



ICJW Bea Zucker Calendar Study Series

“Feminist Inspiration for Living on the Jewish Cycle”

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2 Rosh Hodesh—Celebrating Each New Moon

Context

In ancient texts and times and in our day, Rosh Hodesh—the first day of the Hebrew month—affiliates with women. Talmudic sources suggest that on Rosh Hodesh, women refrain from daily labors. In recent decades, Jewish women have revived the celebration of Rosh Hodesh with creative initiative and joy. Women's and girls' Rosh Hodesh gatherings for evening festivities and for morning prayers began to gather momentum in the late 1970's. Here we explore textual roots and inspiration for contemporary women's Rosh Hodesh celebrations, a monthly opportunity for building community, experiencing renewal and inspiration.

Background

Biblical roots

The celebration of Rosh Hodesh originates in the Torah; it is mentioned among biblical festivals,

On your festive days, your holidays and Rosh Hodesh, you shall sound the trumpets over your sacrifices ... and it shall be a remembrance before God." (Bamidbar 10:10)

Rosh Hodesh also appears in the Torah together with Shabbat as a day for an additional sacrifice, the *mussaf* (Bamidbar 28:11-15). This sacrifice also marks Rosh Hodesh as a special festive day.

An extraordinary story about the prophet Elisha and an unnamed “Shunnamite woman” in the book of *Melachim* II hints at another aspect of Rosh Hodesh (II Kings 4:23). When the Shunnamite woman sneaks off to see the prophet (who will bring her dead son back to life), her spouse inquires, "Why are you visiting him today? It is not Rosh Hodesh nor is it Shabbat." Apparently, she and perhaps other women regularly went to visit the prophet on Rosh Hodesh.

In another biblical passage, the prophet Yishayahu rebukes Israel's hypocrisy for observing Rosh Hodesh while desecrating basic social ethics. Speaking in the divine voice, the prophet explains that when we neglect our obligations to one another, ritual observances are detested by God; when injustice prevails, He warns, -

Incense is offensive to me. Rosh Hodesh and Shabbat ... I cannot abide" (Yishayahu 1:13)

Shabbat and Rosh Hodesh appear together in the book of the prophet Yehezkel, who envisions a great gathering at the Temple.

The gate of the inner court ... shall be closed on the six working days; it shall be opened on

Shabbat day and it shall be opened on Rosh Hodesh. ... The common people shall worship before the Lord on Shabbat and Rosh Hodesh at the entrance of the same gate " (Yechezkel 46:1-3)

Rosh Hodesh shares with Shabbat a unique status. Whereas most festivals commemorate an historical-spiritual event in Jewish experience—Pesach, the Exodus from Egypt; Shavuot, the receiving of the Torah; Purim and Chanuka, redemption from oppression etc.—neither Shabbat nor Rosh Hodesh is event-driven. They both connect with universal themes. Both are cyclical celebrations that sanctify time and mark the renewal of life. According to the Torah, at the conclusion of six days of creation, God sanctifies Shabbat (Ber. 2:3). By contrast, we, people, are responsible to discern and sanctify Rosh Hodesh by noticing the appearance of the new moon in the skies — indeed, the sages understood this to be the first biblical commandment given to the Jewish People, "This month shall be for you the beginning of the months; it shall be for you the first of the months of the year" (Shmot 12:2).

A universal theme emerges in connection with Shabbat and Rosh Hodesh in another chapter of the book of the prophet Yechezkel—a time when *all people* will gather together for divine service at an open gate, "on each Rosh Hodesh and each Shabbat, all humankind shall come to worship Me" (Yechezkel 66:23).

Post-Biblical Reworkings



Rosh Hodesh literally means "the head of the month". It falls on the first of each month (though on some months, the festival of Rosh Hodesh includes also the last day of the previous month). The cycles of the moon guide the Hebrew calendar. The tiny sliver of the new moon indicates the onset of the month. Unlike the sun, the moon changes appearance, waxing toward fullness at mid-month—when we celebrate some of our festivals, Sukkot and Pesach, T"U bShvat and T"U bAv—and waning toward disappearance at the end of the month. The affiliation of the festivals with this cycle rivets our

Jewish celebrations to a cosmic rhythm.

The phases of the moon can remind of the ongoing process of growth and life. Fresh illumination emerges from utter darkness, grows to wholeness, and dims again. This metaphor can also express aspects of our human experience, personal, national, and universal—each time we fall into dark despair, or when the Divine is hidden from view, we have the potential to brighten, to renew.

The lunar cycle aligns with women's monthly cycle of renewing fertility, the process of shedding the rich blood lining the uterus when an egg released from the ovaries is not fertilized. In post-Temple literature Rosh Hodesh explicitly affiliates with women. Here we consider different midrashic approaches.

Midrash I

The following talmudic midrash about the moon seeks to reconcile a seeming contradiction between two biblical statements and thereby explains a Rosh Hodesh ritual—a sin offering that was commanded to be brought during the time of the Jerusalem Temple.

In the first chapter of Bereishit, the Torah describes the divine creation of two great lights. The same verse then goes on to speak of a large and a small light.

God made the two great lights, the greater light to dominate the day and the lesser light to dominate the night and the stars. (Ber. 1:16)

Why does the Torah describe two great lights when a few words later in the same verse, one light is larger and one is smaller?

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| <p>Rabbi Shimon ben Pazi said: Two verses contradict one another: “God created the two great luminaries” [Ber. 1:16], and it is written, “the great light... and the small light” [ibid.]. The moon said before the Holy One blessed be S/He: Sovereign of the Universe, can two sovereigns wear one crown? S/He said to her: Go and diminish yourself. [The moon] said before Her/Him: Sovereign of the Universe, because I said a proper thing before You, must I diminish myself?!</p> <p>S/He said to her: Go and rule over the day and the night. She said to Her/Him: Of what benefit is a candle in bright daylight? Of what benefit can I be? S/He said: Let Israel count days and years by you. She said to Her/Him: the day is also impossible, nor are time periods counted according to me. As is written: “and they [i.e., both the sun and the moon] shall be for seasons and appointed times, for days and years” [ibid. 1:15]. [S/He said:] Go and let the righteous be called by your name— Jacob the Small [Amos 7:5], Samuel the Small [1 Shmuel 2:19], David the Small [1 Shmuel 16:11, 17:14]. S/He saw that her heart was not settled. The Holy One said to her, “Bring a sin offering on my account that I diminished the moon”. And R Shimon ben Lakish said, “What is the uniqueness of the goat of Rosh Hodesh?, as it says about it (Bamidbar 28) “for the Divine” - the Holy One said, “this goat will be a sin offering for my having diminished the moon.” Hullin 60b and Bereishit Rabba on Ber. 1:16</p> | <p>רבי שמעון בן פזי רמי כתיב (בראשית א:טז) ויעש אלהים את שני המאורות הגדולים וכתיב את המאור הגדול ואת המאור הקטן. אמרה ירח לפני הקב"ה רבש"ע אפשר לשני מלכים שישתמשו בכתר אחד? אמר לה לך ומעטי את עצמך. אמרה לפניו רבש"ע הואיל ואמרתי לפניך דבר הגון אמעיט את עצמי?! אמר לה לך ומשול ביום ובלילה. אמרה ליה מאי רבותיה דשרגא בטיהרא? מאי אהני? אמר לה זיל לימנו בך ישראל ימים ושנים. אמרה ליה יומא נמי אי אפשר דלא מנו ביה תקופותא דכתיב (בראשית א) והיו לאותות ולמועדים ולימים ושנים. זיל ליקרו צדיקי בשמיד (עמוס ז) יעקב הקטן שמואל הקטן (שמואל א יז) דוד הקטן. חזייה דלא קא מיתבא דעתה אמר הקב"ה הביאו כפרה עלי שמיעטתי את הירח והיינו דאמר ר"ש בן לקיש מה נשתנה שער של ראש חדש שנאמר בו (במדבר כח) לה' אמר הקב"ה שער זה יהא כפרה על שמיעטתי את הירח. חולין ס: ובראשית רבא</p> |
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This midrash elaborates a dialogue between the moon and the Creator. The sun is silent. In the Torah, creation originates with light (Ber. 1:3-5). Implicit in the dialogue, the emanation of light seems to symbolize the Creator in the creation. In a grammatically female voice, the moon states the apparent contradiction metaphorically—how can two great lights express the sovereignty of the Divine One? There must be one great light in the creation, reasons the moon.

Rather than rewarding the moon for her insight, she is told to diminish herself. The Divine appears to succumb to her logic, but does not answer her challenge. In spite of her protest and unsettled heart, the moon remains small. Meanwhile, the Divine Creator acknowledges His/Her unfairness and seeks atonement by requesting that we bring a sin offering to the *miqdash*-Temple every month, on Rosh Hodesh.

This midrash seeks to explain not only why there is a ritual sin offering on Rosh Hodesh. It also purports to embed a gendered dynamic in the structure of Creation. Male-female relationships seem to be metaphorically characterized by the sun-moon. Why does the Divine ask for a sin offering? The *sin* is diminishing the moon, causing her to be smaller. The moon also changes from a “great light”, a light source, to a body that reflects the light of the sun.

In this midrash, the implacable moon's fate is fixed. However, in the text of the monthly blessing on the new moon, we express the desire for the restoration of the moon's light--

May it be your will, Lord my God and God of my ancestors, to readjust the deficiency of the moon, so that it may no longer be reduced in size; may the light of the moon again be as radiant as the light of the sun, as it was during the first seven days of creation, before its size was diminished, as it says: “The two great luminaries” (Ber. 1:16). (traditional Kiddush Levana prayer)

Our midrash attributes to the moon critical awareness about the creation and direct interaction with the Creator. It also plays out a stereotyped gender dynamic. The Divine expects the moon to accept self-diminishment, as women are often called upon to do. The moon expresses and is disciplined to comply with a dominant attitude about the creation that values material manifestations—size and brightness. According to Jewish mystical tradition (in the Kabbala of Isaac Luria), the Creator performs *tzimtzum*-contraction in order to enable the possibility of creation. Melila Hellner-Eshed suggests that the Divine intends two lights, each great in a different way—“one which is strong, stable and unequivocal, if a little dull; and another, smaller, reflexive and contemplative, veiled in shadows and changing cyclically.” In this alternative value-system, self-diminishment might be considered a positive act that enables interdependence and cooperation, that is, if it is expected of men as well as women. At the outset of Creation, feminist interpretation and egalitarianism had not yet unfolded in the consciousness of either the Creator, or the moon.

Midrash II

A different midrash connects Rosh Hodesh with women in the incident of the golden calf (Shmot 32). Shortly after the Divine manifestation at Mount Sinai, the nation becomes anxious about Moshe's extended absence while he is communing with the Divine and receiving the Torah.

Aharon reasoned as follows. He said to himself: If I say to them, Give me silver and gold – they will bring it immediately. Instead, I will say to them: Give me the earrings of your women spouses, sons and daughters, and the plan will be nullified immediately. Indeed, the verse says, “Aharon said, remove the gold rings that are on the ears of your women spouses, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me” (Shmot 32:2). The women heard but were not willing; they refused to give their earrings to their spouses, saying: To make something detestable and abominable that has no power of salvation – no, we will not listen to you! God gave them their reward in this world: that they observe the Rosh Hodesh more than the men. And S/He gave them their reward in the world to come – in the future they will be renewed like the new months.... The men saw that their spouses would not heed them and surrender their earrings to them. What did they do? Until that time they [= the men] had ear-rings like the [male] Egyptians and Arabs, [and now] the men removed their own earrings and gave them to Aharon, as the verse says “And all the people took out the golden rings that were in their ears” (ibid. 33:3). The verse does not say “in their women spouses’ ears” but “in their ears.” (Pirkei deRebe Eliezer 45)

Aharon is concerned about the people's impatience and potential unrest. In order to distract them from the disappearance of their main leader, Aharon suggests that the people bring him gold. His intention with the gold is unclear. The next verse omits specific mention of the women from among those who contribute their gold. The midrash therefore suggests that the women did not take part in the transgression of the golden calf—idolatry forbidden in the Ten Commandments.

The golden calf incident transpires in the midst of instructions to build a sacred home for the Divine among the people, the Mishkan-Tabernacle. The Torah indicates that the women were very keen to offer their contributions toward the building of the Mishkan, perhaps more keen than the men. One verse describing the people bringing gifts might suggest that the men came "after the women" (Shemot 35:22). Furthermore, all of the gifts were offered in a raw form—gold, silver, precious stones, oil and spices—except the fibers. The women prepared and wove the fabrics from the raw wool and dyes (Shemot 35:25-26). These suggestions about the women's attitudes about the Mishkan support the golden calf midrash that the women had more patience and faith than the men, and that their commitment to the Divine project was unswerving.

According to this tradition, Rosh Hodesh becomes mainly a women's festival as a reward for women's piety in sacred service. The legal writer, the Tur (1270, Cologne – 1340, Toledo) explains -

The twelve Rosh Hodesh dates of the year which are also termed *mo'adim* ('festivals') correspond to the twelve tribes; and when they sinned with the sin of the golden calf, Rosh Hodesh was taken from them and given to their women spouses to commemorate that they were not involved in that sin." Tur, OC 417.

Women's inherent piety, faithfulness and purity of soul are often extolled in the rhetoric justifying exclusion of women from ritual practice— by claiming that the ritual practices were imposed on men as routines meant to discipline men's rebellious nature. In the case of Rosh Hodesh, customs that seem to be based on women's superior spiritual nature release women from obligations to work and promote the possibility of women's involvement in creative and empowering ritual.

Observances, Practices and Resources

Observe the phases of the moon and mark Rosh Hodesh on your calendar. [Here](#) is a website that indicates the dates of Rosh Hodesh in the coming years. See the full text of Melila Hellner-Eshed's essay, '[Of What Use is a Candle in Broad Daylight? The Reinvention of a Myth](#)' to shed some new light on the Sun-moon midrash.

While Rosh Hodesh is not like shabbat and the festivals during which many work activities are prohibited, *halakhic*-legal sources do record the custom that women refrain from performing work on Rosh Hodesh -

"On Rosh Hodesh it is permitted to perform *melakha*-work (those 'work' activities forbidden on Shabbat). [however] Those women whose custom it is to refrain from work [on Rosh Hodesh] --- their's is a good *minhag* (custom)." (Shulhan Aruch, Orah Haim, 417:1)

With this tradition as support, consider reducing your involvement in work on Rosh Hodesh. Of particular relevance to the text above are creative acts [associated with food](#)

preparation and clothing—cooking and baking, sewing, laundering etc. Abstaining from these activities will free you to make Rosh Hodesh a more special day.



In recent years, women have been recovering Rosh Hodesh as a special time, and gathering for celebrations during that evening. This is a unique opportunity to explore the passage of time, to study and experiment with the meaning of events in the month, to bond deeply with friends. Penina Adelman's book,

[Miriam's Well: Rituals for Jewish Women around the Year](#) (1986) is a helpful Rosh Hodesh resource. For each month of the Jewish year, it suggests activities for women's Rosh Hodesh groups based on the experiences of a Boston group, *B'not Eish* – Daughters of Fire. [Ritual Well](#) is a website that offers women's rituals, ready for use. Here is a helpful essay, [Starting and Growing a Rosh Chodesh Group](#). This is a [Rosh Hodesh Nissan](#) ritual. "[Rosh Hodesh: It's a Girl Thing!](#)" is an initiative that engages young women in a Rosh Hodesh process over their adolescent years.



Rosh Hodesh morning is a popular time to convene women's prayer groups and minyanim. Consider gathering women together monthly in the early morning for weekday prayers, the singing of the Hallel psalms of praise, and Torah reading. [Read about an incident](#) during the 25 year-strong struggle of *Women of the Wall* to secure women's Rosh Hodesh prayer at the *Kotel*-Western Wall, reading from the Torah scroll, wrapped in *tallitot*-prayer shawls, and bound with *tefillin*-phylacteries.

The Jerusalem Talmud acknowledges an obligatory festive meal on R”H, like on Purim (Megilla 1:4). This would imply that on Rosh

Hodesh afternoon, before the sun sets, it is fitting to feast together with family and/or friends.

Questions for Discussion

- Many of the Jewish festivals are linked to historical-narrative events—though they also associate with seasons of nature and agriculture--whereas others focus on sanctifying time. Rosh Hodesh is among the second category—like Shabbat and Rosh HaShana, the Jewish New Year. Discuss the differences and relationships between event-based and time-based festivals and their particularism and universalism.
- Analyze the metaphor and gender dynamic of the moon, sun, and the Creator, and their particular use in the midrash from tractate Hullin. Evaluate the meaning of these symbols to you.

- In relation to the traditions discussed above about women's attitude to sacred service—the golden calf, and the *Mishkan*-tabernacle—explore your views about women's and men's faith and faithfulness as a justification for Rosh Hodesh being a women's festival.
- Some advocate for women-only events for the purpose of empowerment. How do you relate to gender-segregated celebrations of Rosh Hodesh? For what reasons ought men and women to celebrate together and/or separately? Do you consider these reasons to be temporary, that is appropriate to a specific historic/social time, or permanent?

Summary of Issues

From the *Tanakh*-Hebrew bible onward, Rosh Hodesh appears as an important holiday that becomes associated with women during the rabbinic period and onward.

Corresponding with women's fertile cycle, the reappearance of the new moon arouses a sense of renewal, hope during dark times, and re-creation. The revival of women's celebration of Rosh Hodesh proposes a unique opportunity for contemporary women. In addition to traditional observances—refraining from work, convening for prayer, and feasting, women can connect with one another on themes of the calendar cycle and innovate meaningful and joyous Jewish rituals.

Methods & Observations

The renaissance of Rosh Hodesh is one landmark in a contemporary trend toward women's active and innovative appropriation, leadership, and participation in Jewish ritual life.

Contact

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