

# Understanding Rosh Chodesh

Rosh Chodesh, the celebration of the beginning of each month in the Jewish calendar, has blossomed into a celebration of women and femininity. While Rosh Chodesh exists as a women's holiday in traditional Jewish sources, the connection has been made much stronger with the emergence of the women's movement, and the establishment of women's Rosh Chodesh groups. There is no one way to celebrate Rosh Chodesh and there are no rules for establishing a Rosh Chodesh group. At the core, it should be comprised of women who gather on a monthly basis to celebrate the new month and their lives as Jewish women. The following resource guide is made to help facilitate the formation and monthly meetings of Rosh Chodesh groups on campus.

## **History of Rosh Chodesh**

### *The Jewish Calendar*

Central to Judaism is the Jewish calendar. Unlike the Gregorian calendar, the Jewish calendar is lunar. Months and holidays are based on the 29 ½-day lunar cycle. While the Jewish calendar is lunar, it is also coordinated with the solar calendar. Many Jewish holidays have agricultural roots which means that they must fall during a particular season. Passover, for example, is also called *Chag ha-Aviv*, or the "Spring Holiday." Sukkot marks the harvest festival and must occur during the fall. To compensate for the fact that the lunar year is 11 days shorter than the solar calendar, the Rabbis developed a way to include an extra month in the year to ensure that the months fell in their proper season.

The calendar is so central to Judaism that it is the first commandment the Jews were given as a nation. Prior to leaving Egypt, God instructed Moses: "This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months for you" (Exodus 12:2). Tradition teaches that before leaving the servitude of Egypt the Israelites were instructed to establish their own calendar. A symbol of slavery is that the slave has no control over time; therefore, in order to truly leave the servitude of Egypt the Israelites had to be masters over their own time.

The lunar month begins at the exact moment when the moon begins its new cycle. At this precise moment the moon is lined up with the sun and earth in such a way that it is completely invisible. This moment is called the *molad*, or "birth" of the new moon; however, the Jewish month was not originally calculated from the *molad*. Rather, the Rabbis point to the verse, "*This* month" which implies that there was something tangible for Moses to see. They teach that the new month begins with the appearance of the new crescent, which is after the *molad*. When the Sanhedrin, or Supreme Court, convened, the new month could be established only by the Sanhedrin based on the testimony of two witnesses who were able to verify that they had seen the new moon. When Rosh Chodesh was declared, the Sanhedrin would light fires on mountaintops to let everyone know that it was the new month. As each town saw a fire lit, they would light a fire on its mountaintop so that the news of the new month would spread. Toward the end of the Second Temple period, this system was changed because the Samaritans were

deliberately lighting fires on the wrong day in order to confuse the Jewish community. In the new system of notification, the Sanhedrin sent messengers who would run from Jerusalem to the outlying towns and villages informing everyone that Rosh Chodesh had been declared.

This new system lasted until the end of the Sanhedrin in the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE. The last head of the Sanhedrin, Hillel II, instituted a fixed calendar based on astronomical calculations of the *molad*. This fixed calendar also provides the additional leap months that are necessary to ensure the holidays fall out in their proper time. Hillel II's calendar allowed Jewish life to continue despite the disbanding of the Sanhedrin.

### ***Rosh Chodesh as a Time of Atonement***

Rosh Chodesh has always been more than simply the beginning of the new month. When describing the Rosh Chodesh offering in the Book of Numbers, the Torah says: "And there shall be one goat as a sin offering to the Lord, to be offered in addition to the regular burnt offering and its libation" (Numbers 28:2). It seems odd that Rosh Chodesh requires a sin offering, which is normally brought after one has sinned. During the Mussaf prayer service of Rosh Chodesh, we call Rosh Chodesh a "time of atonement" *z'man kapara*. The beginning of a new month and a new lunar cycle brings with it a sense of renewal and rebirth. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, a 19<sup>th</sup> Century German rabbi, writes about Rosh Chodesh: "Each time the moon finds the sun again, each time it receives its rays of light afresh, God wants His people to find Him again, and to be illuminated with fresh rays of His light, wherever and however, in running their course, they have had to pass through periods of darkness and obscurity." Hirsch further comments on the fact that the verse says *This month shall mark for you...* "This renewal of the moon shall be a beginning of renewals for you. Noticing, realizing the fresh birth of the moon shall induce you to achieve a similar rejuvenation. You are to fix *your* moons, *your* periods of time by taking note of this ever fresh recurring rejuvenation."

### ***Rosh Chodesh as a Women's Holiday***

The connection between Rosh Chodesh and women dates back to the times of the Bible. According to a tradition recorded in the Midrashic work *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, the women refused to participate in the sin of the Golden Calf. They were rewarded with Rosh Chodesh. The Talmud Yerushalmi cites the custom of women not doing work on Rosh Chodesh as a legitimate custom and this is also codified in many Jewish legal codes, including the Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chayim 417).

Other Jewish sources give different explanations for why Rosh Chodesh is a women's holiday. R. Yitzchak ben R. Moshe of Vienna, known by the name of his work the *Or Zarua*, cites the similarity between the lunar cycle and women's menstrual cycle. He explains that just as the moon is renewed every month, so too are women renewed every month (*Or Zarua*, Laws of Nida, 360). Modern writers note other similarities between women and the moon. Robin Zeigler writes, "a woman's body is characterized by cycles of change" as women go from one stage of life to another: puberty, menstruation, pregnancy, birthing, breast-feeding, and menopause. "Likewise," she writes, "each month the moon waxes and wanes with a comforting predictability" (33).

She further writes: “All throughout the generations women have experienced the same cycles of life. Like the familiar moon, the body gently speaks to us. The moon’s cycles are reflected in our counting and deposited in our bodies. One can look at the moon to observe its phases, and likewise, a woman can observe her internal body changes” (37). Jane Litman, Judith Glass and Simone Wallace note that the obvious connection between the moon and women’s menstrual cycles “leads into the more subtle and complex symbiology of the phases of women’s lives.” They explain that the moon’s phases teach that it is important to welcome periods of rest and retreat, from which one emerges renewed and refreshed. A second lesson of the moon’s phases is to move beyond a linear model of thought and time that often dominates our society. “The phases of the moon validate and sanctify women at all ages of our spiritual, emotional and physical lives” (25).

### ***Celebrating Rosh Chodesh***

There are a number of traditional rituals associated with Rosh Chodesh that we continue to observe today.

#### *Birkat Ha-Chodesh*

On the Shabbat before Rosh Chodesh, there is a prayer in synagogue called *birkat ha-chodesh* or the “Blessing of the New Month.” The prayer consists of both asking God to bless the new month and to fulfill our wishes, and the announcement of the exact time when the new month (the *molad*) will appear. In commemoration of the historical sanctification of Rosh Chodesh during the time of the Sanhedrin, the *molad* is always announced in Jerusalem time. The prayer asks for universal needs such as health and sustenance as well as the particular needs of Israel. *Birkat ha-Chodesh* also focuses on God’s intervention throughout history and the miracles that God has performed for us. Because of the special prayer recited on the Shabbat before Rosh Chodesh, the Shabbat is called *Shabbat Mevarchim*, or the “Shabbat [on which we] Bless [the New Moon].” Many women’s Rosh Chodesh groups and/or women’s prayer groups meet on *Shabbat Mevarchim*.

#### *Yom Kippur Katan*

As mentioned above, there is an atonement element to Rosh Chodesh. Picking up on the renewal and atonement messages of Yom Kippur, the Kabbalists of 16<sup>th</sup> Century Safed commemorated the day before Rosh Chodesh as Yom Kippur Katan – a miniature Day of Atonement. The custom was to fast on this day and to recite penitential prayers which resemble the Yom Kippur liturgy and guide the process of self-examination and purification in preparation for receiving the new moon. A small percentage of modern Jews continue to observe Yom Kippur Katan.

#### *Rosh Chodesh Day*

On Rosh Chodesh there is no prohibition against doing work, and there is a joyous mood to the day. Hallel, a celebratory collection of Psalms, is recited on Rosh Chodesh. There is a special Mussaf, or additional, prayer that is said to commemorate the special sacrifice that was offered for Rosh Chodesh in the Temple. Other additions to the standard daily prayers include the reading of the Torah, and the prayer *Ya’aleh ve-Yavo*, which is also

included in the Birkat Hamazon, the grace after meals. People also dress nicely in honor of Rosh Chodesh.

As mentioned previously, there is a custom wherein women refrain from work on Rosh Chodesh; however, because this is only a custom and not a law women observe it differently. Some will try to refrain from all work; others refrain from certain activities; and some try to set aside some time to mark the day.

### *Kiddush Levana*

A final ritual associated with Rosh Chodesh is known as *Kiddush Levana*, or “the Sanctification of the New Moon.” This prayer takes place outside, at night, in the light of the moon. Geela-Rayzel Raphael provides three explanations for this prayer. First it serves as a reminder that Jewish life is connected to the moon and a lunar calendar. Second, it provides a direct link to natural phenomena and inspires a blessing for God. Finally, it provides a framework for meditating on the moon as a symbol of the Jewish people. The *Kiddush Levana* service includes selections from the Book of Psalms and Rabbinic blessings recorded in the Talmud.

The source for this prayer is in the Talmudic tractate Sanhedrin (42a) which says “whoever blesses the month in its proper time, receives the Divine Presence.” The Talmud further teaches in the name of Rabbi Yishmael, “if Israel had only merited to receive the Divine Presence once per month, it would have been sufficient for them.” Abayye notes that since it is such a great mitzvah, it should be recited while standing.

### ***Rosh Chodesh Groups***

Because of the unique relationship between women and Rosh Chodesh and women and the moon, Rosh Chodesh has always been celebrated by Jewish women. The custom of not doing work makes Rosh Chodesh a natural time for women to gather together. We know that throughout Jewish history women gathered together on Rosh Chodesh, though the details of such gatherings are uncertain. In most cases they most likely got together to exchange family news over coffee and sweets. There is evidence that in Sephardic societies Rosh Chodesh was marked by lighting candles and gathering for a festive meal. Formal Rosh Chodesh groups are a recent development in Jewish history and represent the confluence of three separate movements: the women’s movement, the Havurah movement, and Orthodox women’s prayer groups.

The women’s movement provided the impetus to create unique ways to celebrate feminism, women’s roles, and women’s contributions to history, as well as popularizing lesser known historical roles of women. The Havurah movement, started in the late 1960’s, was founded to make Jewish practice, especially prayer, intimate and meaningful to its participants. The Havurah movement also focused on creating a strong sense of community. Orthodox women’s prayer groups developed as a way to allow Orthodox women to take on a more active role within the boundaries of traditional Jewish law.

There are no set rules for forming or conducting a Rosh Chodesh group. Ruth Berger Goldston and Merle Feld write that “the unifying theme of [Rosh Chodesh]

groups is the exploration of Jewish women's issues with particular emphases on personal spirituality, ritual and celebration" (86). Each group conducts its meetings in the most appropriate way for its members. Many Rosh Chodesh groups have an opening and/or closing ritual, which sets the tone for the meeting and designates the group's gathering as "sacred space." The activities of the group may vary from month to month and may include a text study on an upcoming holiday or topic of interest, an art project, a discussion on a topic of interest/concern, etc.