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KIDDUSH LEVANAH ON THE MOON

Joseph Helmreich is the author, most recently, of The Return (St. Martin's Press).

This too is Torah, thought Zalman, as he watched Reb Velvel, his old *rebbe* from the *yeshiva* on the Alter Colony, unlock the sleek platinum tray that contained his organic.

In his youth, Reb Velvel had been married to the legendary Chana Rochel Barzani, the miracle-working “Maiden of Elara,” but it couldn’t last. Later, he sang in a jug band on Enceladus and, some time after that, was known to perform for *cheder* and gentile children alike as a mime on Kepler-185.

“Too colorful,” Rov Sroelov, the *Rosh Yeshiva* on the Alter Colony, had declared. “A *talmid chochom* doesn’t live like a *tummler* or a bohemian, and how much more so a *rebbe!*”

Reb Velvel had even tread in the fraught waters of historical scholarship. One example was his

insistence that not only did *esrogim* not have to be cobalt like the marbly specimens that emerge from the Venusian crop labs, but that the original fruits weren’t even blue. With so much history having been lost or scrambled during the years of the Great Migration from Planet Earth to the stars, one couldn’t be sure, but Reb Velvel’s position was in line with modern academia. Still, it was heavily frowned upon by the *gedolim*, the leading lights of the day.

However, far and away the most controversial aspect of Reb Velvel’s persona and what had eventually led to his banishment from the *yeshiva* was his unceasing talk of *Olam Habah*.

There had been a time when most religious Jews speculated about the World to Come, but that was long ago, back when it had existed not merely as a theoretical concept to be probed by kabbalists and philosophers, but when it was relevant for everyone. Now, however, the mystics and Hasidim had finally been forced to concede to the rational-minded “halachic men” that it truly was this world

alone that mattered in the end. What sense did contemplating the World to Come have when it had been over 800 years since anyone, Jew or gentile, had died?

That was about to change.

Zalman, now a second-year scholar in the *yeshiva's kollel*, had been late to his reunion with his *rebbe*. He had missed the moon shuttle and had to wait two hours for the next one. The ship was mostly empty save for a couple of aluminum miners absorbed in a game of three-card poker who showed little interest in the pensive-looking Jew across the aisle. It would take six and a half hours to reach the moon from the Alter Colony, and for most of the 247,000-mile journey, Zalman managed to avoid thinking about the trip's purpose. He scanned all of Tractate *Bava Metzia* and its respective commentaries 18 times and occasionally stared out the window at the nebulae and star clusters that garnished the view. At one point, he interrupted Tosfos's discussion of whether angels can hear people's thoughts to watch a bright red comet streak across the starfield, before recalling the sages' harsh condemnation of one who interrupts his studies to gaze upon nature's beauty.

There had been a time when Reb Velvel had been like a father to Zalman, but in the years since the former's dismissal, they had seen one another only sporadically. The last time had been at a fundraising *melavah malkah* four years ago when, conscious of Rov Sroelov's ever-watchful optical sensors, Zalman had been a little rude to his old *rebbe*—outwardly respectful, yes, but curt and rushed. He'd been in that curious, youthful phase

when rigid conformity masks itself as independence, and behaving exactly as your *Rosh Yeshiva* desires can seem like the height of self-actualization.

Reb Velvel hadn't seemed offended, and Zalman now suspected he likely wasn't the first former student to have slighted Reb Velvel in some way.

Had his old *rebbe's* gait been a little stooped that night? Had his rollers moved more creakily in their drivetrain? Zalman couldn't remember now, and perhaps it had been too early.

"The holy Kotzker didn't fear sickness, he feared the *coddling*," Reb Velvel once said after Zalman, then his student, had casually inquired about his *rebbe's* well-being while they pored over Tractate *Gittin* as the moons of Saturn cast spindly shadows on the cracked study house walls.

Speaking on the fone-com four days ago, Reb Velvel had been more direct: "They tell me it's Crepitus."

This by itself was not cause for any major alarm. Zalman's own uncle had endured Crepitus, a disease in which the extracellular fluid meant to indefinitely preserve your organic spoils, and your organic begins to rot inside your machine. Fatal if unattended, the standard treatment was to simply have your damaged organic removed and replaced with an artificial one, an operation usually completed within minutes. Zalman had actually been present for his uncle's procedure and permitted to watch as a team of surgery bots, programmed just

that afternoon, had encircled his uncle with wrenches and pliers. A boy at the time, he had turned away right before the moment of retrieval.

Rev Velvel, the onetime *ilui* of the Atlas District, had ruled for himself that this solution was absolutely forbidden.

“But *Rebbe*, it’s the only choice,” Zalman had protested on the fone. “If saving your life means swapping out a lump of flesh for a sphere of polyurethane, what’s the big deal?”

“Big deal? Reb Zalmy, that ‘lump of flesh’ was fashioned directly by God Himself!” his *rebbe* had shouted. “It is the seat of the *neshamah!* If I replace it, my machine should survive, okay, but who’s to say my soul won’t get left behind? That your new and improved Reb Velvel, though no less incredibly handsome than before, won’t be anything more than a fancy *golem?*”

Zalman struggled for a response. He knew Reb Velvel had turned to him because he knew he was, at bottom, still a faithful *talmid* who would ultimately help carry out his wishes, and this frustrated Zalman all the more and made him fight that much harder. “*Pikuach nefesh docheh ha-kol!*” he stammered. “Preserving life trumps everything!”

“*Nefesh, Zalmy,*” Reb Velvel shot back. “Preserving your *soul* trumps everything.”

Zalman sighed. “Even if *Rebbe* thinks the operation is forbidden, can’t he let himself rely on the majority

opinion that it’s not?”

But he knew there was no point in continuing to debate, that his *rebbe’s* whole argument was just a smokescreen. Reb Velvel, he realized, wasn’t really afraid that his soul would somehow get left behind by his body if he had the operation. He was afraid that it *wouldn’t*.

Reb Velvel yearned for *Olam Habah*.

Now, as teacher and student stood reunited on Mons Huygens, the moon’s tallest peak, staring out onto a gorgeous blanket of stars, Zalman could see the look of sheer rapture on his *rebbe’s* face. They had met at the moon’s main shuttle station several hours before and taken a taxi to this secluded spot. As the automated cab had maneuvered its way through the barren, chalky terrain, Reb Velvel seemed to glow with an anticipation that appeared to be now nearing its apex.

With his gaze still fixed on the view, Reb Velvel addressed his student:

“When Moshe Rabbeinu died by a Divine kiss, God Himself performed the burial. I don’t expect to be so honored, Reb Zalmy, but if the *Aibishter* does arrive holding a shovel, consider yourself off the hook!”

With an impish grin, the *rebbe* then began the complex and lethal machinations for unlocking his own organic.

After a moment, he paused his work and his smile

vanished, replaced by a look of consternation.

Zalman watched him closely. Reb Velvel didn't move, and a faint hope began to swell in the student's proverbial chest. Was his *rebbe* having second thoughts?

"My neural links have begun to break down. What's the date?"

"May 6th, *Rebbe*."

"*Hebrew*."

"The 8th of *Iyyar*."

Reb Velvel remained silent another moment. Then:

"I haven't said *Kiddush Levanah*."

Kiddush Levanah referred to an ancient monthly ceremony for sanctifying the lunar moon. The ritual, once ubiquitous, had less relevance today without the world whose nights the moon had illuminated, but it was still performed by many pious Jews as a remembrance to the past, though no longer with a formal blessing.

"Does *Rebbe* want to do *Kiddush Levanah*?" asked Zalman.

"Do I *want* to? It's a *mitzvah* and I'm still here, right?"

So then and there, standing on the very moon that

had once determined the entire Jewish calendar and in the last moments of his physical existence, Reb Velvel, joined by his loyal student Zalman, performed the sacred ritual of *Kiddush Levanah*.

"Blessed is your Molder, blessed is your Maker, blessed is your Owner, blessed is your Creator," Reb Velvel intoned while Zalman mumbled softly along.

Zalman, however, was becoming rather distracted. He had begun to realize he was facing a serious halachic *shailah*, a genuine legal quandary.

The next portion of the prayer, directed at the very same moon they were standing on, required one to stretch toward the heavens and declare, "Just as I dance toward You but cannot touch You, so may none of my enemies touch me for evil." But to say this phrase on the moon was highly controversial. His own *Rosh Yeshiva*, for instance, the esteemed Rov Sroelov, considered it utterly forbidden. What do you mean, you can't touch the moon? You're stepping on it right now! In Rov Sroelov's view, reciting this phrase to the moon, from the moon, was entirely illogical and implied a conception of *halachah* that was too theoretical, divorced from reality.

Reb Velvel, on the other hand, felt completely the opposite. For him, to follow tradition and recite this seemingly contradictory line only demonstrated that *halachah* was utterly transcendent, unbound by specific real-world scenarios.

So what was Zalman to do? Should he follow the

ruling of his *Rosh Yeshiva* or his *rebbe*?

In point of fact Rov Sroelov's logic seemed more convincing to him. However, Zalman ruled for himself that in this specific case, he would abide by the *minhag ha-makom*, the local custom, and act in accordance with Reb Velvel. On the Alter Colony, Rov Sroelov was certainly the final halachic authority. But here, at this moment, could anyone possibly doubt that Reb Velvel was the Rov of the moon?

When the ceremony was complete, Reb Velvel turned to his student: "It was nice to do one last *mitzvah*."

"One hour of repentance and good deeds is more precious than the entire World to Come," Zalman reminded him, quoting the sages.

Reb Velvel only smiled. Without another word, he returned to his primary task and, after several minutes of tinkering and false starts, finally succeeded in unlocking his organic, the small lumpy piece of flesh that represented the last biological link to early humanity.

About an hour later, as Zalman cast the last shovelfuls of lunar soil into Reb Velvel's grave, he thought of his *rebbe's* soul making its final journey from the physical world to the True World. Whatever does or doesn't happen after one's death, Zalman felt absolutely certain of one thing: his *rebbe* had already achieved immortality. When he had cradled Reb Velvel's shrouded organic in his arms, the very one he'd once argued was so replaceable,

he'd been struck by a profound sense of its eternity. Its flesh might wither and rot and even fade to nothing, but the fact of its existence and the *kedushah* it embodied could never be erased. Perhaps, Zalman thought, that was the true mark of immortality: not what would or wouldn't be remembered, but what was truly *worth* remembering. It was this quality that ultimately defined who or what had attained sanctity and genuine permanence.

Zalman planned to spend the next several hours reciting psalms by the freshly dug grave, but first he had to recite the evening service. In another age, he reflected, he might have been praying amongst a large throng of worshippers, and there would be wailing and torn garments and speeches memorializing the genius and piety of his holy teacher, as they used to make for great rabbis in the old days. Zalman didn't think his *rebbe* would have cared much either way.

At the close of his prayers, he turned to bow in the direction of the lonely, gray, spherical husk that all of life had once called home. He said a last prayer for the coming of the Messiah, that longed-for day when the universe would unite to recognize God's absolute sovereignty and Planet Earth would blossom once again, its massive oceans refilled, its greenery and abundance restored. Then the holy city of Jerusalem would be rebuilt—this time never to be destroyed—and starships carrying the Ten Lost Tribes and all the rest of the Jewish people would streak across space and descend upon the planet—so its passengers could worship their Creator in the newly-built Third Temple, just as

their forefathers had done in ancient times. May it happen speedily in our days.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR: RESPONSES TO EMMANUEL BLOCH AND LAURIE NOVICK ON RECLAIMING DIGNITY

Letters to the Editor

Modesty, Fashion, and Self: A Religious Fashion Designer's Account

In the world of Orthodox Jewish thought, the conversation surrounding modesty has taken a significant leap forward since the publication of [Reclaiming Dignity](#) and the reviews in the *Lehrhaus* pages by [Laurie Novick](#) and [Emmanuel Bloch](#). While valuable discussions have emerged from this discourse, one aspect that remains underrepresented is the personal experience of fashion. As a religious woman and a fashion designer, I believe it is essential to add socio-historical context to this conversation.

Revisiting the context of the 1960s fashion revolution sheds light on the increased focus on modesty in contemporary times. The 1950s were characterized by the elite's fashion choices, with elegant dresses and white gloves being the norm. However, the 1960s brought about a new sense of identity and expression for young people. Dress codes loosened and fashion became more relaxed,

even for the older generation, as evidenced by figures like Jackie Kennedy favoring mini-skirts.¹

My personal journey into the world of fashion began as an expression of transformation. Having spent seven years in the seminary world and grappling with challenges such as depression, body image, and navigating dating and breakups in my 20s, I used *tzeniut* (modesty) both as a religious expression and as a method of control—a way to disconnect myself from rising sexuality as a single woman in her mid-twenties. However, as I embarked on a journey of healing and personal growth in my thirties, I found solace and freedom in clothing. Fashion became my art form, not only in what I wore but also in creating fashion lines that garnered attention from mainstream stores like Saks Fifth Avenue and Macy's. Our broader discourse should reflect these themes as well; as we explore the conversation around modesty, we must acknowledge its connections to body image, sensuality, and self-esteem.

To find guidance in the development of how we relate to fashion and clothing, we can turn to the Torah. To cite some brief starting points for consideration: Adam and Eve first used clothing, realizing their nakedness, covering themselves and hiding—seemingly in shame—from God. The term *beged* means both clothing and trickery, and was used by Jacob (dressing up in Esau's clothing) to deceive his father. However, the significance of

¹ <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/an-introduction-to-1960s-fashion>.

clothing evolves over the course of the Torah, with the pinnacle being the priestly clothing. The *hakhmei lev*, those imbued with the wisdom to construct the Tabernacle—fashion designers in essence—were chosen to create the clothing for the purpose of beauty and for splendor. How different that is than to use clothing for the use of covering in shame and trickery.

As we continue the conversation on modesty, it is crucial to reflect on, and build on the Torah's treatment of the meaning of clothing, the significance of clothing as it projects images of our inner selves to the world and our roles in society. Clothing is not merely about hiding our bodies but also about revealing our true selves, expressing our divine connection, and inspiring others through our attire. Just as the priests' sacred garments exuded splendor and beauty not only to their wearers but to society as well, so too can our clothing be a testament to our devotion and role as agents of change in this world.

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I enjoyed reading Emmanuel Bloch's [review](#) of *Reclaiming Dignity*, particularly his sharp sociological insights, and more broadly, his counterintuitive take on the book as a whole. This particular volume, for reasons Bloch both understands and carefully examines, has received

(seemingly) universal approbation, at least according to my media consumption.

However, the primary question Bloch's evaluation left me with was, "If so, then what?" Meaning: if we grant that R. Falk's relationship to *tzeniut* is excessively puritanical, and we deem R. Manning and Mrs. Poliakoff's approach excessively apologetic to be a fair representation of classical views of *tzeniut*, how, then, did Hazal understand *tzeniut* in Bloch's schema? Is any coherent, overarching "theory of the case" viable in his view?

In addition, I would be curious to hear Bloch's analysis of the book's halakhic treatment. While of course related to its hashkafic content, presumably this lengthy section could be "untainted" by some of the more accommodationist tendencies Bloch attributes to the book's overtly hashkafic second half.

Finally, and as an absolute sidebar, given my own professional investments, I could not let slide Bloch's appraisal that the *kiruv* movement "has been in severe crisis for a decade and a half," an aspersion promoted by a now-infamous *Mishpacha* article he cites, and elsewhere. Bloch makes the common error of equating *kiruv's evolution* with its *decline*. Students (and young professionals) may be less inclined to follow a long lecture from the aforementioned *kiruv* "superstars" (all still active, albeit), but by any metrics the movement writ large is flourishing.

Olami, primary purveyor of programming among

the 18-32 year old populations, currently sponsors over 300 organizations in nearly 30 countries, servicing upwards of 50,000 students and young professionals each year. This is far more “front line” activity than ever has existed prior.

If Bloch would prefer to judge by yeshiva/seminary attendance, Aish HaTorah is filled to capacity, as are Machon Shlomo and Machon Yaakov. A new seminary, Aish Aspire, recently opened. This is without mentioning Schapells, Neve, Shearim, et al. Ohr Sameach Israel recently completed renovating their *beit midrash*. And while Ohr Sameach Monsey—Bloch's alma mater—did close, The Shaar in Far Rockaway, Torah Links' new program in Lakewood, and even Toras Dovid on that same property all have emerged to fill this domestic void.

I invite Bloch to come visit any of these institutions for a refresher on current ongoing, or to join me on campus to share his prodigious knowledge with a largely unlettered generation.

Finally, drawing some kind of straight line between the emergence of “*Kiruv Kerovim*” and the (perceived) decline of “*Kiruv Rehokim*” strikes me as a bit too tidy. The latter’s persistence has been demonstrated (albeit briefly), and the former’s growth is much more likely a function of an emboldened Orthodox community—numerically

larger, which invariably stratifies the population, and no longer willing to brook any disaffections.

In any event, these modest critiques notwithstanding, Bloch’s keen ability to trace various philosophical and public policy approaches to shifting sociological trends constitutes a valuable contribution to this significant, often sensitive, subject. I look forward to his further offerings.

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