

Foreword

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"Life," a friend of mine was wont to say, "is like an Isaac Bashevis Singer novel. Those who were on top are now down, those who were down are now on top." If my friend had reached a bit deeper into her Jewish consciousness, she might have drawn an analogy to the minor Jewish holiday of Rosh Chodesh. For indeed, its anchor, the moon, is a symbol of the ebb and flow of life: death and disappearance, life and reemergence; peak periods and low ones: light overtaking darkness overtaking light: the cycles of nature paralleling the rhythms of human emotion, the sway in human fortune.

Had my friend further compared life to Rosh Chodesh rather than to a Singer novel, she would have benefited more so. For embedded in the former is a theme not found in the latter, a central idea about optimism. We find this most prominently in the curious timing of the ritual that marks Rosh Chodesh.

Logic would suggest that the ritual be timed to the full moon. Why not name each moon cycle at its richest showing, its most exuberant, most romantic moment? Why not celebrate in the beauty of a round moon and the safety of its glowing light?

Moreover, tradition confirms what logic suggests: the festivals of joy and deliverance, Sukkot and Pesach; the jubilant feast of Purim; the planting of tree

saplings—all coincide with the fullness of the moon. It was not simply to light the pilgrims' way on their night journeys to the Temple in Jerusalem but rather that a bright and beaming moon seemed to fit the spirit of happiness and well-being, a feeling that *should*, in fact, accompany the celebration of the new month.

Nevertheless, the ritualization of the Rosh Chodesh was tied to the peak of night darkness rather than to the peak of its light, for the central message was—is—that each new month is a time again for optimism. Light follows darkness, hope returns; here's another chance, an opportunity for renewal. We don't even wait for the first sliver of light to appear;* we announce the new month in a state of total eclipse and celebrate it at the first glimmer of light—because we have faith. Rosh Chodesh says to us, "It's coming, it's coming, even though you can't see it." We have absolute trust that a force will light the darkness, that we shall not be abandoned. At life's darkest moment . . .

These are themes that not only Jews should carry in their hearts throughout their lives. These are universal messages. They suit the human condition in all of its varied forms. We Jews are good at getting across these kinds of messages to the world. In fact, we enjoy such a role. With gusto we tell the story of the Exodus, for ourselves and for all downtrodden people and all oppressors. Passover is the most widely celebrated holiday among Jews today, not because of the good food or intense preparation, but rather because of its core message—that God loves us and redeems us, lifts us up even from abject slavery. Even in the most horrible conditions, a savior will come to take us out. That message has served us well; it has also become the central theological underpinning of other monotheistic religions. The message of Rosh Chodesh, too, is one that we should be telling to all the world.

And yet, modern Jews, except those tied to the liturgy with regularity, have all but forgotten this holiday, have all but ignored its message. They search in other places for a whiff of optimism. Randomly ask one hundred Jews about this special day that comes eleven times a year, and ninety of them will offer a blank stare. There are far more Jewish bird-watchers than there are moon-watchers. Even those who mark the day liturgically (and those who bless the new moon on the Sabbath preceding its appearance) limit their celebration to exactly that—recitation of special prayers. No foods, no special rituals, no prohibitions that serve to define parameters, nothing that imparts a feeling of sacredness to the whole day.

This unceremoniousness is even more remarkable when one considers the extent of Rosh Chodesh celebration and meaning in ancient times. The sight-

*We don't wait, but in those months when Rosh Chodesh is celebrated two days, we do spot a glimmer of moonlight.

ing of the first sliver of moon from the mountaintop, the resounding signals from one mountain to another, the runners making haste to the court to give testimony, the system of relaying the news to distant communities. What excitement, what anticipation, what joy! Now all would know when to celebrate the holidays, when to take the firstfruits, when to begin the fast days! Now individuals would set aside work and bring special sacrifices in gratitude, marking the renewal of night's light.

Why did Rosh Chodesh awareness/appreciation lapse? Perhaps it had to do with the destruction of the Temple and end of the sacrificial cult; perhaps it was a natural fallout of the loss of a homeland and the need to calculate the Jewish calendar well in advance so that diaspora communities flung far and wide would know when to celebrate the holidays. Perhaps Jews of the diaspora simply found it easier to adopt the solar/Christian calendar to which the lunar calendar had already been intercalated. (In fact, so well integrated have Jews become to a calendar not their own that if you were to ask again one hundred Jews the dates of their Hebrew birthday, ninety would not know.)

Perhaps Rosh Chodesh ran afoul of the ideology of modernity. The twin themes of vulnerability and faith were replaced by ideas of human resourcefulness, initiative, steadily up the ladder, independent of nature rather than being controlled by its vicissitudes.

But here we are with Rosh Chodesh being reclaimed in our times as a day to be known and a day to be celebrated; spread to greater numbers beyond traditional Jews who mark its occurrence in the formal prayers; and marked by more than the recitation of those prayers. It is a remarkable phenomenon, fully recorded in the very pages of this book. Like the internal meaning of the day itself, Rosh Chodesh is being renewed. It is flowing back into the collective Jewish consciousness to a place of meaning and spirit from which it has been absent for the past few centuries.

And just as we asked why it lapsed, we are bidden to ask why it is now coming out of obscurity. One cannot help but wonder, poised as we are at the lip of reemergence of a sacred day, why this is happening particularly in our times.

I believe there are two explanations. One has to do with living as a Jew after the Holocaust. With the dawn of modernity, Jews everywhere were lulled into thinking that we were no longer as vulnerable as we had been during the long diaspora. We had begun to believe that the messages of enlightenment regarding equality and dignity of humankind would offer us protection. We thought that an end to victimization was in sight and that we would find a secure place among the nations of the world.

But the cataclysm that was the Shoah flung us back into a different reality, a return to the state where vulnerability quietly rumbles beneath a surface of

calm and well-being. Fifty years later—and forever after—we all carry within ourselves a lingering, terrifying memory of something that was worse than anything that went before it.

But we have also experienced in our flesh the miracle that light can follow total darkness. I speak, of course, of the miracle of the rebirth of Israel, the recreation of a homeland after centuries of longing. *The beginning of the flowering of our redemption*—that is the Rosh Chodesh of our collective lives.

Perhaps more than at any other moment in our history since the Exile, we feel the powerful sweep of the tides of history and the great swings of darkness and light in our national sensibility. So a day whose themes are about the vicissitudes of life and the hope and optimism for better times finds great resonance in present Jewish consciousness.

The second impetus for resurgence of this minor holiday comes from without — from the broad social movement that is feminism. In one sense, feminism can be seen as the waxing of women in the context of human history.

One consequence of a new self-perception of women is their relationship to spirituality. Women everywhere are engaged in the search for ritual—women of all faiths. In the past, women of traditional religions were one step removed from large parts of the ritual and liturgical enterprise. Men were right up close, in charge of the construction of sacred space and the organization of sacred time. In Judaism, women were not often seen or heard in the performance of communal rituals. Rather, they functioned as enablers or observers.

But women's sights have risen, their spiritual aspirations enlarged. In the process undertaken by Jewish women, it was only natural to connect the search to an existing holiday, to a day that already enjoyed a special association with women in traditional lore, one that was linked to women's unique biological cycle, the menses. The fact that it was a minor holiday in need of resuscitation made the match perfect.

Thus, when in 1973, the now classic article by Arlene Agus appeared, reclaiming Rosh Chodesh as a woman's holiday, it was both revolutionary and natural at the same time. The article was published in the first major anthology of Jewish feminism and the process was underway. Little by little, groups of women began to take a look at Rosh Chodesh, not a new look but in fact a first look by women of this generation. They began to gather to celebrate, to study, to feast, to pray, to talk. The numbers were small, but the momentum kept growing.

This remarkable book is the next milestone in the process. It records not only the history and halacha of Rosh Chodesh but also its unfolding during the past two decades; it offers a blueprint for ways to celebrate Rosh Chodesh. In that sense, this work is a Rosh Chodesh siddur and anthology all in one. And a

measure of how the climate of community has changed—less suspicion and more receptiveness to women's new celebration and ritual—is the fact that this volume of ritual is edited by a woman, among the first of its kind in Jewish history.

And yet, were we to close on this note, we would be ignoring a significant dilemma, one raised by the very breakthrough. Reclaiming Rosh Chodesh as a woman's holiday begets its own question: is it right and proper for women to arrogate to themselves a special holy day? Especially after the Shoah, where no distinction was made between male and female, young and old, traditional and secular, should the day whose implicit message is about swings in nature and history be specially inclined toward women? And if the reverse were true, if Jewish men now placed a special lien on a Jewish holiday, would it sit well with contemporary women?

Somehow the answer lies in the dialectical tension. True, there is something special about the association of women with Rosh Chodesh. One cannot deny it. But that fact does not at all diminish the sense of Rosh Chodesh as a holiday for everyone. Happily, Susan Berrin, the editor of this volume, has managed to maintain the perfect balance here. What comes through these pages is the joy of a recreated holiday, one that is special in many ways to women, yet does not make men feel pushed aside, neither those who are potential newcomers to it nor those who have marked the day faithfully for generations. The contributions of both women and men in these pages, the perceptions of women and men, and the celebrations all add up to a wonderful paradigm for past and future religious creativity. Women will not be seen as "taking the day"; rather, their special overlay will enlarge and carry along the whole community in its acts of sacred celebration.

We who live in this generation have been privileged to witness a renewal in many areas of Jewish life. The observance of Rosh Chodesh is but one of them. Reading these pages confirms what we often feel in our hearts: that the possibilities are endless, the flowering contagious, the elements interconnected, and the witnesses blessed to be part of this whole process of Jewish rebirth.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik takes the lesson of the new moon further and onto a much larger canvas. In *Halachic Man*, Soloveitchik reflects on the inner meaning of the ceremony of *kiddush levanna* (the sanctification of the moon), the essence of which is a prayer for the cosmos. The lawful waning and waxing of the moon, says Soloveitchik, is a symbol of the defectiveness and replenishment of creation. Thus, in this prayer over the sliver of new moon, human beings express their hope for the perfection of creation and repair of the defects in the world, an enterprise in which human beings are partners with God.

The pages that follow, which confirm the renewal of Rosh Chodesh, should be read then as a symbol of something larger: not only as part of a movement to replenish Jewish spirituality, or merely as a symbol of restoration of women to their rightful place as coequal partners in Jewish life and faith, but also as part of a universal movement for *tikkun olam*—perfection of the cosmos and redemption of human history. In this way, Jews continue to witness that we are all part of a cosmic plan in which life will someday reach its fullest realization.

This book is both a small *tikkun* and part of that larger *tikkun*. May we all learn from it the lesson of Rosh Chodesh, of a never-tiring, never-ending renewal that illuminates the world with light and hope.