

Quantitative Frumkeit and Assorted Pitfalls of Piety (A Kiddush Levanah Meditation)

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At the time of Kiddush Levanah, a Unity is reached which took place at the giving of the Torah. . . . Through it there is an awakening of desire and joy to one who has a sense of the Divine, in order that he may then experience a spiritual delight and the Creator's proximity . . .

—*Meor Eynaim, Parshat Bereishit*,
R. Nahum of Tschernobil.

The new moon teaches us that after all our spiritual travels . . . we ascend to One Elevated Line . . . and then desire a rebirth which begins with a Light, small in quantity . . . the New Moon; and from there shines forth like the sun in its strength . . .

—*Rosh Milin*,
R. Abraham Issac Kook.

Kiddush Levanah is perhaps unique among the mitzvot in that the optimum time for its recital is an open halachic question, debated throughout the centuries until the present. Unlike other time-bound recitals which, of course, are subject to assorted disagreements as well, *Kiddush Levanah's* debate refuses to yield simple guidelines concerning its most elementary time requirements and obstinately denies the *machmir* desirous of fulfilling all opinions any means to achieve his "lofty" goal.

The problem begins in the twentieth chapter of *Masechet Soferim* where we read, "We do not bless the moon other than on *motza'ei Shabbat* when one is *מבושם* and his clothes are nice . . ." (*בשמים* is interpreted to mean "after one has blessed the *שמים*").

This would be simple enough if not for the fact that Rabbeinu Yonah at the end of the *Perek Tefillat HaShachar* in *Berachot* has a different version of the above text. His version reads merely, "We bless the moon *משתבשם* . . ." There is no reference in the text to Saturday night. Rabbeinu Yonah thereupon offers three explanations of *משתבשם*: 1) It is referring to Saturday night and *בשמים*. This possibility he rejects asking, "why should the matter depend on *motza'ei Shabbat*? Occasionally Rosh Chodesh is the first day of the week, so why wait until *motza'ei Shabbat*?" 2) *בושם* means canopy, so we are forbidden to bless the moon until it is as large as a canopy, emitting "light around itself." This opinion is not stated in terms of a precise number of days, nor is it formally rejected by Rabbeinu Yonah. 3) *בושם* means sweet, so we may not bless the moon until "its light is sweet, man being capable of deriving benefit from it." This opinion is accepted by Rabbeinu Yonah and is expressed in halachic terms as being "two or three days after the New Moon."

The *Tur* (426) quotes our version of *Masechet Soferim* and leaves the matter there, implying that *Kiddush Levanah* should not be said until *motza'ei Shabbat* but that it *may* be said beginning the first of the month. However, the *Beit Yoseph*, after citing Rabbeinu Yonah, concludes that the latter's ruling of waiting "two or three days" was not based solely on his alternate version of the text but on logic as well, and concludes, therefore, that it is best to wait the two or three day time period.

Two further subtleties are introduced by the *Beit Yoseph*. First he quotes the *Terumat HaDeshen*, who qualifies the *motza'ei Shabbat* imperative, limiting it to only such occasions when ample time will remain after Saturday night until the halfway point in the month (after which the blessing may no longer be said) in order to allow for the possibility of clouds covering the moon. "Ample time" is left vague in this opinion, although reference is made to "three or four days." Second, R. Karo quotes *Shaarei Orah*, who, on the basis of Kabbalah, rules that *Kiddush Levanah* should not be recited until seven days into the month.

It would thus seem that ideally the best time for *Kiddush Levanah* is on *motza'ei Shabbat* after seven days. Yet the matter is not so clear, for according to the *Terumat HaDeshen* we must allow "ample time" for possible cloudiness. This, combined with Rabbeinu Yonah, who completely denies the *motza'ei Shabbat* imperative, makes the issue a complex one.

The *Shulchan Aruch* (426:1,4) codifies merely the *motza'ei Shabbat* imperative and the Kabbalistic injunction to wait seven days. Rav Moshe Isserles (426:1), apparently following the *Terumat HaDeshen*, says that we should wait until *motza'ei Shabbat* only if it occurs before the tenth of the month. The *Mishnah Berurah* (426:4:20) departs yet further, stating that most later authorities reject the seven day stipulation and that the Vilna Gaon among others even negated the *motza'ei Shabbat* ruling. This group rules in favor of *Kiddush Levanah* at the earliest possible time after three days. The *Mishnah Berurah* therefore concludes against the seven day ruling but leaves the *motza'ei Shabbat* question open.

The Vilna Gaon (*Biur HaGra*, 426) considers delaying until *motza'ei Shabbat* to be a violation of the rule "performance of a commandment must not be delayed" (*Yevamot* 39b). The *Chayei Adam* (118:14) seems to go the furthest with this, rejecting even the need for a minyan in order to recite *Kiddush Levanah* immediately after three days.

Although aware of the whole "Rabbeinu Yonah tradition" not to delay *Kiddush Levanah*, the *Shulchan Aruch* remains with his *motza'ei Shabbat* decision. This intriguing fact may simply be due to his plain reading of our version of *Masechet Soferim*. It may, however, be due to the rather powerful statement which R. Karo received from his Angelic Instructor (*Maggid*) to the effect that "all of one's success in a given month is dependent on reciting *Kiddush Levanah* on *motza'ei Shabbat*" (*Kaph HaChayim*, 426:2:21). These sentiments are echoed on Kabbalistic grounds in the *Pri Etz Chayim* (Shaar 19, chapter 3).

Similarly, the *poskim* most influenced by Kabbalah all conclude in favor of the seven day imperative. Among them, to cite a few, are Ben Ish Chay (*Parshat Vayikra*, 23), Chidah, *Machzik Berachah* (6,182) and the Baal HaTanya in his *Siddur*. This is also an

opinion heartily expressed by the *Beit Yoseph's* *maggid* in which the dire spiritual effects of reciting *Kiddush Levanah* before seven days are spelled out in vivid detail (*Maggid Mesharim, Shir Ha-Shirim*).

Hence, as stated at the outset, *Kiddush Levanah* simply cannot be performed at a time that will meet the requirements of all authorities. Either one goes with the plain meaning of our text in *Masechet Soferim* (with added reinforcement from Kabbalah), performing *Kiddush Levanah* on *motza'ei Shabbat* (with or without the option of adopting the seven day imperative), or one sides with those who, based on the Rabbeinu Yonah (to greater or lesser degrees), aim at the earliest possible performance of the mitzvah.

There is strong emphasis in *halacha* upon *Kiddush Levanah* as a mitzvah to be performed joyously. Rav Moshe Isserles in *Darchei Moshe* (426:3) discusses the importance of song and dance after the recital. This is because the New Moon's appearance symbolizes *Klal Yisrael's* re-establishing of its unique link with God. (For more on this see *Maharsha, Sanhedrin* 42a, and for a lengthy treatment of the matter see *Meor Aynaim, Bereishit*, pp.5-9). Accordingly, Rama prohibits reciting *Kiddush Levanah* before the Ninth of Av or Yom Kippur, and at the conclusion of the Ninth of Av or any other fast day (426:2). These stipulations are somewhat modified in the *Acharonim*, but the original intent is maintained.

A particular controversy surrounds Yom Kippur. The Rama (see above) prohibits reciting *Kiddush Levanah* before Yom Kippur because, as the *Mishnah Berurah* explains, "We are afraid of the power of judgment and are not joyous" (426:2:9). The *Aruch HaShulchan* quotes other authorities who reject this view, urging that we should not delay mitzvot in order to perform them "better" (הידור) at a later time. He concludes that we should follow this latter opinion (426:8). The *Mishnah Berurah* also sounds a dissenting note in the *Biur Halachah*, where he quotes the *Levush* to the effect that it is better to recite *Kiddush Levanah* before Yom Kippur in order to increase our merits before judgment.

Here again one cannot be *יוצא לכל הדעות*. Either one opts for the added *הידור* of *Motza'ei Yom Kippur* joy or tries to add to one's merits by performing the mitzvah as early as possible.

It is not surprising that on both of the above discussed disagreements we find that Chasidic custom tends towards those *poskim* who favor delaying *Kiddush Levanah* in order to perform it after seven days or on *motza'ei Shabbat* or after *Yom Kippur*. Although certainly heavily influenced by Kabbalistic motivations, Chasidim in general inclined towards what we may label "qualitative" as opposed to "quantitative" performance of mitzvot. Doing a mitzvah in the proper mood (i.e., *motza'ei Yom Kippur* or *Shabbat* joy) or in deference to Kabbalah took precedence over early or (and this latter point steps beyond the context of this article) more exacting (*לחומרא*) performance.

The approach made legendary by Brisk, but popular in many yeshiva circles, of trying to fulfill as many *shitot* as possible was decidedly not that of Chasidim. Aside from certain areas of *halacha* which the kabbalah tradition accentuated, Chasidim sought to better (in terms of inner spiritual content) perform the basic mitzvah as opposed to endlessly searching for *chumrot*. R. Aaron Karliner expressed this sentiment when he wrote, "A person should think constantly of God's greatness in order to love and fear him. And one should not seek to fulfill exacting stringencies (*דקדוקים יתרים*) in all that he does, for this is the advice of the Evil Impulse. He strives to make a man fearful that he has not fulfilled his obligation in some small way. . . ." ^{1, 2}

Today, obviously, the matter is vastly different. The phrase "institutionalized charisma" has been used³ to describe the current status of chasidic Rebbes who today draw upon traditional hierarchical forms to lead their flocks, as opposed to the populist spirituality of the movement's early days. So, too, in their approach to mitzvot, chasidim have "institutionalized" their concern with spiritual quality, e.g., delaying the performance of mitzvot as part of a now well trodden ritual long since barren of the intentions of the practice's originators. What remains are the *outer forms of qualitative concern*: *mikvah*, Psalms, song, etc., devoid of their inner spiritual passion.

The hardening of the arteries of qualitative "observance" has paralleled the yeshiva world's renaissance of *chumrah* performance. Both these phenomena yield much in the realm of doing but little in the soul of our deeds. We are left looking back towards the fathers of *chasidut* or the early *musar* leaders in order to derive our spiritual sustenance. Surrounded by the structure of mitzvah resurrection, we are forced to grope in past centuries for a renewal of its spirit. Rav Kook, who clearly sensed this need, claimed that the solution would come from highly controversial sources.⁴ Rabbi Hirsch felt that an obsession with rote performance would fall away as part of a general enlightenment sweeping European man.⁵ History has yet to prove them right . . . And so we sit, waiting for a spiritual awakening to kindle Jewish souls as we enter post-modernity.

NOTES

1. *Beit Aharon*, Introduction. This quote was shown to me by Rabbi Chai Yitzchak Twersky, the present Rochmistrivka Rebbe of Boro Park. He contrasted it with the approach of R. Yehoshua Leib Diskin, who would spend the entire Rosh HaShanah afternoon listening to alternative soundings of the shofar, thus defeating the the mitzvah's simple essence and purpose in Rabbi Twersky opinion.

2. As in any large and fragmented movement, ideas varied among Chasidim. Tschernobil, for example, greatly emphasized assorted rituals and recitals, while Polish (as opposed to Galician) Rebbes always affirmed the original qualitative approach.

3. See for example Stephen Sharot, "Hasidism and the Routinization of Charisma" in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, December, 1980, vol. 19, no. 4. This article, although scandalously free of primary sources and guilty of several first-rate factual errors, is a commendable effort detailing an aspect of Chasidism's development often overlooked by armchair academicians.

4. Rav Kook writes that prior to the Baal Shem Tov, the Jewish people were in "danger of spurning altogether every vestige left it from the treasure of spiritual inspiration. . . . This was felt by the father of Chasidism in whom the divine inspiration was a living soul force." After describing the Vilna Gaon's animosity towards Chasidism in a Hegelian sense, seeing it as having "salutory results . . . leading to a renewal of practical work for the rebuilding of our homeland" (a painful Messianic reductionism of history and spirituality to this reader's mind), he returns to his frequent theme of viewing the physical rebuilders of Israel as "eventually returning to her (Israel's) spiritual source, the source of vision and prophecy." This will happen, we are told, after "all free probing and speculation, after a lapse of discipline and endless experiments in

free life styles." To which our only response is, maybe, but then again, maybe not. (מאמרי הראייה, Jerusalem, 5744, pp. 6-7. The essay these quotes were taken from is entitled דרך התחיה and is not advisable reading material for faint-hearted provincialists!).

5. Rabbi Hirsch's romanticization of the nineteenth century ("an age so enlightened and civilized as the present") led him to believe "the more closely Judaism identifies itself, in spite of all its peculiarities, with all that is good and true in European culture, the more fully will it perform its own Jewish task . . . (we will make our youth) better Jews by making accessible to them the treasures of general culture." (*Judaism Eternal*, Vol. I, Soncino Press, 1956. This essay, "Relation of General to Jewish Education," should also be kept away from the frail of heart as well as from contemporary Hirschians!) As to the point made, one wonders what remains of "European culture" on the continent brought to heel by the twin sisters of Capitalism and Communism.