

Weekly Teaching

April 12, 2019



Seder Birkat Hamazon (Mannheim, 1736)

The Jewish calendar is lunar; from new moon to new moon.

There is a special blessing, *Kiddush Levanah* (Sanctifying the Moon), which is traditionally recited at the end of the first or second Shabbat of each month.

The watercolor drawing above was an 18th century illustration that accompanied the *Kiddush Levanah* text that was included in a prayer booklet that belonged to “Bella from Frankfurt”.

When reciting *Kiddush Levanah* we reaffirm our Jewish commitment to sanctify time, and to assure our celebrating of the Jewish holidays as determined by our lunar calendar.

According to rabbinic legend, the moon was originally the same size as the sun—“God made the two great luminaries.” (Genesis 1:16)

But the moon complained to God: “Two kings cannot share one crown.”

So God told the moon to make herself small. (Talmud)

God’s “diminishment” of the moon was understood by the rabbis as a symbol of God’s own presence being distanced from our own worldly existence; resulting in the many imperfections that would confront our world during human history.

Within Jewish history we have suffered many tragedies, and felt that the Presence of God was too far from us. When we look at the moon, we recall both the distancing of God’s presence and the challenges that have confronted the Jewish People.

Gazing at the moon, either when she’s a new sliver or shining in her fullness, has always been a powerful experience.

Recently I have gazed at the moon and felt even closer than before.

Having grown up with a love of outer space, I was very excited to follow Israel’s launch of its own rocket to the moon. It was a rocket much like the “Wandering Jew”, as it couldn’t take a direct path to the moon.

Instead, the unmanned spacecraft, named *B’reshit* (Genesis), had to travel four million miles so that it could use Earth’s gravitational pull to increase its speed.

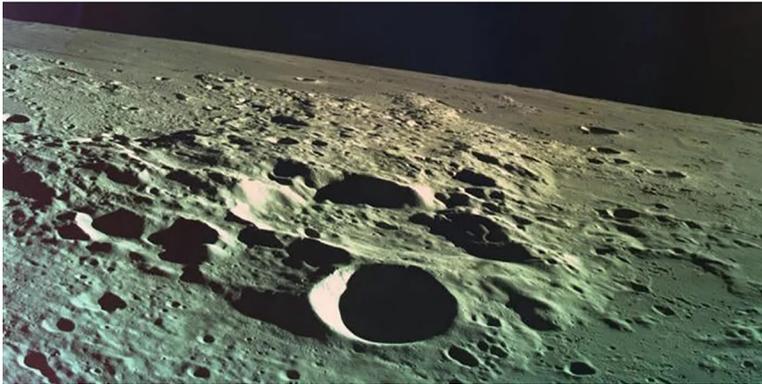
B'reishit's path was the longest lunar mission ever traveled.

While writing this column, *B'reishit* had entered its final orbit and after a set of very complex maneuvers, attempted to land on the Moon.

Unfortunately, the "wandering" Jewish rocket didn't make it to the promised land; its main engine failed and the rocket crashed.

Like the highs and lows of Jewish history, this Israeli rocket has become about the inspiring journey; the Promised Land still needing to be reached.

B'reishit pictures of the moon's surface prior to the crash brought us all closer to the moon; closer to God's Presence.



The surface of the moon as seen by B'reishit moments before it crashed into the lunar surface. (Credit: Space IL)

I think it is especially appropriate that on Sunday, April 28 at 3:00 pm, our congregation will welcome the first Jewish American man in space, astronaut Dr. Jeffrey Hoffman.

Dr. Hoffman was one of the astronauts on the Space Shuttle, flying several missions during the 80's and 90's.

For each of his five missions into space, he took with him several Jewish artifacts; a mezuzah, dreidels, the atarah (crown) of the tallit that his son would wear at his Bar Mitzvah, and on his last mission into space, he took a small Torah scroll.

Dr. Hoffman had the privilege to gaze at the moon physically closer than almost all of humanity, and God's Torah bridged the gap.

The Torah is the tractor beam that pulls God closer to us and we humans closer to God.

Blessed be You, Lord, our God, ruler of all space and time, who with God's word created the galaxies...and with the breath of God's mouth created the hosts of law and time...so they would not change their course...And God said to the moon *levanah*, "Renew yourself!" ...for we are destined to renew ourselves like the moon herself.

Blessed be You, Lord, our God, who makes new the renewing moons...

Amen!

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi Mitch

rabbimitch@templesholom.com