

## The City in the Moonlight

When they strike you from all sides, there's only one thing to do: flee, like a *dybbuk* from the shofar.

Things got bitter in Kamay. *Khabad-niks*<sup>145</sup> arrived from White Russia and they made the place a *khasidic* colony. When they saw a Jew in the street, they drummed into him that he had to pray completely differently. For them, there was no *kadish* unless one added the words: *yismakh purkoney*<sup>146</sup> (may salvation blossom up). Of course! If the Messiah just heard that, he would delay no longer, and would come right down to Kamay even before the next Sabbath! And when they said their afternoon prayers, they added who knows how much, and by the time they finally got to *shimone esre*, all their enthusiasm was gone. Furthermore, they had one answer to everything: "the rebbe."

God decided that in that same year a group of *musr-niks*<sup>147</sup> should come to the city too, all the way from Zamet, though they taught in Navaredok. You know what *musr-niks* are like: everyone else is evil, and only they have a pipeline to God; this one has bad habits and that one is in a bad state. Apparently, if they lectured some ordinary Jew, the Messiah would come that very evening.

The *khabad-niks* in Kamay were considered "white rascals"; the *musr-niks* were considered just plain crazy. They too had a single answer to everything: "change your ways," and that's all. So they would go to the pharmacy and ask for nails. Why? To boast that they didn't get frightened if people laughed at them. Who cares what people think?!

The natives of Kamay were being driven out of their minds. There was one thing they didn't understand: why had the two kinds of *nudniks*<sup>148</sup>, as they called those who had come to the city, picked precisely Kamay to 'honor.' Apparently they didn't think Svirdun and Dizhorits would do—they had to put their hooks into Kamay, and that was that!

145. *Khasidim* who follow the Lubavitsh rebbe

146. A phrase used by *khasidim* but not by *misnagdim*

147. Moralizers; self-appointed teachers of ethics

148. Nuisances, pests



The City in the Moonlight

The poisonous quarrels clouded the air everywhere. Everyone tried to make peace, but it didn't work. The rabbi of Kamay, Reb Markil Kaminopol, who called him, was disgusted by all this. A year passed, and he moved his congregation in the middle of a sermon.

"People of Kamay! It's like this. Not just once but twice did the prophet Jeremiah say 'Peace, peace,' but there was no peace. Why twice? Once for Jerusalem and once for Kamay! Here there will be no peace—there's a quarrel and a war there. By all means! If you have a different tradition, see here and a war there. If you come from a town where the High Holiday prayers are said every Wednesday all year long, go ahead and say them! Will anyone tell you not to? But here's the problem—that's not enough for them, so they're going up on us. Quarreling leads to baseless hatred for no reason. We're losing this world and we'll lose the next world too! If the Holy Temple was destroyed by them, then certainly Kamay will be too. People! Better to sell your homes. There's still hope—they'll grab everything, those new arrivals! What's there to talk about, ha? Today it's as it was with our Father Abraham. God said to him: 'Go forth from the land of your birth,' so he got up and went! 'We'll build a new village! Let's go!'"

And the congregants cried out in unison: "Let's go!"

People would walk through fire if Reb Markil Kaminopol told them to. After all, there had been rebbes from the Kaminopol family for ages.

It didn't take even a full month. Buyers for the houses were not lacking—here a *khuhul-nik*, there a *must-nik*.

When they were about to leave Kamay, people started whispering without meaning any malice: "Let the new arrivals stay here and climb all over one another." That was the only curse-word in Kamay at that time: "new arrivals."

The people of Kamay followed Reb Markil the way the children of Israel had followed Moshe Raiteyom in the desert. He was not an old man, but he had trouble with one leg, so he used a cane. Those who remained in Kamay, the *khuhul-niks* and the *must-niks* and a number of peasants as well, all stood in the streets, astonished, as the rebbe led his community away to the Devil knew where. He insisted, did Reb Markil, on leading them on foot. A north wind blew his long, black beard up over his face. He kept looking out into the distance through the bare trees at his beard, and put his hand above his eyes like a visor.

They took everything with them on their way: the *seyfer-tyres*<sup>150</sup> and

149. Torah Scrolls

150. A late-Spanish word for "scroll."  
151. Literally "the city in the moonlight."



their crowns and the pointer, the holy books, and all their household goods. Everything was put on the wagons. Women drove the hens, to the sound of *pleh-pleh-pleh*. Children led the cows by ropes. Swirls of sand blew up all around them, like restless clouds.

For generations, Kamay had been called "the village of candles." The townspeople were called the "candle-blessers," and sometimes, jokingly, "the candle-cursers." They made candles, some from tallow and some from wax, some for the Sabbath and some for *havdole*, some for the holidays and some for the peasants. Customers from as far away as Vilna bargained for Kamay candles.

When they reached their 'sandy Red Sea,' a great pile of candles lay on the wagons—big and small, fat and thin, simple and colored. The wax candles were considered the best ones. They raised enough bees in Kamay to send an eleventh plague for Pharaoh. They had dragged all the equipment for bee-raising along with them: boxes, cages, and bee-hives. The lambs were sounding "ba-a-a," the horses were whinnying, the bees were buzzing. It was a hot day in Iyar.<sup>150</sup> Everything is recorded in the *Archive of the Exodus from Kamay*.

As if guided by one of God's daytime guiding stars, the rebbe knew where to go. He led the Jews in the direction of Postev. They came to a village, Butsevich. There the rebbe announced to the peasants that they had to put up cottages for a new community a bit farther on; meanwhile the Jews needed a place to bed down for the night. When the peasants saw the wagons full of Kamay candles, they demanded to be paid in advance with candles. Enough candles to light Alexandrovsky Boulevard in Vilna were given away on the spot. Candles had hardly any value for the people of Kamay!

That very same day, Reb Markil crept off with his cane to a corner of the forest, near Dvartshan. He stood there in his new 'Land of Milk and Honey,' right up till sunset. A fiery red moon battled with a dying sun. He had never in all his life seen a more beautiful moon. He went back to his horde in Butsevich and proclaimed the good news to his community:

"We'll build our village not far from here, near Dvartshan. There they have the most beautiful moon in the world. What shall we call our village? Let it be called not Danielevich, and not Avarevich but Levonevich!"<sup>151</sup>

To this very day, the name "Levonevich" appears on the signposts on the highway between Kamay and Dvartshan.

<sup>150</sup> A late spring month

<sup>151</sup> Literally "Son of the moon" equivalent to "Moonville" in English. We have rendered it as "The City in the Moonlight"



### *The City in the Moonlight*

The peasants of Butsevich, strong as Philistines, started chopping down the gigantic trees the following day, on the spot that Reb Markil had designated. They peeled off the bark, squared the edges flat, and put them up on two big sawhorses so they could be worked on all sides. Ropes were wrapped around them so they could be pulled and smears of black ashes were used to indicate where they should be cut. Two peasants held the saw, one above and one below. The peasants in those parts could work at building things for a month—they had the strength of Issa, after all.

The people of Kamay then left Butsevich and moved to their newly prepared 'Canaan.' The place where wolves had reigned and foxes had run and owls had hooted at night became Levonevich of Lithuania.

The Levonevich rabbi, Reb Markil, studied Torah day and night. He very much liked to study late at night, by the light of two big candles, watching the dancing of the shadows from the bright moonlight.

Their moon, people said, was more beautiful than the Salok moon, which was renowned throughout the land. Reb Markil was an ardent *misnagid*—he liked to emphasize "people said," so he went and traveled to Salok, which is between Doksht and Novy Alexandrovsk. He looked at the moon there for a whole night and came to understand that the beauty of the Salok moon did not derive from the moon itself. What then? It derived from its reflection in the Salok lakes. It couldn't hold a candle to the Levonevich moon, whose beauty was intrinsic.

Reb Markil Kaminpol started studying books of *kabala* more and more; after a while, he started writing a treatise of his own, in Aramaic, that he called *The Small Light*.<sup>152</sup>

And when there is a world-class beauty of a moon in a village of candle-makers, only one thing can come of it. In the early days, when Levonevich was first established, people hardly noticed that they stayed awake later and later into the night, and stayed asleep in bed later and later into the day. When the days started to grow shorter in the winter, they realized what was happening. They, "the moonlit ones," as the people of Levonevich were called, liked to work by the red light of their homemade candles, which blended with the white nocturnal rays from the sky.

The rabbi ruled that it was all right to daven *shakhris* right after sunrise, even though it was just before they went to sleep. Everyone got up in time to daven *minkhe*. On Sabbath and holidays, they stayed awake with difficulty for 24 hours, and the next day they slept themselves out thoroughly.

<sup>152</sup> Biblical term referring to the moon.

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The years raced by, and in Kamay the Russian *khasidim* intermarried more and more with the *musr-niks* from Zanet. The people from Lyadi joined hands with those from Salant, despite the fact that they each insisted on attaining the Lithuanian Heaven in their own way.

No one from the vicinity of Levonevich thought the residents of that village were anything to wonder at. Candle-makers live in the light from their candles, so why make a fuss about it? Besides—let them do things as they see fit. After all, it's their business and no one else's. But the new residents of Kamay did wonder about the fact that the former residents had adopted such strange ways in the new village. "They weren't exactly right in the head when they were here, either," they explained in Kamay.

The *dayen* of Kamay, a Russian *khasid*, screwed up his courage and sent a rabbinical question to Levonevich: How could they so contradict the rules of the Universe by making day into night and night into day? Even in early childhood *kheyder*, students learn that God said that the light was good and separated the light from the darkness.

The Kamay *dayen* boasted about his question. The *misnagids* had considered themselves real scholars, and here they had fled like deer and established a village of their own in the forest and had turned the world upside down.

When they brought the Kamay *dayen*'s question to Reb Markil in Levonevich, he was, if anything, pleased. By this time he was an old man. Since he had removed his community from the quarreling so they could live out their lives in peace, he had continued to live happily with his people.

"What audacity!" Reb Markil thought to himself. "People come and disrupt a community and drive away its inhabitants, then many years pass and they're still asking questions! Go understand what goes on in a person's heart!"

Reb Markil sent his reply to Kamay. The essence of it was brief:

"The Bible does indeed say: 'God said "Let there be light" and there was light.' But after that, it says unequivocally 'God created Man, male and female He created them, on the sixth day of Creation,' and 'God created Man in His own image.' What does 'in His own image' mean? *Rabeynu Bakhya* says, in his *Gate of the Unity of God*, that it means 'having heavenly attributes, like those of God Himself.' And what do we understand from *Bakhya*'s words? That in this world Man is only flesh and blood, so what can he accomplish? He can only try to imitate the Holy One, blessed



be He. In imitating the Almighty, he has indeed done mighty deeds, to the best of his ability. That's as far as Bakhya went. Everyone knows that God wrote the Torah. Matching that is quite something else. Elevation of one of God's minor creations to the level of a major creation would constitute a great accomplishment. God created the big light, the sun, and the small light, the moon. The residents of Levonevich found the strength to make an even smaller light with their candles, but together with the moon it sufficed for studying Torah, for making a living, and for living in peace with God and with Man. And how do we know that God is pleased with that? We have evidence in the Talmud, which says that they used to sacrifice the buck in the Holy Temple on the first day of the month<sup>153</sup>, as expiation of a sin by none other than God Himself, because the Almighty regretted having made the moon little, so as part of Creation He beautified Levonevich. At the same time, He was fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy: "The light of the moon shall be like the light of the sun." So what's the fuss about?"

The response was well received. In both Kamay and Levonevich, people began to say that everything had happened so that that response could be made. Do you think that it occurred to both the *khassidim* from the East and the *musr-niks* from the West at the same time and out of the blue to pick Kamay to move into? And don't you think that the exodus from Kamay was the direct cause of the rise of Levonevich, so Reb Markil could issue his response in his old age? This was God's plan—to teach all three tribes that everything is predestined.

<sup>153</sup> The beginning of each month in the Jewish calendar corresponds to the time of the new moon, i.e. the first reappearance of the moon

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