

# Rosh Chodesh

## Intersecting Feminism and Judaism

by Susan Berrin

*L'auteure analyse la fête juive Rosh Chodesh, une fête de renouvellement et une célébration pour les femmes juives, dans un contexte judaïque et féministe.*

The Jewish calendar follows a lunar-solar cycle: the months are charted by the moon while the seasons and festivals by the sun. When the moon is exactly between the earth and the sun, the sky is blackened, without any visible light from the moon, because we are facing the moon's dark side. This is called the *molad*, the birth of the moon, and marks the

beginning of Rosh Chodesh, the first day or days of the Hebrew month. Rosh Chodesh, a biblically-based holiday, was virtually ignored for the past few hundred years. It has been reclaimed in the last decades through a renaissance of celebration, due in great part to its rediscovery by Jewish women. Midrashic legend claims that the holiday was given to women as a reward for their refusal to relinquish their jewelry to the building of the golden calf.

More than most holidays, Rosh Chodesh is marked by the duality of canon and creativity, *kevah* and *kavana*. Because there is no set stricture for observance, Rosh Chodesh

has become a holiday marked by a richness in creativity. Its popular growth from both the wellsprings of women's creativity and traditional embeddedness, lends to an unusual *kavana*, spiritual intention. Rosh Chodesh serves as a welcoming, open door to women long estranged from Jewish life as well as a focal point for women steeped in tradition. The range and variety of Rosh Chodesh observances—from the gatherings of women in an Orthodox *tefillah* (prayer) group in Montreal to diverse groups in Winnipeg, Vancouver, and Victoria—attests to its wide appeal. Rosh Chodesh celebra-

tions focus women's gatherings with a spiritual dimension and root the Jewish experience with women's sensibilities.

Rosh Chodesh, as the intersection of Judaism and feminism, joins two, often separated parts of my life. It joins the teachings of two very important spheres of my existence. The women's movement has taught us about group experience and individual empowerment, egalitarianism, and the place of process in women's lives. Judaism has taught us about the God-human partnership, of awe as religious response, of the timeless quest for wholeness and holiness. Together Judaism and feminism find a natural intersection in Rosh Chodesh as a women's holiday exemplary in essence and form.

Judaism serves to ground feminism by recognizing and valuing ritual. Tradition is understood even while successive generations embellish its gift with the insights of new realities. The ritual aspect of Rosh Chodesh observance becomes a forum for addressing the content of women's lives. It is an experience of centrality, moving women from an "other" to a normative experience.

Rosh Chodesh gatherings have become a primary venue for new ritual and life cycle events precisely because women's lives are, for the most part, not mirrored in traditional rituals. Rituals have the potential to make our lives richer. They connect us to a world larger than ourselves, to a sense of purpose, holiness, and Divine mystery. It is through the enactment of ritual that we acknowledge and create sacred time and space. And I think that we are more and more in need of this connection as our lives become increasingly frenetic and alienated. Through the performance of ritual, we are reconnected through symbolic memory to others and to places within ourselves that are often



Phyllis Serota, "Woman at Rosh Chodesh," watercolour on paper, 15" x 22", 1994

ignored in the mundaneness of our lives. Ritual gives voice to inner feelings and expresses truth in a symbolic way. Whether alone or in a group, ritual becomes the synapse linking us to something more profound than ourselves.

A vast compendium of rituals has been developed specifically to speak to and reflect the content of women's lives, to take the ordinary events of our lives and ritualize them, make note of their importance, make them holy, give them depth and sanctity. New rituals being observed on Rosh Chodesh include those marking birth, weaning, miscarriage, marriage, divorce, onset of menarche, fertility and infertility, menopause, and aging. In addition to rituals created to sanctify the joys and sorrows of women's lives, new rituals are also being adapted which mark the festive year through the lens of women's sensibilities. These new rituals are performed at Rosh Chodesh for several reasons. First, Rosh Chodesh is emerging as a symbol of women's covenant with God—the ever-changing, recurring moon is a mirror of women's body cycles—and is thereby an appropriate holiday for women's rituals. And the symbolism of hope drawn from the moon's waxing phase, lends an important spiritual message to these rituals.

Exploring the spiritual in this setting implores us to incorporate not only the *limud* (study) but also the *ma-aseh* (action). Through woman's sense of connectedness, that dimension of our lives in which relationships are esteemed, in which our intuition guides us to assess and address

the needs of others, we transcend the spiritual with action, a basic Jewish response. Here feminism's appeal of redress, of activity fed by analysis, is manifested. We make the personal political. We connect the spiritual, individual experience into one of a larger, communal nature. And through ritual, experienced within the framework of the community, we enhance the individual's connection with the Creator, strengthening the covenantal partnership.

Contemporary Rosh Chodesh observances are generally marked as a group experience. Whether this falls under the aegis of a Synagogue Sisterhood, or a living room of unaffiliated Jews, it is marked as a circle of women. The circle is an organic, egalitarian whole. The group may meet once or be on-going, but a tenet of almost every gathering would be the empowerment of its individual participants. For some, this may take the form of learning new skills in a safe, women-only environment. For others it may be the place in which new rituals are birthed, new poetry shared, blessings offered in a new, holy assembly. For all women gathering to greet the moon's crescent, it is an act of faith in the ongoing cycle of our lives.

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