

The Mysterious Moon - an Analysis of *Kiddush Levana*

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A flash of lightning, a breathtaking vista, a heartwarming rainbow, the endless sea - these are among the many natural phenomena for which we recite a ברכה upon encountering them. Challenging us not to waste these rare moments of wonder, *Chazal*, in their wisdom, mandated that we channel the awe and inspiration we feel when experiencing these natural events into praising Hashem and recognizing His hand in the creation of the world. These brachot are referred to as ברכות הראיה - literally, “blessings of seeing.”

There is one ברכה that seems to be a part of this list, but at the same time, stands out as unique - ברכת הלבנה - the ברכה we recite upon seeing the new moon, also known as קדוש לבנה. While this is a ברכה that we recite upon witnessing a natural phenomenon, as are all of the other ברכות הראיה, we treat this ברכה differently. For example, we generally recite קדוש לבנה together with the community and we deliberately try to recite it on מוצאי שבת. In addition, we cradle this ברכה amid chapters of Tehillim, certain pesukim repeated multiple times, and various homiletic statements of *chazal*. And finally, *chazal* teach us that כל “Whosoever blesses the month (moon) in its proper time, it as if he has encountered the presence of Hashem.”¹

Let us examine this ברכה more carefully and attempt to understand its nature and its significance in the cycle of our religious lives.²

There are two very different approaches in understanding the nature of this ברכה. The more common and intuitive understanding is that essentially קדוש לבנה focuses on the new moon and the cycle of renewal. Observing the waxing crescent moon gives us hope that life can always be fresh, that strength and hope can be renewed. According to this, the ברכה over the moon is essentially a type of ברכת שבח והודאה - a blessing a praise and thanks to Hashem.

A second way to understand the nature of קדוש לבנה is that the ברכה focuses on a different aspect of the moon - the light of the moon that illuminates the night and enables us to function even at a time of darkness. As we benefit from its light, we recite the ברכה expressing our appreciation for this brilliant natural phenomenon. According to this, the ברכה over the moon is more akin to a type of ברכת הנהנין - a blessing recited prior to benefitting from this world. (Although, for some reason, קדוש לבנה is recited **after** seeing the moon, and not before.)

We can detect these contrasting approaches in various halachik sources and disputes.

What is the latest time to recite קדוש לבנה?

The Gemara in Sanhedrin, while discussing the mitzvah of קדוש לבנה, inquires as to the latest time one may recite the ברכה over the new moon.³ The gemara quotes the opinion of Rabbi Yochanan (as transmitted by Rav Acha bar Chanina in the name of Rav Asi), who says that one may recite the ברכה “until the [moon’s] blemish is filled. - עד שנתמלא פגימתה.” The Gemara then records two ways of understanding what Rabbi Yochanan meant: Rav Yehuda understood that one may recite the ברכה until seven days have passed since the new moon, meaning until the crescent moon is “filled in” and it looks like a semi-circle. The students of Neharda understood that one may recite the ברכה until sixteen days have passed since the new moon, meaning until the full moon.

1. סנהדרין מב.

2 This topic was dealt with previously by Rabbi Brian Gopin in Ohel Avraham V. 6 with a different focus.

3 סנהדרין מב.

What is the underlying reason for their argument? We can suggest that according to Rav Yehuda, who says that the ברכה can only be said during the first seven days of the month, the ברכה over the moon is essentially a ברכה about the new moon, or the renewal of the moon. Rav Yehuda believes that the ברכה can only be recited while the moon is still considered new - during the first seven days of the month when the moon is still in its crescent form.

The students of Neharda on the other hand hold that the ברכה is about the light of the moon, and therefore, as long as the light is increasing (until the moon is full) we may recite the ברכה.

2) What is the **earliest** time to recite קדוש לבנה?

The Mechaber⁴ writes that one should not recite קדוש לבנה until seven days have passed from the מולד (the actual moment of the new moon). The Mishna Berura notes that most *poskim* disagree and allow one to say the ברכה after only three days.⁵ The Rambam implies that one may say the ברכה from the moment one first sees the new moon - meaning at the very beginning of the month (and this may even be preferable⁶).

If one sees קדוש לבנה as a ברכה over the renewal of the moon, it is permissible and perhaps preferable to recite the ברכה while the moon is merely a sliver, at its infancy and in a completely “new” state - from day one. But if the ברכה is about the benefit we receive from its light, it is better to wait until the moon gives off a significant amount of light - day seven (or day three). We may even suggest that according to this approach, theoretically, one should wait until day fifteen to recite the ברכה, but for the practical consideration that the moon may not be visible on any given day. Only because of this concern, it is preferable not to delay excessively.⁷

3) Does one have to actually benefit from the light of the moon?

An interesting and poignant question was posed to the Birkei Yosef⁸ regarding someone who was imprisoned during a time of persecution of the Jewish community. The captive wanted to know if he was allowed to recite קדוש לבנה upon seeing the moon through a very narrow window from his place of captivity. Perhaps he was not allowed because the window was too narrow for him to benefit from the moonlight. The Birkei Yosef suggested that benefit from the light is not a crucial condition for reciting the ברכה;⁹ the only prerequisite is to see the moon.

This seems to accord with the approach that the focus of the ברכה is the renewal of the moon - as a result, seeing the moon is enough. According to this, it is plausible to allow one to recite the ברכה even during the daytime, if he can see the moon - even though he receives no benefit during the daylight.

There are those who would disagree with the conclusion of the Birkei Yosef. In addition, regarding reciting the ברכה during the daytime, the Rema¹⁰ expressly bids us to wait until nightfall and he specifically emphasizes the importance of receiving benefit from the light of the moon, implying that the moonlight is the key element in the ברכה.

4 שולחן ערוך אורח חיים סימן תכו סעיף ד'

5 משנה ברורה שם סעיף קטן כ'

6 (הלכות ברכות פרק י הלכה יז) אם לא בירך עליה בליל הראשון מברך עליה עד ששה עשר יום בחדש עד שתמלא פגימתה.

7 Generally, our practice is to wait three days from the מולד to recite the bracha.

8 ברכי יוסף אורח חיים סימן תכו

9 He proves this from the Rambam above who allows a person to say the bracha at the beginning of the month even though the moon does not provide significant light so early in the month.

10 אורח חיים סימן תכו סעיף א'

If one cannot see the actual moon, but its light benefits him, can he recite the ברכה?

An interesting case is raised about the opposite scenario regarding someone whose view of the moon is obstructed by a building, but he is able to benefit from the moonlight - may he recite קדוש לבנה?¹¹ The שו"ת ציץ אליעזר suggests that according to some views it would be permissible to recite the ברכה. This view clearly conceives of קדוש לבנה as a ברכה over the light of the moon.

5) קדוש לבנה or ברכת הלבנה?

We find two terms used to describe this ברכה - ברכת הלבנה and קדוש לבנה. The term ברכת הלבנה makes no mention of the new moon and therefore implies that the ברכה is about the moon itself - perhaps its identifying feature - its light. The term קדוש לבנה implies that the ברכה focuses on the beginning of the month - reminiscent of the phrase מקודש מקודש proclaimed by בית דין to begin the new month.

The way in which we understand the nature of קדוש לבנה also affects our understanding of the statement of *chazal* quoted earlier that "כל המברך על החדש בזמנו - כאילו מקבל פני שכינה" - "Whosoever blesses the month (moon) in its proper time, it as if he has encountered the presence of Hashem."

If our focus is the **new** moon, then likewise, the moon reminds us to renew our relationship with Hashem. As the moon reconnects with the sun, we reach out to reconnect with Hashem. On the other hand if we experience קדוש לבנה as a ברכה on the moonlight, then as we contemplate the moon and its ability to light the world at a time of darkness, we are reminded that even during trying and challenging times or when we are feeling distant from Him, Hashem is always with us and our connection with Him is ever present.

Two personalities are mentioned in the liturgy of קדוש לבנה - Yaakov *Avinu* and Dovid *HaMelech*. Yaakov is alluded to when we recite ברוך בוראך, ברוך קונך, ברוך עושך, ברוך יוצרך. The first letters of the words (not including ברוך) spell Yaakov's name. Dovid is of course mentioned when we say דוד מלך ישראל חי וקים. We can suggest that these two personalities correspond to the two views and aspects of קדוש לבנה that we outlined above. Yaakov *Avinu* corresponds to the theme of moonlight as Yaakov understood the importance of connecting to Hashem during difficult times - while in *galut* away from his parents and the land of Israel, while suffering over the loss of Yosef, and while in *galut* again in Egypt.¹² From Yaakov we learn that we can connect with Hashem at all times. Dovid *HaMelech* corresponds to the theme of renewal as he represents our faith in the renewal of the Jewish People. One day the royal throne will be returned to the house of Dovid with the arrival of משיח.

May we be *zoche* this year to feel the presence of Hashem in all of our personal and communal endeavors and may we continually renew and reinvigorate our relationships - with friends, with family and with הקדוש ברוך הוא.

שנה טובה.

¹¹ שו"ת ציץ אליעזר חלק יב סימן כא

¹² In addition, we see that Yaakov symbolizes having faith in dark times, as shown by the statement of *chazal* that Yaakov instituted *tefillat arvit*.