



MIDEI CHODESH B'CHODSHO

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The Mystery of Rosh Chodesh

You may have never noticed, but Rosh Chodesh is something of a mystery.

What exactly is the nature of this monthly occasion? How does it fit into the parameters that usually define special occasions on the calendar? Is Rosh Chodesh to be treated as a festival, or an ordinary weekday?

Strangely, the picture that emerges from the practices of Rosh Chodesh is, at first glance, confounding and contradictory.

Consider the evidence:

In contrast to Shabbat and festivals, melacha is permitted on Rosh Chodesh.

At the same time, some scriptural and Talmudic sources do obliquely indicate that Rosh Chodesh is not to be viewed as a full-fledged workday. This potential limitation

on Rosh Chodesh melacha does not emerge from the Biblical sources prohibiting melacha on Shabbat and festivals. It is instead of rabbinic derivation, based on a tradition unique to Rosh Chodesh; a singular relationship between Jewish women and the occasion.

According to the Midrash, women present during the Revelation at Sinai refused to surrender their jewelry toward the sinful creation of the Golden Calf. In stark contrast, a short time later, these same women eagerly donated their possessions toward the construction of the Mishkan, the portable sanctuary in the desert.

As the Mishkan was erected on Rosh Chodesh, Hashem designated Rosh Chodesh as a holiday for women, a reward for the actions of their ancestors.

While this tradition does not give rise to a firm halachic mandate, in various communities women do abstain to some extent from work, particularly menial labor, on Rosh Chodesh.

As on other celebratory calendar occasions, fasting, eulogies and other sorrowful activities are proscribed on Rosh Chodesh.

Nonetheless, while some authorities recommend marking Rosh Chodesh with a festive meal, as is done on Shabbat and full festivals, on Rosh Chodesh such a celebration is not obligatory.

A portion of Torah text outlining the Rosh Chodesh offerings brought to Temple is read on Rosh Chodesh.

May the learning be לעילוי נשמת
My beloved father

MILTON BRAUN ז"ל

מנחם מנדל בן
יחיאל מיכל וחי' ז"ל

You are missed very much!

Judy Wasserman

Once again, however, mystery emerges. The Rosh Chodesh reading mirrors that of *chol hamo'ed*, the intermediate days of the festivals, when four individuals receive *aliyot* (are called to the Torah). This contrasts with weekdays, when three individuals are called; full festivals, when five individuals are called; and Shabbat, when seven individuals receive *aliyot*.

Adjustments are also made to the daily services through the omission of specific somber prayers and the inclusion of other passages appropriate to the occasion- such as Hallel (Psalms 113-118).

A significant difference, however, exists between the Hallel on year-round festivals and the Hallel on Rosh Chodesh. While the rabbis debate whether the year-round requirement is of biblical or rabbinic derivation, all agree to its obligatory nature.

In contrast, the Talmud clearly indicates that the practice of reciting Hallel on Rosh Chodesh originates as a *minhag*, a popular custom.

To reflect this distinction, Psalms 115: 1-15 and 116:1-15 are omitted from the Rosh Chodesh Hallel, resulting in what is colloquially referred to as a half-Hallel.

A Musaf (additional) offering, otherwise exclusive to Shabbat and festivals, was brought on Rosh Chodesh during Temple times.

Consequently, a Musaf Amida focusing on that Temple ritual is recited on Rosh Chodesh, as on Shabbat and festivals, after the morning service.

Perhaps the clearest indication of the unique, seemingly self-contradictory nature of Rosh Chodesh can be seen in its effect on the daily mitzva of wearing Tefillin.

Noting that Tefillin and Shabbat are each

described in the Torah as an *ot*, a sign of the relationship between the Jew and Hashem, the rabbis mandate the suspension of the mitzva of Tefillin on Shabbat and *yom tov*. Days that are intrinsically “signs,” the authorities argue, do not require the additional sign of Tefillin.

On Rosh Chodesh, however, an unusual pattern emerges. Tefillin are worn - as on

weekdays - during the morning service, the recitation of Hallel, and the reading of the Torah. They are then removed in most communities, however, before the recitation of the Musaf amida.

Thus, during the first portions of the morning service on Rosh Chodesh, we wear the

Tefillin as if it were a weekday, while during the concluding sections we remove them, as if it were Shabbat or a festival.

When all is said and done, therefore, we are left with a mystery. Our tradition seems intent on producing a day that is neither ordinary nor extraordinary, but *something in between*; a day which is neither a secular nor a festive occasion, *but an amalgam of both*.

Why does halacha create a monthly calendar event marked by such ambiguity?

Perhaps we can suggest that Rosh Chodesh earns its singular status from the pivotal role that it plays in the flow of our year.

Rosh Chodesh is not a full festival, yet it serves as the “driver” of all the year’s festivals. The very convening of Rosh Chodesh itself determines the days on which the upcoming calendar occasions will be marked.

Rosh Chodesh is thus designed to serve as an enabler, a critical calendar component that finds its ultimate importance, not in its own celebration, but in the occasions that flow from its observance. Rosh Chodesh does

not rise to the level of a Yom Tov; yet, absent Rosh Chodesh, all the year's events, joyous and solemn, would not occur.

Like all enablers, while Rosh Chodesh passes without great "personal" commotion, it quietly resonates with the power of all it brings into existence.

Perhaps that's the point.

Once a month, on days meant to be marked by personal introspection, Hashem challenges us to recognize and value the quiet enablers in our midst. He calls on us to truly "see" those individuals whose contributions, though neither public nor prominent, serve as catalysts for the achievements of others.

And, perhaps, on Rosh Chodesh He wants us to go one step further: to recognize our own value as potential enablers. He beckons us to accept and to teach our children that we don't always need to be center stage; that great, sometimes the greatest, rewards can be found in helping others reach their goals.

For, like Rosh Chodesh, all enablers absorb and carry with them pieces of the accomplishments that they help produce, enriching their own lives beyond measure. ■

Rabbi Goldin is the author of the OU Press volumes "Unlocking the Torah Text," and "Unlocking the Haggada."

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