinah* and that the *berakhah* that we make as an expression of thanks to God for creating the celestial beings from which man benefits is itself a manifestation of *Kabbalat Penei Ha-Shekhinah*. At the same time, we are highlighting the fact that God does not actually reside in the moon.

After presenting this connection between *Kiddush Levanah* and *Kabbalat Penei Ha-Shekhinah*, the *gemara* cites the statement of Abaye that the *berakhah* must be recited while standing. This ruling is codified by the Rambam,<sup>555</sup> though he does not elaborate upon the reason. Rabbenu Mano'ach (d. 1265) in his commentary on the Rambam there, states that this blessing is actually a form of testimony about God's -*Shekhinah*; since in Jewish law, all testimony in court must be recited while standing,<sup>556</sup> so too one is required to stand here as well. The -*Shulchan Arukh* likewise codifies this ruling.<sup>557</sup>

In addition to all of the above, perhaps the following explanation may be suggested for both the connection between *Kiddush Levanah* and *Kabbalat Penei Ha-Shekhinah* as well as the practice to stand for this *berakhah*. The idea that when one performs a particular *mitzvah* he is considered as if he is accepting the *Shekhinah* is found in very few instances. Most notably, the *Yerushalmi*<sup>558</sup> states that one who greets one's *rebbe* (and other *talimidei chakhamim* and older people) is considered to be accepting the Divine Presence. In addition, we also find this statement regarding someone who properly observes the *mitzvah* of *tzitzit*; he too is viewed as if he were *mekabeil penei Ha-Shekhinah*.<sup>559</sup> What is the common denominator among these *mitzvot*?

In all three cases, by doing what he is doing, the person is experiencing a manifestation of the Divine Presence. One's *rebbe*, a Torah scholar, who speaks and studies the word of God and imparts it to others, clearly embodies the spirit of God, who is of course the supreme teacher of Torah.<sup>560</sup> One who sees his *rebbe* is therefore likened to one who sees the *Shekhinah*. Likewise, the color of the *tzitzit* is designed to make sure that one is reminded of the Heavenly throne;<sup>561</sup> when one looks at the *tzitzit*, then one is similarly connected to the *Shekhinah*. Along these lines, the moon too is in some way a manifestation of God. The Ramban writes at the end of *Parashat Bo* (*Shemot* 13:16) that the major, obvious miracles such as those that took place at the time of the Exodus from Egypt help us appreciate the day-to-day miracles which we call nature; understanding this is a true foundation of Torah. The Ramban then explains that we must learn that everything in the world is controlled by God and is thus in a sense related to our keeping His *mitzvot*. Based on this idea, we can perhaps suggest that when we recite *Kiddush Levanah*, we are declaring our recognition of the fact that God controls nature (which in turn leads us to a better commitment to observing His *mitzvot*) and this too is thus a form of *Kabbalat Penei Ha-Shekhinah*.

This approach will also explain Abaye's aforementioned assertion in the above-cited *gemara* that the *berakhah* of *Kiddush Levanah* must be recited while standing. The way respect is shown towards one's *rebbe* (and towards Torah sages and the elderly in general) is by standing when in their presence.<sup>562</sup> Likewise, the *mitzvah* of putting on *tzitzit* is one of those that must be performed while standing.<sup>563</sup> We may therefore conclude that an act which entails being

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<sup>555</sup>. *Hilkhot Berakhot* 10:17.

<sup>556</sup>. See Rambam, *Hilkhot Sanhedrin* 21:3 and *Shulchan Arukh C.M.* 17:1.

<sup>557</sup>. *O.C.* 426:2.

<sup>558</sup>. *Eiruvin* 5:1.

<sup>559</sup>. *Yerushalmi Berakhot* 1:2.

<sup>560</sup>. See *Berakhot* 21b. See also the position of R. Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, as presented by R. Hershel Schachter in *Nefesh Ha-Rav* (Jerusalem, 5754), 70.

<sup>561</sup>. *Menachot* 43b.

<sup>562</sup>. See Rambam, *Hilkhot Talmud Torah* 5:9 and *Shulchan Arukh Y.D.* 242:30.

<sup>563</sup>. *Shulchan Arukh O.C.* 8:1.

*mekabeil penei Ha-Shekhinah* requires standing in order to show the proper respect. Regarding *-Kiddush Levanah* too, then, we must stand as we recite this *berakhah* which relates to our perceiving a manifestation of God's Presence.

## Contributors

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