

RENEWAL
Rabbi Hal B. Schevitz
Rosh Hashanah (Second Day)
2 Tishrei 5783/September 27, 2022

A couple weeks ago, I happened to look up at the night sky and saw a full moon. My very first thought was, "Two weeks till Rosh Hashanah. Time to get to work." Last week, as I was driving the girls to school in the morning, they noticed that both the sun and moon appeared in the sky at the same time. Taken together, these moments reminded me of a Jewish legend (Hullin 60b) about the moon and its role in Jewish life. The teaching begins by pointing out that, in the first chapter of the Torah, God created two great lights in the sky, one to rule the day and the other to rule the night. In the Midrash, the moon said to God, "is it possible for two kings to serve with one crown? One of us must be subservient to the other." God responded, "You're right; go diminish yourself." Flabbergasted, the moon replied, "Hold on a second! I make a good point, and I have to diminish myself?" God accepted responsibility for slighting the moon and said that she, the moon, could appear both in the day and at night. The moon, not satisfied with this concession, challenged God again, "What's so great about that? What use is a candle in the middle of the day?" God conceded again and said, "How about this? Your greatness will be that the Jewish People will count days, months, and years by you." The moon retorted, "That's all well and good, but they will count the seasons by the sun." Seeing that the moon was not comforted, God said, "You are correct. I will atone for diminishing the moon." This explains why the book of Numbers lists a special offering called "God's sin offering" in the catalog of Temple sacrifices for Rosh Hodesh, the New Moon.

According to this Midrash, the moon is a feisty lady, and part of God's atonement for wrongdoing against her is to forever link the Jewish People with its 29½ day cycle. We are called to elevate the moon, and it is our task to look up at the night sky and observe its phases, marking holidays like Passover and Sukkot on the full moon, and Rosh Hodesh, the beginning of the lunar cycle, when we see the reappearance of the tiniest sliver of the moon, a day after its disappearance. Rosh Hashanah, the Head of the Year, is also a new moon, and the moon's renewal echoes this holy day's themes of personal renewal and the communal renewal of the Jewish People.

A well-known Hebrew children's song goes דָּוִד מֶלֶךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל חַי וְקַיִם, "David, King of Israel, lives and endures." I would venture to guess that most of us are familiar with this song. You might even remember that the song is accompanied by hand motions. When I was in the younger grades of elementary school, we would begin the song slowly, increase to a moderate pace, and then gradually work up to breakneck speed, trying to keep up with the music teacher, resulting in a confusing cacophony of singing and clapping that finally ended in laughter and joy.

This fun children's song originates in the Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 25a), where it serves as a code for the declaration of the New Moon, the beginning of a month in the

Jewish calendar. Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi, Rabbi Judah the Prince, the leader of the Jewish community in his generation in the early 3rd century of the Common Era, once said to his colleague Rabbi Hiyya: "Go to a place called Ein Tav and declare the New Moon there, and send me a sign that you have done so. The sign is, 'David, King of Israel, lives and endures.'"

Before the Jewish calendar was fixed in the numerical pattern that we now have, the New Moon was established when two witnesses of unimpeachable character came before the rabbinic authorities to declare that they saw the slightest sliver of the moon in the night sky. Once it was verified by the rabbinic court, the rabbis affirmed the new month. Declaring the New Moon was a big deal for our ancient sages. Having a consistent calendar determined when a community celebrated its holidays, establishing the normative practices of members of that group.

In the ancient world, different Jewish communities had different calendars, which led to divergences in practice and belonging. One story in the Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 25a) tells about a debate between Rabban Gamliel and Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananiah, who verified different witnesses on different dates for the beginning of Tishrei, when Rosh Hashanah began. Rabban Gamliel, who was the leader of the community, challenged Rabbi Yehoshua by ordering him to come to the town square, carrying his money bag and his walking stick, on the day that Rabbi Yehoshua calculated it was Yom Kippur. These actions were, of course, forbidden on the holiest day of the year. Although Rabban Gamliel's challenge was especially humiliating, Rabbi Yehoshua conceded and appeared in public on the day that Rabban Gamliel instructed him because he understood the value in communal solidarity. Later on, Gamliel was rightly reprimanded for embarrassing his colleague. Even so, his actions established his authority as leader of his generation and certified a common calendar for the Jewish People.

Rabban Gamliel was also the grandfather of Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi, and both were descendants of King David. Their attention to the details of the moon was no coincidence. Jewish tradition links the moon with the glory of the Davidic dynasty. The Talmud tells us that David rose at midnight to sing psalms of praise to God and study Torah. In the mystical tradition, *David HaMelekh*, David the King, is the personification of *Malkhut*, the Emanation of the Divine and the cluster of metaphors that also includes the Moon.

Rabbenu Bachaya, a medieval exegete, linked the kings of the Davidic dynasty to the waxing and waning of the moon. The moon waxes and becomes full at 15 days, and it takes 15 days of waning until it fully disappears. Similarly, there were 15 generations from Abraham to King Solomon, David's son, who built the Temple and ruled over the largest territory of the Israelite Monarchy. David's dynasty descended from there, with 15 generations between Solomon and Zedekiah, the last king of the line of David to rule in Jerusalem, who was taken into exile by the Babylonians, when they destroyed the Temple and the city.

However, Rabbenu Bachaya continues by explaining that the moon never ceases its cycles and will renew itself, showing the faintest luminosity one day after disappearing. So too for the fortunes of the Jewish People. Just when things seem darkest and bleak, the New Moon tells us that there is always restoration and renewal. This is why Rabbi Judah the Prince utilized the phrase "David, King of Israel, lives and endures," as a code for the New Moon. He was living during a period of persecution and a time of spiritual darkness for the Jewish people, and yet, he saw in the New Moon the possibilities of renewal and rebirth.

The Jewish People endure. Our national aspirations still live. Hope for individual restoration and renewal becomes apparent to us at the beginning of the lunar cycle, when there is the slightest bit of light in the darkness. This is most auspicious on Rosh Hashanah, when we do not just renew the month, but the entire year. The rabbis emphasize this point through their interpretation (Rosh Hashanah 8a-b) of the Psalm for this day, Psalm 81. Many times throughout these two days, we recite the verse *תִּקְעוּ בַחֲדָשׁ שׁוֹפָר בַּכֶּסֶה לְיוֹם חַגְנוּ*, "Sound the shofar on the new moon, our festival day when it is covered." (81:4) The Rabbis tell us that this psalm can only be referring to Rosh Hashanah, because it is the only day of the year when there is a festival on the New Moon, when the moon is concealed. Unlike Sukkot or Passover, which take place on the 15th of the month, when the moon is full and bright, on Rosh Hashanah, we can only see the tiniest sliver of the moon in the night sky. The psalm invites us to celebrate this New Moon, sounding the shofar in celebration.

This is reinforced in the next verse of the psalm *כִּי חֻק לְיִשְׂרָאֵל הוּא מִשְׁפָּט*, "For it is a law for all Israel, a judgment of the God of Jacob." (81:5) The rabbis interpret this to mean that Rosh Hashanah is also the day of God's judgment. According to the rabbis, this verse affirms the universalistic nature of Rosh Hashanah, teaching that it is a day of judgment for all peoples.

The psalm continues, *עֲדוֹת בְּיַהֲסֹף שָׁמוּ בְּצֵאתוֹ עַל־אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם שָׁפַת לֹא־יָדַעְתִּי*, "He placed it as a decree upon Joseph when he went forth from the land of Egypt; I heard a language that I did not know." (81:6) The Rabbis tell us that this verse means that Rosh Hashanah was the day that Joseph, all alone in prison in Egypt, was released and brought before Pharaoh, and interpreted the dreams of the King of Egypt, beginning his ascension to becoming Pharaohs' right-hand man. Like the new moon, in the darkness and in the midst of suffering, Joseph was set free, and God's plan began its first steps to fulfillment. This child of Israel, so far from his home and family that had rejected him, was about to begin the process of reunion, reconciliation, and renewal.

There is a famous expression: "You never get a second chance to make a first impression." Jewish tradition would modify this to say, "You always get another chance to start over again." As we renew ourselves from year to year, the opportunity to start over again comes with the wisdom gained from previous experiences. Each Rosh Hashanah is a time of possibility, an invitation to make a fresh start. This day marks a

moment of renewal for us collectively as the Jewish People, and as individuals walking our own unique paths.

The small sliver of lunar light that appears on the eve of Rosh Hashanah signifies our ability to renew our lives, to discover our connection with others, and provides us with the comfort that, as dark as things might get, hope is not too far off. Personally, I feel blessed to renew my service to Congregation Beth-El Zedeck, and bring my previous experiences to bear on my second go-round. On this Rosh Hashanah, may we all accept the invitation that this New Moon, and each subsequent New Moon, offers us, so that we may continually renew our lives in the year ahead.