

# Rosh Chodesh

By John Parsons

## The Concept of the New Moon

It takes about 29.5 days for the Moon to orbit the Earth. During each lunar orbit, the Moon's appearance changes from not visibly illuminated (a new moon) through partially illuminated (a waxing crescent) to fully illuminated (a full moon), then back through partially illuminated (a waning crescent) to not illuminated again (a new moon). This cycle of moon phases is called a lunation:



The first time that the waxing crescent of the Moon is visible marks the beginning of a Jewish month, called Rosh Chodesh ("head of the month"). Twelve chodashim make a shanah or year! However, since  $12 \times 29.5$  equals 354 days ... and a solar year is 365 days ... an extra month (called Adar Sheni) is added to the Hebrew calendar every two or three years in order to keep the solar seasons aligned with the lunar calendar).

Astronomy note: The Earth's moon is about 400 times smaller than the Sun but it is also about 400 times closer, so that they both appear to be about the same size in the sky. This accords with the Scripture that says, "And God made two great lights; the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night" (Gen. 1:16).

Since a Hebrew month may be either 29 or 30 days long, Rosh Chodesh may occur at two times:

1. If the current month has 29 days, Rosh Chodesh is observed on the first day of the new month.
2. If the current month has 30 days, Rosh Chodesh is observed on the last day of the month as well as on the first day of the new month.

The Shabbat service before the new moon is called Shabbat Mevarchim, or the “Sabbath that blesses the month.” After the Torah reading service, the leader holds the Torah scroll, recites a blessing for a good month, and then announces the day of the upcoming week when the new month will begin. Note that Shabbat Mevarekhim is not observed during the month of Elul (to announce the beginning of Tishri), since the entire month of Elul is a period of selichot and preparation for Rosh Hashanah and the High Holidays.

On the actual day that Rosh Chodesh occurs (in the coming week), the daily prayer service includes a musaf (additional) portion including part of Hallel (readings from the Psalms), an addition to the Shemoneh Esrei (about the extra sacrifice brought to the temple for Rosh Chodesh) and an additional Torah reading (Numbers 28:11-15).

## The History of Rosh Chodesh

According to Rabbinic tradition, the very first commandment given to the children of Israel after being delivered from Egypt was to sanctify the new moon (Exodus 12:1-2), thereby causing the fledgling nation to depart from the

solar tradition of the Egyptians (Ra worship) and to look to the moon for a new means of reckoning time and seasons:

This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you (Exodus 12:2)

The emergence of the moon - from darkness to light - is a picture of God's salvation for the Jewish people and our personal deliverance from darkness to light. Note that the word for month is chodesh, etymologically related to chadash, meaning new.

In Talmudic times, the day marking the New Moon was fixed by actual observation by at least two witnesses. As soon as the new moon was visible as a waxing crescent, the Sanhedrin (the Supreme Rabbinical Court) in Israel was informed and Rosh Chodesh was formally announced (this system was later discarded in favor of the fixed calendar developed by Hillel II (c. 360 CE.), which has been in use to the present day). The day after the new moon was sighted was a festival, heralded with the sounding of the shofar and commemorated with convocations and sacrifices.

Knowing precisely when Rosh Chodesh began was critical to the order of the mo'adim, or appointed times commanded by the LORD. In fact, the entire Jewish calendar was dependent upon knowing when Rosh Chodesh began, and without this information the set times for the festivals and holidays would be lost. Therefore, during times of persecution (e.g., by the Syrian-Greeks), the Jews were often forbidden to observe Rosh Chodesh as well as Shabbat, in order to keep them from obeying God.

Note: The correlation between the moon's monthly cycle and a woman's monthly cycle helped establish Rosh Chodesh as a women's holiday. In the Talmud [Megillah 22b], we read that women are exempt from work on Rosh Chodesh.

## Birkat HaChodesh (Sanctification of the Month)

Here is the additional blessing said during Shabbat Mevarchim (Sanhedrin 42a) that asks the LORD for a good month. It is recited at the synagogue at the end of the Shabbat Torah reading service:



*May it be Thy will, LORD, our God and God of our fathers, that You begin for us this month for good and for blessing. May You give to us long life, a life of peace, a life of goodness, a life of blessing, a life of sustenance, a life of physical health, a life in which there is fear of heaven and fear of sin, a life in which there is no shame or humiliation; a life of wealth and honor, a life in which we love Torah and fear God; a life in which the LORD fulfills the requests of our hearts for good. Amen. Selah.*

יְהִי רְצוֹן מִלְּפָנֶיךָ, יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ,

e-vo-tei-nu vei-lo-hei e-lo-hei-nu Adonai mi-le-fa-ne-kha ra-tson ye-hi  
our fathers and God of our God LORD May it be Thy will

שֶׁתְּחַדֵּשׁ עָלֵינוּ אֶת הַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה לְטוֹבָה וְלְבִרְכָה.

ve-liv-ra-khah le-to-vah haz-zeh ha-cho-desh et a-lei-nu she-te-cha-desh  
and for blessing for good this month ( ) for us that You begin

וְתֵתֶן לָנוּ חַיִּים אֲרוּכִים, חַיִּים שֶׁל שְׁלוֹם,

shalom shel chayim a-ru-khim chayim la-nu ve-tit-ten  
a life of peace long life May You give to us

חַיִּים שֶׁל טוֹבָה, חַיִּים שֶׁל בְּרָכָה, חַיִּים שֶׁל פְּרִיגָה,

ar-na-sah shel chayim be-ra-kha shel chayim to-vah shel chayim  
a life of sustenance a life of blessing a life of goodness

חַיִּים שֶׁל חֵלוּץ עֲצָמוֹת, חַיִּים שֶׁיֵּשׁ בָּהֶם יִרְאַת שָׁמַיִם

shamayim yir-at ba-hem she-yeish chayim a-tza-mot chil-lutz shel chayim  
fear of heaven a life in which there is a life of physical health

וְיִרְאַת חֵטָא, חַיִּים שֶׁאֵין בָּהֶם בּוֹשָׁה וּכְלָמָה,

u-ch-lim-mah bo-shah ba-hem she-ein chayim cheit ve-yir-at  
and humiliation shame a life in which there is no and fear of sin

חַיִּים שֶׁל עֲשָׂה וְכָבוֹד, חַיִּים שֶׁתִּהְיֶה בָּנוּ אֱהָבַת תּוֹרָה

to-rah a-ha-vat va-nu she-te-hei chayim ve-kha-vod e-seh shel chayim  
the love of Torah a life there will be in us a life of wealth and honor

וְיִרְאַת שָׁמַיִם, חַיִּים שֶׁיִּמְלֵא יְהוָה מִשְׁאֲלוֹת לְבַבֵּנוּ לְטוֹבָה

e-to-vah li-bei-nu mish-a-lot Adonai she-ye-ma-lei chayim shamayim ve-yir-at  
for good of our hearts the requests a life in which the LORD fulfills and fear of God



אָמֵן, סְלָה.

se-lah a-mein  
Selah Amen

## The Molad (time announcement)

After the invocation for the month's blessing from the LORD, it is customary for the time at which the new moon will appear in Jerusalem to be announced. First the congregation recites *mi she'asah nissim*, "the One who performed miracles":

מִי שֶׁעָשָׂה נִסִּים לְאַבוֹתֵינוּ, וְגַאֲל אֹתָם מֵעֲבָדוֹת  
לְחֵירוֹת, הוּא יְגַאֲל אֹתָנוּ בְּקָרוֹב, וַיִּקְבֹּץ נִדְחֵינוּ  
מֵאַרְבַּע כְּנָפוֹת הָאָרֶץ, חֲבֵרִים כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל.  
וְנֹמֵר: אָמֵן.

*The One who performed miracles for our forefathers and redeemed them from slavery to freedom, may He redeem us soon and gather in our exiles from the four corners of the earth; then all Israel shall be friends. Let us say: Amen.*

רֵאשׁ חֹדֶשׁ (month) יִהְיֶה בְּיוֹם (day of the week)  
הַבָּא עָלֵינוּ וְעַל כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל לְטוֹבָה.

*Rosh Chodesh (Hebrew month) will be on the day (Hebrew day of the week) that comes to us and to all Israel for good.*