

The National Jewish
Post&Opinion

Volume 76, Number 19 • August 11, 2010 • 1 Elul 5770 Two Dollars
www.jewishpostopinion.com

THE NEW MOON OF ALL NEW MOONS

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Our *devar* Torah for the first day of Rosh Hashanah opens with a mystery. It comes to us in a very small package. It's the second word in the next to the last verse of the Torah reading for the day. The verse tells us: "He [Avraham] planted an *ishel bi'v'eir shavah*. (ויטע אשל בבאר שבע)—Genesis 21:33)

What is an *ishel*, anyway?

We take our cues for answering this and other questions in this *devar* Torah from the commentary of Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888).

We only find this word in one other place in the whole of the Tanakh—in all of the Torah, Prophets, and Writings. In I Samuel (22:6) we find Saul sitting under an *ishel* with a spear in his hand. So maybe it's a tree. Our sages have alternatively interpreted this word as a *caravanserai*, an inn built around a large court for accommodating caravans at night. In either case, they tell us that, according to the root letters of the word, א-ש-ל, this *caravanserai* or tree offered everything—*achilah* (food), *shetiyah*, (drink), and *linah* (shelter).

This should come as no surprise, since Avraham is famous for his hospitality. We can easily picture him and his family bustling around, let's say under a tree, making sure his guests have everything they need. He would have used every chance he got to teach by example the practice of *chesed* or loving-kindness. He would have used every opportunity to lead people from thanking him for the hospitality to thanking God.

But why did he plant a tree? And why plant it at the place called *b'eir shava*, the well of the oath? Always before, he had built an altar when he called on the name of God. And before, Avraham had called God *eil elyon konei shamayim va'aretz* (אל עליון קנה שמים וארץ)—Genesis 14:22), mean-

ing God of the heights, who had acquired heaven and earth.

But as our rabbis would be quick to point out, this does not mean only the God of the past, the One who brought the world into existence eons ago, and then went on vacation. It means the God who is still, even now, the owner and director of heaven and earth—the Living God of the present. So that's the name that Avraham had used in the past.

But under this tree, Avraham teaches us a new name of God, one which points beyond the visible horizon of our present, to God as the One who proclaims the time that is hidden from human eyes. The name is *Eil Olam*, and it too only occurs in one other place in all of Tanakh (as אלקי עולם הי).

The word *olam*, from the root ע-ל-ע, means, to be hidden. It only came to have the meaning of "the world" later in the language of our rabbis. Here, in the Torah, it means the hidden time, the whole future, and all the distant past, which also lies beyond our understanding.

Declaring this Name of God, Avraham plants a tree—at *b'eir shava*, the well of the oath, of all places. It's strange because the well itself stands for everything that Avraham is not. As an outsider, he is *persona non grata*, someone with no rights. In fact, he is so dependent that the peaceful possession of a well that he himself has dug has to be acknowledged as a "royal gracious kindness." And he has to secure an oath to guarantee that he can keep the well.

And yet on this occasion of the oath, it is Avimelech, the Lord of the land, along with his field marshal Phichol, who come to Avraham, and not the other way around. And they come looking for an agreement unrelated to the matter of the well,

saying: “We know that God is with you in all that you do. Swear that you will not deal badly with us or our descendants.” (Genesis 21:22-23)

But why should they do this?

After all, the political hopes of a hundred-year-old nobody and his two-year-old son must have simply seemed laughable in the eyes of the world. And yet, obviously, Avimelech here is not addressing Avraham as a private individual whose importance comes to an end with his own life, and who, as such, would never be in a position to do good or evil to an entire country.

Did the King have a premonition that a mighty nation would grow from this two-year-old? Or as a cautious politician, did he want to form an alliance with the father of the baby, thinking that the descendants of the boy would one day repay the favor?

Maybe—but in any case, Avraham saw in the respect of the king the beginning of the future that had been promised to him, actually being realized. So this is the place where Avraham plants a tree and proclaims the name *Eil Olam*, the God who sows the future with invisible seeds in the present.

With this, Avraham lays down his own idea of the future. Out of small beginnings, like his own, the future germinates, like the seed that gives rise to a tree. And like a tree, it spreads blessing far around when it matures. And it is *Eil Olam*, the God of the hidden future, who nurtures this possibility. But as we said before, our rabbis have added to this meaning of the hidden future. They have brought the word *olam* to have the meaning of “the world,” which is, of course, the most concrete, actual present.

Now, usually it’s the case that when we human beings are in trouble, we think about the future. We try to find consolation in the future for a painful present. But our sages teach us the exact opposite of that idea. Just at the time when our present becomes the laughing-stock of the world, they teach us to look at every present moment as being already a part of the future, and to think of God as the director of that future. At all times—when thunder rolls and lightning flashes, trees blossom and flowers smell, food nourishes, events mature, etc.—they teach us to take to heart the fact that the present is already a part of the future and to think of God as the director of that future. For every second that we truly live is in the very center of that eternity in which we not only will participate, but in which we already are participating if we are what we should be.

But what if we are not what we should be?

Then we have the moon and Rosh Hashanah.

And what’s the moon got to do with it?

To answer that, we have to go back to Egypt. While we were still there, God gave Moses and Aaron a new mission to our people. Until then, Moses and Aaron had been the messengers of God

to Pharaoh on Israel’s behalf. Their mission had been to perform signs and wonders for the Egyptians, and especially Pharaoh, to try to get them back to what they should be—conscious of their duty to God and their fellow-humans. But as we all know, it didn’t work. Pharaoh’s heart was too hard for signs and wonders to make any difference. The will of God could only be forced on him. And as soon as the force was removed—it’s an old story—he went back to his old ways.

So God turned away from Pharaoh and towards Israel to make sure that Israel would not make the same mistake. Thus God began the construction of our inner life as a people with an *ot* (אֹת), a sign. And that sign was the moon. God called Moses out into the open and showed him the silver crescent of the moon struggling out of complete darkness into new light, and God said to him: This is to be your model. Whenever you see the new moon, it is to remind you of your own possibilities for renewal. And just as I, God, make you new, and you make yourselves new, you are to pass across the night sky of the nations, like the moon, and proclaim everywhere this teaching of renewal. You are to tell the world that God has given all of us the possibility of always being able to start again. You are to tell everyone that our whole moral and physical fate lies entirely in our own hands.

So each time the moon finds the sun again, and begins to grow, God wants us to find God again. Without this, we would always slide farther and farther away. Without even noticing it, we would become less and less responsive to the light of God’s spirit. Our natures would become darker and darker until, like Pharaoh, our hearts would become so hard that even the most startling signs and wonders would have no effect.

This teaching forms our foundation stone as Jews, and it is this that differentiates us sharply from all pagans. The pagan knows no renewal, not in the world and not in humankind. To the pagan, everything is bound by cast iron necessity. Guilt and evil must forever and ever give rise only to guilt and evil. For the pagan, nothing of godlike freedom dwells in the human breast. All freedom is only an illusion to the pagan.

But the Jewish God says to us: When you fail to be inspired by My light (the Torah) and you turn your back on Me, sinking into darkness, you can struggle again towards the light, just as the new moon renews its radiance out of the darkness. With every new moon God pronounces for all of us to hear: I am still the same God. I am with you, alongside you, near you. I hear your every sigh. I notice all your tears. I am close to you even if clouds of the storm hide Me from you.

And what is the connection to Rosh Hashanah?

Rosh Hashanah is the new moon of all new moons. It sends a *shofar*-call into all of our homes

and our hearts and calls us to God. The *shofar* is a call to freedom, a freedom that can be found only through God and in God. Each year this Godly summons enters into our Divine-human relationships and calls on us to turn from moral servitude to freedom, from moral misery to joy, from spiritual abandonment to an intimate relationship with God and our people.

We leave you with this poem. It's called Reflection.

We do not see
Your face,
But in its light
We come to see
Ourselves
For what
We dare to be—
A mirror.
In that light
We are all shining
And able
As new moons

To rise and struggle
With the night
And fling
Reflected glory
Deep into the dark.
In that light
We come to see
Ourselves
As One.
In that light
We can see forever.

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