



The holidays of the Bible play a crucial role in helping solidify our relationship with God, in reminding us of our history, our responsibilities for the present and of his plans for our future. They also provide occasions during which we can celebrate as families and as congregations that which binds us together as a vibrant and enduring community.

Aside from the weekly Shabbat, all the holidays are anchored to the months of the luni-solar Hebrew calendar. As described in the Bible, the ראש חודש (Rosh Chodesh – “head of the month”), also known as the אחד לחדש (echad l’chodesh – “first of the month”) is, itself, a holiday. In this article, we consider the scriptures attesting to this special day and how they guide our commemoration of it.

### **A Day of Worship for All Humanity**

We begin with Yeshayahu (Isaiah) 66:23, where we read, “And it will be, from new month to its new month, and from Shabbat to its Shabbat, all flesh shall come to worship before me, says YHVH.”<sup>1</sup>

A number of important facts emerge from this particular passage, which forms a closing crescendo for the entire book of Yeshayahu.

The first is that the beginning of the month, like the Shabbat, is a day of worship.

The second is that it, like the Shabbat, is for all humanity.

The third is that, despite present disinterest and neglect, these celebrations will regain their prominence in the age to come.

Therefore, as we continue our tour through relevant scriptures, we should not let the references to the temple and its rituals lead us into thinking the new month celebrations are nothing more than relics of antiquity, or the sole domain of a single

people. They have an important place in contemporary worship as well as being heralds of the world to come, having themselves an ongoing role in that future age.

### **In the Torah**

The first of the month as a celebration is introduced in the Torah, but, of all the holidays, it has the least coverage therein. The only general reference is in B'midbar (Numbers) 10:10, as follows:

And in the day of your gladness, and in your appointed times, and in your heads of months, you shall blow the trumpets over your burnt offerings, and over the sacrifices of your peace offerings. And they shall be to you for a memorial before your Elohim. I am YHVH your Elohim.

The context here is the instruction to fabricate a pair of silver trumpets to be sounded for assembling the people, both to regular holidays and random occasions of import.

B'midbar (Numbers) 28:11-15 details the korbanot (offerings) prescribed for the first day of the month, as follows:

And in the beginning of your months you shall bring near a burnt offering to YHVH: two bulls, sons of the herd, and one ram, seven lambs, sons of a year, ones without blemish; and three tenth parts of flour, a food offering mixed with oil for the one bull; and two tenths parts of flour as a food offering mixed with oil for the one ram; and a tenth part of flour mixed with oil as a food offering for the one lamb; a burnt offering, a soothing fragrance, a fire offering to YHVH; and their drink offerings shall be a half of a hin to a bull, and a third of a hin to a ram, and a fourth of a hin to a lamb, of wine.

This shall be the burnt offering of every month for the months of the year; and one kid of the goats for a sin offering to YHVH; it shall be prepared besides the continual burnt offering, and its drink offering.

The only other references in the Torah to the first of the month pertain to the first of the seventh month, the annual holiday Yom T'ru'ah (the Day of Tumult), which we discuss in a separate article. Most of what we learn about the first of the month in terms of how it is observed is found in other parts of the Bible outside the Torah.

This calls attention to an interesting fact with broad implications: Since the Torah contains only the barest introduction to the Rosh Chodesh, most of what we know about it was transmitted orally for hundreds of years until such times as various prophets wrote about it and their writings were accepted as holy scripture.

The first of the month's status as a holiday is reinforced by the fact that, seventeen times, it is mentioned alongside the Shabbat; sixteen times it accompanies mention or discussion of the annual holidays.

### **A Day of Assembly**

Like Yeshayahu, Yechezk'el (Ezekiel) wrote of the Rosh Chodesh as a day of worship:

So says Adonai YHVH: The gate of the inner court that faces the east shall be shut the six days of work. But on the Shabbat day it shall be opened, and in the day of the new month it shall be opened. And the prince shall enter by way of the porch of the gate from outside and shall stand by the gatepost. And the priests shall prepare his burnt offering and his peace offerings. And he shall worship at the threshold of the gate. Then he shall go out, but the gate shall not be shut until the evening.

And the people of the land shall worship at the door of that gate on the Shabbats, and on the new months, before YHVH.

And the burnt offering that the prince shall bring near to YHVH on the Shabbat day shall be six lambs without blemish, and a ram without blemish. And the food offering shall be an ephah for a ram, and a food offering for the lambs, a gift of his hand; and a hin of oil to an ephah.

And in the day of the new month: a bull without blemish, a son of the herd, and six lambs, and a ram, they shall be without blemish, and an ephah for a bull and an ephah for a ram he shall prepare as a food offering; and for the lambs as his hand can reach; and a hin of oil to an ephah. (chap. 46:1-7)

This passage is also discussing a future age and, in it, we have another description of the korbanot. These ingredients can distract us from a particularly noteworthy fact for the present: That is that the first day of the month is not merely a day of private worship; it is a day when the faithful assemble for communal worship.

### **A Day when Commerce is Prohibited**

Though daily worship is an integral part of the life of a disciple, the days of dedicated, communal worship set aside by God are each characterized by varying degrees of detachment and disengagement from the temporal world, that we may achieve a focus and freedom not otherwise available.

We learn from the prophet Amos that commerce is prohibited on Rosh Chodesh, even as it is on the Shabbat:

Hear this, you who swallow up the poor, even to make the humble of the land to cease, saying, "When will the new month have passed, so that we may buy grain, or the Shabbat, so that we may open the wheat, making smaller the ephah, and making greater the shekel, and to falsify the deceitful balances, in order to buy the helpless with silver, and the poor for a pair of sandals, and sell the chaff of the wheat?" (chap. 8:4-6)

One interesting aspect of this passage is that the avaricious described here do close their businesses on Rosh Chodesh and Shabbat in accordance with the custom of the land—but they do so begrudgingly. So the criticism here is not the failure of observance—that being a given—but the attitude associated with it, in addition, of course, to the larger issue of fair business practices.

Also noteworthy is the strident tone of Amos' criticism. He is not gently informing the ignorant or establishing some new standard; he is castigating the informed.

Though Rosh Chodesh observance shares some similarities with the Shabbat and the shabbatonim, it is nowhere described by either of these two terms except for the first day of the seventh month, Yom T'ru'ah, which is ordinarily a shabbaton (except when it falls on the weekly Shabbat).<sup>2</sup> Neither is there an explicit ban on labor connected with Rosh Chodesh as there are for the Shabbat and the shabbaton holidays.

For this reason, unpaid, volunteer and charitable labor is not only permitted, but encouraged during Rosh Chodesh, but we refrain from income-drawing employment.

Regarding allowances for certain types of labor on Rosh Chodesh, Ezra 7:8-9 (along with statements in Chapter 8) is instructive:

And he came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king. For on the first day of the first month he founded the ascent from Babylon, and on the first day of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, according to the good hand of his God upon him.

We learn from the following chapter that his "founding" the ascent did not mean his departure, for it tells us he first assembled about 1,500 adult males, plus women and children, beside the Ahava River, where they camped for three days. While at the river, Ezra inspected the ranks of the assembled, sent for Levites to join them and proclaimed a fast. Verse 31 of chapter 8 tells us they departed from the river on the twelfth day of the first month, so it appears they traveled along the river for nine days before leaving it. Three and-a-half months later, they arrived at Yerushalayim.

Given the head of the month's status as a day of worship, Ezra's piety, and some of the details we are given about their departure, it appears they spent a portion of their first day beside the river in worship, leaving their initial encampment two days later. Their arrival at Yerushalayim on the first day of the fifth month does not presume they traveled that entire day. Either they could have arrived "in haste" (whatever manner of haste they could make with the young and aged among them) shortly after sunset at the beginning of the first day of the month, or perhaps arrived in late morning, in time to make camp and congregate for worship before day's end. In either case, such travel would be uncharacteristic of a Shabbat.

Whether one's employment is in the commercial sector or not, employment itself is a commercial arrangement, as is engagement in an activity that brings income. It also diverts one from worship. Charitable labors, in contrast, are appropriate to the day—so long as they don't preclude sufficient time for private and communal worship.

### **A Day of Adjudication & Counsel**

One labor sometimes conducted on a Rosh Chodesh is the convening of judicial proceedings such as described in Ezra chapter 10. There the community was

compelled to take up the issue of forbidden marriages. “And the sons of the exile did so. And Ezra the priest, with men, heads of the fathers, according to the house of their fathers, and all of them by names, were separated. And they sat down in the first day of the tenth month to examine the matter. And they finished with all the men who had dwelt with foreign women by the first day of the first month.” (vs. 16-17) This was not a minor case, but a pervasive issue that threatened the very survival of the Jewish people. In this instance, it both commenced and closed on a Rosh Chodesh.

Such proceedings would not be held on either a Shabbat or a Shabbaton, though it is noteworthy that Yom T’ru’ah pictures the convening of the greatest judgment of all.

Melachim 2 (2 Kings) 4 recounts the day a son of a patroness of the prophet Elisha died. Not telling her husband of the boy’s death, “. . .she called to her husband, and said, ‘Please send to me one of the young men, and one of the asses, and I shall run to the man of Elohim, and return.’ And he said, ‘Why are you going to him today; it is neither new month nor Shabbat?’ And she said, ‘Shalom.’” So a personal consultation was also associated with either a Shabbat or a Rosh Chodesh.

### **Family Fellowship**

Being free from business and related labors, families have time to spend together as they do on other holidays. Shmu’el 1 (1 Samuel) 20 reflects this practice. “And David said to Yonatan, ‘See, the new month is tomorrow. And sitting I should certainly sit with the king to eat. And you shall send me away, and I shall be hidden in the field until the third evening’ . . . And Yonatan said to him, ‘Tomorrow is the new month, and you shall be expected, for your seat will be empty.’” (vs. 5, 18) Unfortunately, this vignette is hardly a picture of family harmony, but it still offers a window into customary sharing of the holiday.

### **A Harbinger**

Paul’s letter to the Colossians (2:16-17) contains the following, often misunderstood statement:

“Then let no one judge you in eating, or in drinking, or in respect of a feast, or of a new moon, or of Sabbaths—which are a shadow of coming things—but the body of the Moshiach.”

Contrary to popular Christian teaching, these are not discarded customs. He says they “are”—present tense—a shadow—their function continues. Moreover, Paul is writing to gentiles, hundreds of miles from the Holy Land—and the letter is generally dated at around 60 CE, roughly thirty years after the crucifixion. So this is actually an affirmation of continuing Shabbat, festival<sup>3</sup> and Rosh Chodesh observance for gentile as well as Jewish disciples of Yehoshua (as well as affirming the instructions regarding food and drink).

The various observances listed are framed by “. . . let no one judge you . . .” and “but the body of the Moshiach.” This is addressing customs pertaining to communal worship, where the body of Moshiach, as an organized entity, coordinates these common affairs so they may be shared and performed in common. (It does not say, as English translators would have us believe, “the body *is* of Christ,” for the Greek lacks “is.”)

Paul is reminding us that these various practices we draw from scripture are evidence of and enable us to glimpse what God has planned for us. They both work together to form that single shadow and they each focus on particular aspects within the divine plan.

For example, without going into detail, the Shabbat is a memorial of creation. “For in six days YHVH made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all which is in them, and He rested on the seventh day; on account of this YHVH blessed the Shabbat day and sanctified it.” [Sh’mot (Exodus) 20:11] At the same time, it also pictures the world to come: “So, then, there remains a Sabbath rest to the people of God. For he entering into his rest, he himself also rested from his works, as God had rested from his own. Therefore, let us exert ourselves to enter into that rest . . .” [Hebrews 4:9-11]. Sandwiched in between is the life-changing reprieve and rejuvenation we enjoy in the present on a weekly basis.

Even as Pesach (Passover) and the Chag haMatzot (Feast of Matzahs) vividly commemorate the deliverance of Israel from Egypt, we consider our own, personal salvation and are additionally apprised of a future, epic deliverance. Likewise is the account of the arousal of the holy spirit at Shavu’ot, and so on.

With each Rosh Chodesh, despite living in a society alienated from God, we recalibrate each month to YHVH’s schedule and to his plan, afforded with yet another occasion to worship and give thanks to him and to be refreshed with good fellowship. And as we do so, we are once more reminded that we will not always be marginalized sojourners, for, “It will be, from new month to its new month, and from Shabbat to its Shabbat, all flesh shall come to worship before me, says YHVH.

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<sup>1</sup> The Hebrew word behind the phrase “new month” is חֹדֶשׁ (chodesh), which literally means, simply, “new.” It is often translated into English as “new moon,” but this has led to both confusion and controversy as new moon has different meanings in different contexts. For

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example, in astronomy, new moon refers to the moment of lunar conjunction. With the Islamic and Karaite calendars, it refers to the first visible crescent (in the case of the Karaites, as observed from the land of Israel) and the roughly twenty-four hour period which follows. However, in the Bible, chodesh, when referring to a day, refers directly to the first day of the month and only indirectly to the renewing moon. It can also refer to the month as a whole.

<sup>2</sup> It is generally understood among us that there are different degrees as to the Torah's constraints on special days, as follows:

1. Yom haKippurim is a Shabbat and a fast day—a day of complete rest.
2. The weekly Shabbat, sometimes referred to as a “Shabbat Shabbaton,” is a day of rest, though that which relates to serving previously prepared meals is permissible. The kindling of a fire is expressly forbidden on a Shabbat.
3. With regard to a Shabbaton, Sh'mot (Exodus) 12:16 reads, “No work may be done on them. Only what must be eaten by your soul, that alone may be done by you.” This allowance, which is not present with the Shabbat instructions, is understood to give some latitude with food preparation, though as much as can be done is performed in advance of the Shabbaton.
4. None of the above restrictions apply to the Rosh Chodesh—only the prohibition of commerce (which obviously would be precluded on the above days as well).

<sup>3</sup> ἑορτή, is overwhelmingly a translation in the Septuagint of the Hebrew חַג (chag; festival—any of the three, annual shalosh regallim—Matzot, Sh'vu'ot and Sukkot), used likewise in the New Testament. Much more occasionally, it is supplied for מועד or מועד (mo'ed; appointment (e.g. Yechezk'el (Ezekiel) 46:9)—which, in addition to the chaggim, would include the annual Yom T'ru'ah and Yom Kippurim, as well as the more frequent appointments].