

Celebrating the New Moon: It's a Lady Thing!

A paper Examining Rosh Chodesh and its Relationship to Women

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A Jewish Midrash states:

The moon said to God: 'Sovereign of the Universe, can two kings share a single crown?' God replied: 'Go and make yourself smaller.' 'Sovereign of the Universe,' she said to him, 'because I made a proper claim before you, am I to make myself smaller?' He said to her, 'Go, and you will rule over both the day and the night.' She said 'What good is a lamp in broad daylight?' He said, 'Go! Israel shall use you to count the days and the years.' [The moon went on complaining].... On seeing that the moon would not be consoled, the Holy One of Blessing said 'Bring an atonement for me for making the moon smaller.' [Hence the sin-offering of the new moon was offered in the Temple.]

—Babylonian Talmud, Chullin 60

In Biblical and other ancient Jewish texts, women generally had a lesser status than and were subservient to men. The moon in this story can be compared to other female Biblical characters, such as Lilith and Vashti, who were punished when they confronted figures of powers. These and other similar Biblical and midrashic characters have been reclaimed by the Jewish feminist movement as mediums for empowerment. By reinterpreting these characters as role models of strong woman, instead of pariahs or punished outcasts, the Jewish feminist movement has sought to root their view/support of gender equality in ancient Jewish tradition and texts.

In contemporary times Jewish feminism has also sought to reclaim the Jewish traditions related to the moon, particularly the holiday of Rosh Chodesh, as a means for empowerment and equality. Jewish feminists seek not only to practice rituals that exclude them, but also to revive those which Jewish women had done in the past and whose meaning has been lost or requires reinterpretation. Rosh Chodesh which began in ancient Biblical time has, in the past have century, been reclaimed by women as a time for prayer, study and gathering. By examining Biblical, rabbinical and historical texts, Jewish feminists have made a profound connection with Rosh Chodesh. While the holiday's liturgy does not acknowledge the connection of women with the new moon,

Jewish feminists have demonstrated the clear Biblical and historical connection woman have to the holiday.

Rosh Chodesh, which translated means 'head of the month' is the name for the first day of every month in the Hebrew calendar and is marked by the appearance of the new moon. The commandment to observe the new moon as a holiday came on the eve of the departure from Egypt. It was given to the Israelites as they were preparing to leave Egypt and be a free people. The commandment which is found in *Exodus* states:

"This renewal of the moon shall be for you a beginning of new moons; it shall be for you the first among the months of the year." (*Exodus* 12:2)

In Biblical times, Rosh Chodesh was a festival marked by celebratory sacrifice and feasting. In rabbinic times, bonfires were lit on the mountains to announce the arrival of the new moon, and today Rosh Chodesh remains a minor holiday for all traditionally observant Jews.

In examining both Biblical and historical texts one can find many connections between women and the moon. The most telling is the relation of Rosh Chodesh, women and the Golden Calf. After the Exodus out of Egypt, while Moses was on Mount Sinai receiving the Torah from God, the Israelites, impatient and worried, succumbed to idolatry. They pooled their gold and made the golden calf. But in this case, the rabbis tell us, "the Israelites" means only the men. The women refused to participate; they refused to offer up their gold and jewelry for such an abomination. According to legend, the holiday was a reward given to the women of Israel because they refused to surrender their jewelry for the creation of the golden calf. The Midrash says:

The women heard about the making of the Golden Calf and refused to give their

jewelry to their husbands. Instead, they said to them: 'You want to construct an idol, a molten form which is an abomination? We won't listen to you!' And the Holy One of Blessing rewarded them in this world that they would observe the new moons more than men, and in the next world they are destined to be renewed like the moon.

In this interpretation, the women are rewarded with a special connection to this holiday due to their independence, wisdom, and piety in the face of an unacceptable request.

Rosh Chodesh is rewarded to the women from God for their commitment and becomes a celebration of women's loyalty to the Israelite vision of God.

Due to their righteousness, the women were exonerated from working on Rosh Chodesh. Rashi, the 11th century French commentator, and the scholars from the Tosafot comment that while men are permitted to work on Rosh Chodesh, women are not. Rashi instructs that women should not sew, spin, or weave on this holiday. Other traditional sources have added that women should refrain from doing laundry and avoid any type of "women's work" on this day.

Furthermore, the *Zohar*, the authoritative work of the mystical tradition, frequently likens the moon to the Shekhinah, the Divine Presence, which mystics consider the feminine aspect of God. According to mystical tradition, only when the world is redeemed will the Shekhinah reunite with the masculine aspect, the Kadosh Barukh Hu, the Holy One Blessed is He, and only then will the moon's light intensify, matching that of the sun. It is clear that the rabbis, throughout history, saw Rosh Chodesh as closely connected to women.

Perhaps most important, the Rosh Chodesh tradition contains allusions to the unique spiritual connection between women's menstrual cycles and the cycle of the moon. "Menstruation, which means 'moon change', is women's reflection of the moon."

It is a way to connect one's experience of change with the cycles of all women who have come before us. Due to this connection the Rosh Chodesh moon, as a symbol of covenant, a symbol of transition and of change, lends itself to mark the right of passage. The moon's correlation with women's menstrual cycles and reproductive functions means that it has been most useful to represent women's uniqueness and distinctiveness from men, rather than evoking the challenge to achieve parity with them.

How the feminist movement viewed Rosh Chodesh

Rosh Chodesh is a great holiday in the eyes of most Jewish Feminists. To start with, Rosh Chodesh was already a Jewish holiday that had stature in the Jewish calendar. Further, it has a special undisputed link to women, which then provided a "halachically permissible means of expanding the role of women in tradition." The concept of Rosh Chodesh as a women's holiday was there, it just needed to be explored and have rituals created around it.

For religious feminists who were seeking inclusion without revolutionizing Judaism Rosh Chodesh immediately became important. Although the reinvention of Rosh Chodesh as a women's holiday did not and could not obtain the goal of full equality (within the Jewish religion), it foreshadowed the possibility for change even amongst those that were religiously conservative and often fearful of modification and transformation.

From the 16th to the early 20th centuries, the women of Eastern Europe wrote special Rosh Chodesh *tekhines*—personal prayers in the Yiddish language. Over the past four decades, Rosh Chodesh observance has been revived by religious feminists. In the 1970s, Jewish women around the world began to reclaim Rosh Chodesh. They used the

holiday to sing songs, share stories, study Torah, comfort one another in response to recent losses, or rejoice at one another's successes and pleasures, large or small. It became a time of caring and connecting, of knowing that they belong. And for some, it is a moment of reconnecting to a tradition that they had thought had no place for them. The Rosh Chodesh ceremonies which were reinvented in the 1970's enabled women to feel appreciated, and celebrates as women in a religious context.

Examples of Rosh Chodesh prayers, ceremonies and events

Rosh Chodesh Women's Groups were created to celebrate the cycles of the moon in a communal setting. The groups, which usually meet once a month on Rosh Chodesh, come together to celebrate Rosh Chodesh in a meaningful way with connections to women. The Jewish religion teaches us to mark moments of Jewish significance with ritual which the women who initially created the Rosh Chodesh women's groups have done. Over the past 25 years, Rosh Chodesh groups have become more well-known in North America. Peninah Adelman's book *Miriam's Well: Rituals for Jewish Women Around the Year (1982)* outlined the experiences of the original Rosh Chodesh group and provided program ideas and rituals that could be used by groups that were just beginning.

The variety of Rosh Chodesh groups have widened: some confine themselves to celebration of the new moon, while others have branched out into Jewish study, personal spiritual exploration. Some of the activities focus on the festivals in that particular month and others are issues which relate to Jewish women. The texts and methods are as varied as are the themes of the activities. The unifying theme of these groups is the exploration of Jewish Women's issues, with specific importance on personal spirituality, ritual and celebration. Each group that is created works together to come up with its own *minhag* and how the group will deal with the numerous issues that groups face such as: membership, programming, leadership and continuity. The atmosphere in which the group hopes to provide is one where women feel more empowered to take action and charge of their Jewish lives both publicly and privately. For some women this exclusively female experience can be very liberating, while others may be hesitant to place

themselves in such contexts because they feel their needs for as a Jewish woman are being met in already established organization.

Rosh Chodesh groups: “it’s a girl thing”

One of the most fascinating Rosh Chodesh group curriculums is through an Organization called ‘It’s a Girl Thing’ which is for teen-age girls. The target audience for this program is Girls in grade 6-12, with participants from any denomination (Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstruction,) or are unaffiliated. “Mental Health professionals, educators, and feminists, as well as Rosh Hodesh pioneers like Agus, Adelman and Berrin, designed the program.” It was created to help girls celebrate their strengths and guide them in social interactions, with others girls and learn about their own religious and ethical heritage as a source of strength.

Small groups of girls meet monthly and are lead by an adult facilitator who uses a curriculum put together by the organization. Through discussion, arts & crafts, and drama, the girls integrate core Jewish values as they focus on the things most prevalent in their lives, such as body image, friendship, relationships, competition, stress, and family. The program addresses two documented concerns for girls in the Jewish community. The first, that many girls drop out of Jewish programming post Bat-Mitzvah and secondly, that girls’ self esteem often decrease when they enters adolescence. The informal education program uses Judaism to enrich the lives of girls. It draws on Jewish tradition to give girls a place to feel safe, articulate their questions and concerns and focus on ‘girl things’ in a Jewish environment. The program helps girls examine their identity as Jewish women while taking part in the ritual of Rosh Chodesh.

Critiques from the feminist view

While it seems as though the women's rituals associated with Rosh Chodesh are wonderful, there are still those that critique them and believe they should be reconstructed. Three feminist thinkers in particular, Jane Litman, Judith Glass and Simone Wallace, discuss their discomfort with some of elements found in many contemporary Rosh Chodesh celebrations.

The first argument corresponds with women receiving Rosh Chodesh as a reward for not donating their jewelry to Aaron's construction of the Golden Calf. Rosh Chodesh is not a fitting reward for women refusing to give up their belongings and partake in worshipping the golden calf. As the critique states:

“Justice would suggest that women's loyalty be rewarded with priestly power and leadership. Aaron should have been disposed and the righteous women ordained in his place.”

The view argues that women already had the holiday of Rosh Chodesh. The connection between women and the moon is ancient. The most apparent connection is between the moon and women's menstrual cycles. Another issue these women critique was the division of “symbolic inanimate objects” into binary division roles. Men, are associated with the sun and Women the moon. “This division is part of a dualistic way of thinking that tends to value among other things, the male over the female, the larger over the smaller, the rich over poor, youth over age and day over night.”

While these three women and other thinkers have further critiques of the ceremony, many of them seem problematic and quite radical. It is as though those who critic the ceremony are looking for full inclusion into the Jewish religion, rather than

finding rituals and ceremonial practices from Biblical and historical context which highlight the role and the importance of women. Rosh Chodesh, while it may not be perfect from all aspects of feminist philosophy, it is defiantly a right step for the movement and achieves much of what the movement has been searching for, for many years.

Whatever the critiques may be, Rosh Chodesh has been widely accepted in the mainstream Jewish community organizations. Synagogues and youth groups have become involved in fostering Rosh Chodesh groups and Jewish educators view Rosh Chodesh as a good programmatic device for enhancing the religious lives of women in their community.

Conclusion

The Rosh Chodesh women's ceremonies and groups has dramatically expanded and diversified since its recreation in the early 1970's. Rosh Chodesh programs are designed to be fun, stimulating and an opportunity to create social bonds with fellow Jewish Women. It is a social occasion for women that celebrate their ethnic and religious heritage in a unique and empowering ritual only for them. While Rosh Chodesh liturgies and ceremonies still usually do not explicitly advocate feminist involvement, they do affirm the value of women's experience.

Rosh Chodesh has been reclaimed by the feminist movement as a source of empowerment and an opportunity for reflection on women's role and place in the religion. The ceremony has become very common and mainstream especially in The North America, Europe and Israel. Rosh Chodesh women's ceremonies can is being practices across the religious spectrum. The concept of Rosh Chodesh as a women's holiday was there, and now that it has been explored and has rituals involved women are coming together each month to commemorate this holiday.