

ROSH CHODESH A VITAL HOLY DAY

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Before you looked at the title of this *devar* Torah, could you name the vital Jewish holy day that occurs once every month?

It's Rosh Chodesh of course, the beginning of the new month.

So maybe you're asking yourself: "Vital holy day? How can it be holy or vital if the day passes unobserved every month by the overwhelming majority of American Jews?"

Maybe you're thinking: "Anyway, it's just the beginning of the new month, the new moon, hardly an earth-shaking event."

Withal, why should we take time and energy to think about Rosh Chodesh?

Those of us who attend Shabbat morning services are familiar with the blessing that we recite once a month, on Shabbat *Mevarekhim ha-Chodesh* (מברכים החודש), the Sabbath before Rosh Chodesh. You'll find this part of the liturgy in any traditional *siddur* (prayer-book). If you examine it, you may notice that we stand for this blessing, in effect calling ourselves to pay special attention to the words we are about to recite.

The ritual has several notable features:

- The Torah scroll is removed from the ark and held by the *chazzan* (cantor) or a member of the congregation during the blessing.
- We pray that in the month ahead we will re-awaken ourselves to a life guided by Torah.
- The prayer actually announces when the new month will begin.
- At the conclusion of the prayer the congregation affirms its belief in God's power to bless us with "life and peace, joy and gladness, deliverance and consolation."

In *parashat hashavua* (weekly Torah reading) Bo, we read: "Then Adoshem said to Moses and to Aaron in the land of Egypt, saying: this renewal of the moon shall be for you the beginning of new moons; it shall be to you the first of the months of the year." (Exodus 12:1-2) And we note that Akeidat Yitzchak (Rabbi Yitzchak ben Moshe Arama, 1420-1494) teaches that this was the first commandment we received as a nation, while we were still in Egypt.

Here's the picture: Adoshem calls Moses and Aaron and shows them the silver crescent of the moon. He tells them that it's an *ot* (אֵת), a sign that will serve to focus Israel's attention. The sign signifies a beginning of renewals or revivals because,

according to Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888), *chodesh* (חֹדֶשׁ) doesn't mean month but the *beginning* of the month. It is a day that we are to consecrate, using it to separate and dedicate ourselves to a sacred purpose. The new moon is somehow to be an inducement to moral spiritual action in our day-to-day lives.

So while we have this commandment to sanctify the beginning of the months, it isn't about commemorating astronomical events, such as the phases of the moon. This isn't a form of nature-worship. Akeidat Yitzchak's commentary teaches that, "to think that any star or heavenly body has dominion over the Jewish people is completely erroneous." To the contrary, the liturgy and ritual of *Kiddush haChodesh* (קִידוּשׁ הַחֹדֶשׁ), sanctifying the beginning of the months, are focused on the social life of humankind.

Moreover, Rosh Chodesh differs from other *moadim* (מוֹעֲדִים), the fixed times of our meetings with God. It has no reference to historical or seasonal events like the Shalosh Regalim (three pilgrimage festivals) or Rosh Hashanah (New Year).

The Rosh Chodesh *moeid* (meeting time) has a voluntary quality to it since, although God specifies the time of the month, the determination of the exact day is left to the people. In effect, the Rosh Chodesh meeting between God and us is one that we mutually agree to. It isn't the movement and position of heavenly bodies that determines the day of our *moeid*, our meeting with God every month. Only those days specifically fixed as *moadim* by the representatives of the people, not God, are recognized as such. So it is not as if God and us were locked into a relationship by the fixed laws of nature.

But what has this meant practically?

Our verse reads in part, *hachodesh hazeh lachem rosh chadashim* (הַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה לָכֶם רֹאשׁ חֳדָשִׁים) "this month shall be for you the beginning of new moons. . . ." The word *lachem* (for you—לָכֶם), according to Rabbeinu Bachya (Rabbi Bachya ben Asher, 1255-1340), tells us that God did *not* instruct Moses and Aaron to convey the commandment to the people, although it applied to them. So the tradition teaches that the determination of the new moon was reserved to the "elders of the people, a court of experts."

According to the *Baal haTurim* (authored by Rabbi Jacob ben Asher, 1270-1343), the Hebrew *el Moshe v'el Aharon* (אֵל מֹשֶׁה וְאֵל אַהֲרֹן) in our verse

(Exodus 12:1) should be understood to tell us that the head of a *beit din* (rabbinic court), represented in the text by Moses, sanctifies the new month by saying *mekudash* (מקודש), “it is sanctified.”

Rabbeinu Bachya tells us, “It is unanimously agreed that the authority to determine the calendar adjustments is vested in the hands of the “Jewish Supreme Court” or its equivalent as something handed down from the time of Moses, provided such court is composed of the most knowledgeable and God-fearing people of their generation.” In effect, Moses had the “authority to delegate the adjustments. . . .”

In the *galut* (Diaspora), we are without an authorized court of elders. But we have the benefit of a fixed calendar, the preparation of which was delegated to Hillel the Younger (Hillel II, 330-365 C.E.), the last representative of the Sanhedrin. Thus fixing the date for Rosh Chodesh remains in human hands, albeit indirectly, and consequently we know when to celebrate the day.

Although in ancient times *Kiddush haChodesh* was a privilege reserved to the high court, nowadays the members of our congregations recite the blessing, ensuring that we remain conscious of the calendrical cycle and the spiritual opportunities it affords at the beginning of every month.

What we most need to understand is that *Kiddush haChodesh* is meant to be a joint venture between God and Am Yisrael (the Jewish people), to be an inducement to our own voluntary renewal—every month! In this vein, Rabbi Hirsch teaches us

that, “The moon, finding itself again in conjunction with the sun, is only to be a model for our finding ourselves again with God, the rejuvenation of the moon a picture of, and an incentive to, our own rejuvenation.”

The inevitable demands and indignities of our day-to-day lives have the certain effect of distancing us farther and farther from our high moral spiritual calling, and from all of its potential blessings. So every month, if we avail ourselves of the opportunity, we can allow ourselves to be inspired by the prospect of softening our hearts and reawakening our souls, purposefully reasserting the unique capacity for goodness that exists within each of us.

Rosh Chodesh is when we meet with God for *internal* moral spiritual rejuvenation—as individuals, families, communities, and a people—in our synagogue sanctuaries. The potential transformation that can take place within us on those holy days can be the basis for transforming our *external* social life throughout the remainder of our days.

How can we realistically imagine such a grandiose expectation?

As Rabbeinu Bachya teaches, “Reciting the benediction of the new moon is equivalent to testifying to the fact that God created the universe and all that is in it”—which, of course, God is still creating from moment to moment, including the potential for recharging our moral spiritual energies on Rosh Chodesh.

So you see, Rosh Chodesh can be a vital holy day—if we choose to make it one.

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