

ROSH HODESH AS A WOMAN'S HOLIDAY¹

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THE BIBLICAL ORIGINS OF ROSH HODESH

The first mention of celebration of the new moon on Rosh Hodesh [literally: Head of the Month] comes in Numbers 10:10:

And on your joyous occasions – your fixed festivals and new moon days – you shall sound the trumpets over your burnt offerings and your sacrifices of well-being. They shall be a reminder of you before your God: I, the Lord, am your God.

In the commentaries of the Etz Chayim, the waxing and waning of the moon is compared to the Jewish people's cycles of prosperity and suffering, "knowing that even in darkness there are brighter days ahead."² As Goldstein³ points out, the Hebrew month does not begin on the full moon but on the new moon, the darkest days of the lunar cycle. "The Hebrew 'new moon' is in fact the darkest night, or the 'no moon.' The ancient Hebrews blessed the moon at its darkest period, when its power is least evident, when it was specifically *not* worshipped by other cultures."

ARE THE ORIGINS OF ROSH HODESH CONNECTED TO PAGAN MOON WORSHIP?

The Israelites never worshipped the moon, but nevertheless, celebrated its "rebirth." The new moon, offering new hope and new life, was greeted with shouts and blasts of joy from royal trumpets. The waning moon represented the powers of destruction and death. According to Goldstein:⁴

Early civilizations saw the moon as having influence over fertility, and later revered it as a deity. Moon cults were in the hands of women, and Hebrew women were also familiar with the reverent associations of the moon and femininity. Worship of the moon is one of the oldest forms of goddess worship.

The early Israelites probably knew about sun and moon cults, because they proliferated in Egypt.

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The relationship between women and moon worship is further explained by Novick:⁵

Virtually all ancient peoples, and particularly the cultures of the Middle East, had rituals for honoring the monthly reappearance of the moon. That revered crescent was invariably associated with the divine feminine, who was seen as the birth-giver to the sun, moon, stars and planets. The moon was also linked to the menstrual cycle of the human female, whose birth-giving powers emulated the Divine Mother. The Jewish people, whose Sumerian and Chaldean origins would have exposed them to the various moon goddesses of that area, then journeyed to Egypt, where, again, they came in contact with temple practices that included the veneration of the moon.

The prophets were concerned about the syncretism of pagan and Hebrew ideas, a mixture that seems to have already been occurring among Israelite women.

HOW ROSH HODESH BECAME A "WOMEN'S HOLIDAY"

According to Berrin:⁶"The talmudic period saw a greater codification of laws surrounding the observance of Rosh Hodesh. It is in the Talmud that we see for the first time reference to Rosh Hodesh as a special holiday for women." She expands on this by citing Greenberg:⁷

The Talmud rules that work is permitted on the new moon but describes a tradition that women abstain from work on that day. Later sources explain that on this semi-festival partial abstention from labor was a reward to the righteous women who refused to surrender their jewelry for the creation of the golden calf.

Goldstein⁸ goes further, pointing out that this talmudic interpretation was a way of finding an excuse to allow Jewish women to continue celebrating the coming of the new moon. "In effect, they authorized women to celebrate what they probably had already been celebrating anyway. They taught that women were rewarded with Rosh Hodesh for refusing to participate in the building of the golden calf."

In TB Megillah 22b there is a discussion of the laws of work on Rosh Hodesh. Tosafot and Rashi, who cite Pirke de Rebbe Eliezer 45, comment that while men are permitted to work on the new moon, women are not:

The women heard about the construction of the Golden Calf and refused to submit their jewelry to their husbands. Instead they said to them: 'You want to construct an idol and mask, which is an abomination and has no power of redemption? We won't listen to you.' And the Holy One, Blessed be He, rewarded them in this world in that they would observe the New Moons more than men, and in the next world in that they are destined to be renewed like the New Moons. . .

Thus, the rabbis used the Golden Calf story to justify the celebration of the new moon as a women's holiday.

REVIVAL OF THE HOLIDAY TODAY

In the Jewish prayer book, it is God who renews the moon, and not the moon that renews itself. Rosh Hodesh represents an authentically Jewish practice. In the past 25 years, Jewish women have found new meaning in associating themselves with Rosh Hodesh. Today, there are prayer groups, study groups, ceremonies, articles, books, and other creative women's celebrations of the new moon. Arlene Agus was the first to write about this revival, and she cited 1972 as the year in which a small group of women began observing the new moon holiday.⁹

By reviving Rosh Hodesh as a sacred time for Jewish women, a step is taken that is expressed movingly in *The Book of Blessings* by Marcia Falk:¹⁰

Renewing the New Moon festival,
hallowing it today,
we weave new threads
into the tapestry of tradition.

NOTES

1. Presented as a *D'var Torah* at Beit Knesset Moreshet Yisrael, Jerusalem, Rosh Hodesh Av 5762.
2. *Etz Hayim Torah and Commentary*, David Lieber, Senior Editor (New York: The Rabbinical Assembly, 2001), p. 380, footnote #2. English biblical quotes are from *Etz Hayim*.
3. Elyse Goldstein, *ReVisions: Seeing Torah Through a Feminist Lens* (Woodstock: New Lights, 1998) p. 160.
4. Goldstein, pp. 159-60.

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5. Leah Novick, "The History of Rosh Chodesh and Its Evolution as a Woman's Holiday," in Susan Berrin, ed. *Celebrating the New Moon: A Rosh Chodesh Anthology*, (Northvale: Jason Aronson, 1996) p. 13.
6. Berrin, p. xxiv.
7. Irving Greenberg, *The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays* (New York: Summit Books, 1988) p. 414.
8. Goldstein, p. 160.
9. Arlene Agus, "This Month is for You: Observing Rosh Hodesh as a Woman's Holiday," in *The Jewish Woman*, ed. by Elizabeth Koltun (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), p. 3.
10. Marcia Falk, *The Book of Blessings* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1976) p. 392.

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