



## Parashat Mishpatim

### Is it Permitted to Gaze at the Moon?

**Shalom Rebbetzin Chana Bracha,**

My husband has told me that according to the Talmud, it is not good to look at the moon. He didn't know the reason. If you could touch on this, I'd be very interested.

Thank you for your understanding.

**Wendy Shulman** (name changed)

**Dear Wendy,**

I know the moon is so beautiful and that it is hard not to gaze at its soft glowing light. The rainbow is even more special yet, we are also not allowed to stare at it. It is hard to understand why the Torah prevents us from deriving pleasure from Hashem's most stunning creations. Judaism teaches the importance of enjoying the beautiful world that Hashem created for us. Could it really be forbidden to look at the moon and at the rainbow? What in the world would be a reason for that?

#### Who Can Gaze at The Shechinah and Live?

First of all, it is not completely prohibited to look at the moon and the rainbow. If it was, how would one be able to sanctify the new moon or recite the blessing on the rainbow? There is a difference between looking and gazing. The definition of gazing is to consciously focus attention and derive enjoyment or satisfaction from what we see. The Talmud warns us against gazing at the rainbow for our own protection:

תלמוד בבלי מסכת חגיגה דף טז/א

כָּל הַמִּסְתַּכֵּל בְּשִׁלְשָׁה דְבָרִים - עֵינָיו כְּהוֹת - בְּקִשְׁתּוֹ, וּבְנִשְׂיָא, וּבִכְהֻנָּם. בְּקִשְׁתּוֹ - דְּכִתִּיב, (שם א) "כִּמְרָאָה הַקִּשְׁתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר יְהִי בְעֵנָן וְגו', בְּנִשְׂיָא' - דְּכִתִּיב, (במדבר כז) "וְנִתְּתָה מִהוֹדֶךָ עָלָיו". בִּכְהֻנָּם - בְּזִמְנֵי שְׂבִית הַמִּקְדָּשׁ קָיָים, בְּשַׁעֲרֵי שְׁעוּלָיו לְדוֹכֵן וּמְבָרְכִין אֶת הָעַם בְּשֵׁם הַמְּפֹרָשׁ.

All who stare at three things, his eyes are dimmed: At the rainbow, at the Nasi (prince) and at the kohanim. At the rainbow, as it is written, "As the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud in the day of rain... this was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of Hashem." At the Nasi, as it is written, "You shall put from Your honor upon him (*Bamidbar 27:2*). One who looks at the kohanim [his eyes would dim], at the time that the Temple was standing, when they would stand on their platform and bless Israel with the Holy Name (*Babylonian Talmud, Chagigah 16a*).

Maharal explains that these three things embody the likeness and the rays of the Shechinah. There is a tradition that gazing at the likeness or the rays of the Shechinah causes the eyes to be dimmed. If a person gazes at the actual Shechinah, he is unable to live- as it states, "...For a person may not see Me and live" (*Shemot 33:20*). However, looking only at the likeness or rays of the Shechinah does not cause death, but dims the eyes, which is compared to death (Maharal, *Chidushei Aggadot, Chagigah*).

#### Looking at the Moon in Halacha

The Talmud does not record a prohibition of staring at the moon, but some well-respected Kabbalists, write: "Just as it is prohibited to gaze at a rainbow it is prohibited to gaze at the moon" (*Sefer Chareidim 45:5; Sefer Shoshan Sodot*). According to Kabbalah, it is just as harmful to gaze at the moon as it is to gaze at a rainbow (*Sefer Ta'amei haMinhagim, Kuntres Achron to Siman 464:22*). "Gazing at the moon" is enumerated in the Vidui version (confession) of Rabbeinu Avraham, father of the *Shlah*

*HaKadosh*, among the sins that a person needs to do Teshuva. There are various opinions whether it is permitted to look at the moon during the monthly ritual of *Kidush Levana* (sanctifying the new moon). The *Mishna Berura* brings three views. According to the first view, which is what most people do, it is permitted to look at the moon until one completes the entire ritual. However, *Sefer Chareidim* permits looking at the moon for only the duration of the recital of the first blessing. The Magen Avraham, in the name of the *Shelah HaKodesh*, goes even further to permit one to only glance at the moon for a brief moment prior to reciting the blessing (*Mishna Berura, Siman 426*).

### The Diminishment of the Moon Reflects the Exile of the Shechinah

There is an inherent connection between the moon and the kingdom of the house of David. Therefore, we recite “*David, Melech Yisrael chai v’kayam*” during *Kiddush Levana*. The Jewish people are compared to the moon, which waxes and wanes. Just as the light of the moon in the future will be renewed to become like the light of the sun, so will Israel return to cleave to Hashem (*Shulchan Aruch OC 426:2*). The moon was originally the same size as the sun – “G-d made the two great luminaries” (*Bereishit 1:16*). Due to the moon’s complaint, that two kings cannot share one crown, G-d told the moon to make itself small (*Babylonian Talmud, Chulin 60b*). The diminishment of the moon reflects the exile of the Shechinah, which resulted in the imperfection of the world and the splitting of the kingdom of David. The dim light of the moon symbolizes that Hashem’s Divine Shechinah is not fully revealed in this world. This is because the world is not yet ready to receive the perpetual light of the Shechinah in all of its brightness. Since the diminishment of the moon, there has been a flaw in creation, and this is why we experience ups and downs in the history of our people as well as in our personal lives. Gazing at the moon could therefore symbolize blatantly looking down at the broken world without being able to rise above this imperfection. This is similar to when Lot’s wife looked at the destruction of Sodom and turned into a pillar of salt, because she didn’t merit to be saved while gazing at the destruction.

### Staring at the Divine Reflection within the Physical World

Likewise, the rainbow symbolizes Hashem’s covenant to never make another flood- even should we deserve it. When we see a rainbow, it reminds us that we indeed deserve another flood, but Hashem is faithful to His covenant. To stare at the rainbow would then be chutzpah, as if we don’t care that we may deserve a flood. Staring at the moon would also be considered insolence since the moon is embarrassed that it is still so small, and that we have not yet perfected ourselves to enable its light to grow equal to the sun’s. In addition, both the moon and the rainbow reveal Hashem’s Shechinah, and it is not respectful to Hashem to stare at His reflection. Therefore staring at the rainbow is considered as not giving honor to Creator (*Babylonian Talmud, Chagiga 16a*). The Shechinah is on a very high level, and therefore, we are not on the level to stare at it from within our own mundane reality. Rashi explains in Parashat Mishpatim, that Nadav and Avihu stared at Elokim while eating and drinking.

**ספר שמות פרק כד (י) וַיִּרְאוּ אֶת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַתַּחַת רַגְלָיו כְּמַעֲשֵׂה לִבְנֵת הַסַּפִּיר וּכְעֶצֶם הַשָּׁמַיִם לְטָהָר׃**  
**(יא) וְאֵל אֲצִילֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא שָׁלַח יָדוֹ וַיִּחַזְּזוּ אֶת הָאֱלֹהִים וַיֹּאכְלוּ וַיִּשְׁתּוּ׃**

“They saw the G\*d of Israel; and under His feet was like sapphire brickwork and the likeness of the heavens for clearness. He [G\*d] did not lay His hand on the nobles of Israel, although they beheld G\*d while eating and drinking” (Shemot 24:10-11).

By stating that G-d did not slay them, the Torah implies that they deserved to be slain, because they gazed at the Shechinah while being involved with physical eating and drinking (Rashi). In our lower world, there is still a discrepancy between the physical and the spiritual. Similarly, the moon also embodies the discrepancy between 'light' and 'vessels' – the Garden of Eden and this lower world we live in. In the future, the light of the moon will grow big like the sun (*Yesha'yahu* 30:26). At that time, B"H, we will no longer be prohibited from gazing at the moon. Rather we will have reached a level where we will be able to rejoice and bask in its light!