

Walk through the Parsha

with **Rabbi David Walk**



VAYAKHEL-P'KUDEI

We Are Moonies!

This Shabbat we read the special section in Sefer Sh'mot for the Shabbat either preceding or landing on Rosh Chodesh Nissan (Sh'mot 12:1-20). These verses begin by discussing the Mitzva of setting up our national calendar by sanctifying the day upon which the new moon appears as Rosh Chodesh. After that, we have the introduction to the Mitzva of the Paschal Lamb (KORBAN PESACH). This year I'd like to focus on verse 2 in this section, which informs us: This month (Nissan, also called Chodesh Ha'Aviv, the first New Moon after the Vernal Equinox) shall be the first month of the year for you.

Let's ignore all the laws of setting up a national calendar, and, instead, focus on two crucially important ideas contained in this statement. This first concept derived from this verse is that we Jews have the power to sanctify things (L'KADESH). That's why the blessing associated with prayers on Rosh Chodesh and our Biblical Chagim is built from this phase: M'KADESH YISRAEL V'HAZ-MANIM. God sanctifies us (Yisrael) and we, in turn, sanctify these calendar dates. Cool! And powerful.

In this piece, though, I'm going to turn my attention to the second idea: We identify with the MOON! As opposed to every other civilization in the ancient world, which identified with the Sun, and established their calendars accordingly.

Why is this so important? Because this idea defines us. Most of human history is a series of major civilizations rising, flourishing and, eventually, disappearing. The list is long: Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, Persia, Greece, Rome. Not one returned for an encore. But the Jews, we just keep coming back for more. Why? Because we identify with the Moon which goes through cycles only to shine brightly every fifteenth of the month.

The second critical idea: We have the power of CHIDUSH, renewal!

These are our two Jewish super-powers: the ability to sanctify and the power to renew. This second idea, of course, feeds into the capacity to repent. T'SHUVA is central to Jewish thought, and it derives from this faculty of CHIDUSH, renewal.

The centrality of the Moon and its cycles within Jewish tradition is very visible, if one endeavors to look. We, as a nation, are so impressed with the energy of the full Moon that most of the Full Moon days (the fifteenth of each month) in the calendar are celebrated: Pesach, Pesach Sheni, Tu

b'Av, Sukkot, Tu BiShvat, Purim and Purim Katan. We don't say TACHANUN on the majority of the Full Moon days.

It's really sad that light pollution has diminished the significance of the Full Moon in our modern world. But, please, go for a night hike in Midbar Yehuda or the Negev on a Full Moon night. It's amazing! You can actually read by the Moon's light when it's full. But the print does have to be rather big (and you do have to know how to read).

Rabbeinu Bechaye (B'reishit 38:30) notes that the entire history of the Jews in Tanach can be compared to one massive cycle of the Moon. The twins born to Yehuda and Tamar are Zerach ('shining' like the Sun) and Peretz (one who 'breaks through', like the Moon). It's Peretz who fathers the heads of Yehuda's tribe and our kings. The fifteenth heir to that lineage is Shlomo the Full Moon of our Biblical leaders, and the line goes on for 14 more generations before going dark with Tzidkiyahu, at the time of the Destruction.

So, it should be no surprise that our ancestors decreed that we should celebrate this rebirth of the Moon. That commemoration of the return of the Moon's light and our hope is called Kiddush L'vana.

Originally, we used to say that all-purpose nature B'RACHA: OSEH

MA'ASEI B'REISHIT (Who made the Act of Creation; Tosefta, B'rachot 9:2). This is the blessing we recite for amazing natural phenomena, like majestic mountains or beautiful vistas. But the blessing for the re-emerging Moon has grown over time.

Here's the present version:

Blessed are You, Eternal our God, King of the universe, Who created the heavens by Your command, and all their host by Your word. You subjected them to fixed laws and time, so that they might never deviate from their set function. They are glad and happy to do the will of their Creator, the true Author, whose achievement is truth. He ordered the Moon to renew itself as a glorious crown over those He sustained from birth, who likewise will be regenerated in the future, and will worship their Creator for His glorious majesty. Blessed are You, O Eternal, who renews the months. (Masechet Sofrim 20)

The most important of the 52 Hebrew words (Gematriya: BEN, suggesting progeny and continuity) in this blessing is: SHE'TICHADESH ('that You renew it'). That is what we celebrate. And, indeed, we are supposed to be celebrating.

There are a number of ingredients to this celebratory mindset. The most famous element is that we wait to

recite this blessing until MOTZEI SHABBAT (Saturday night), because at that time we are well-dressed and in good spirits. Many POSKIM (the Vilna Gaon in the lead), over the centuries, demanded that we recite the blessing as soon as possible (for Ashkenazim, that means three days after the MOLAD or 'birth' of the New Moon), for the 'zealous rush to perform Mitzvot'.

The Sfat Emet explains that the mitzva of sanctifying the new moon was given to Israel precisely because we are a people defined by renewal. Just as the Moon disappears only to shine again, so too the Jewish people possess an inner capacity for continual rebirth. Every time we recite Kiddush L'vana, we affirm our faith that the hidden light of Israel will ultimately shine once more.

So, in our joy, we greet each other (SHALOM ALEICHEM) and we sing (TOVIM M'OROT) and do a little dance. But the greatest joy: We feel that we are greeting our Creator as things were when God created everything, and our tradition is that the Moon was as great as the Sun then. This is our 'joy' and our hope: We can go back to our former greatness! The rebuilt Beit HaMikdash and the renewed Davidic Dynasty are on the way.

The 'renewal' can be absolute!

We get inspired every month by the

sight of the return of that silver sliver in the sky. So, yes, we are 'moonies' of a certain kind, and we're both joyous and proud of it. CHODESH TOV! 