

Taking a Closer Look

²⁶“See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse (בְּרָכָה וּקְלָלָה)—²⁷ the blessing, if you listen (*sh'ma*, i.e., listen) to the mitzvot of Adonai your God that I am commanding you today, ²⁸ but the curse, if you do not listen (*sh'ma*) to the mitzvot of Adonai your God, but turn from the way I am commanding you today, to go after other gods you have not known” (Deut. 11:26-28).

There are no Shortcuts

The month of *Elul* begins tonight when the sun sets. *Elul* is the month of repentance in Jewish tradition. This week's *Parasha* is *Re'eh* (ראה) the same root as the Hebrew *Pa'al* verb 'to see' (*Roeh*) and it is translated “See, Behold or Take a closer look.” It is. It deals with the choices in a life devoted to *Adonai* – choices that ultimately bring life or death. In this section of the *Torah* we are severely warned against idolatry in its various forms and given instructions about the food we may or may not partake of, the *Shemithah* (sabbatical) years and reminded about the *moadim*. Every time I encounter this particular *Torah* Portion, the *Ruach* prompts me to remind you that there are no shortcuts and we must pause and take a closer look at the choices before us: we can choose life and blessing or cursing and death.

Do we need reminders? As I prepared for today it was as if *Adonai* was asking me ‘Tony, take a closer look.’ As I read over the *Parasha* in preparation for this message, I found many reminders. Tonight at sundown starts the month of *Elul*, the first day of the sixth month. Do we remember that: “¹⁶ Three times a year all your males are to appear before Adonai your God in the place He chooses—at the Feast of Matzot, the Feast of Shavuot, and the Feast of Sukkot. No one should appear before Adonai empty-handed—¹⁷ the gift of each man's hand according to the blessing Adonai your God has given you” (Deut. 16:16-17). King David said: “I will not offer burnt offerings to Adonai my God that **cost me nothing...**” (2 Sam. 24:24, 1 Chron. 21:24) How often do we remember that we are required (it is not optional) to appear before *Adonai* during the Three High Holiday Festivals?

Each Biblical month begins with the crescent New Moon, also called First Visible Sliver. The Hebrew word for month is *chodesh*, which literally means New Moon and only by extension the period between one New Moon and the next. The first day of *Aviv* (or *Nisan*) was and is a historic day: it is the day when we received our first commandment as a nation: *sanctify the new moon* (Ex. 12:1-2). The new moon (month) in Ancient Israel was declared by a *Sanhedrin* (*Beit Din*) after hearing the testimony of two eyewitnesses. This monthly ritual had a profound spiritual and historic significance for Jews living all over the world: the establishment of when *chagim* (Biblical Holy Days) fall, how many days they encompass and when they are celebrated in and out of Israel. By virtue of this commandment, the Jewish people were/are given mastery and privilege over the reckoning of time. You can say that from that moment onward the calendar with its cycle of *Shabbat*, *chagim* and festivals could exist only when human witnesses authoritatively declared the new month. This signifies more than control over the determination of time and the everyday events of daily life. It represents the potential for change/renewal, for rebirth/growth, and for the waning/waxing of the moon each month.

He Created the Moon (and Sun) for Holidays

There can be no doubt that the biblical Holidays are dependent on the sun and the moon: “¹⁴Then God said, “Let lights in the expanse of the sky be for separating the day from the night. They will be for signs and for seasons (*lemo'adim*) and for days and years” (Gen. 1:14). The strongest proof of this is the passage in Psalm 104:19a: “¹⁹He made the moon for appointed times (*mo'adim*)...” The Hebrew term *mo'adim* [appointed times] is the same word used to describe the Biblical Holidays. Leviticus 23, which contains a registry of the Biblical Holidays opens with the statement: “These are the appointed *moadim* of Adonai, which you are to proclaim to be holy convocations—My *moadim*” So when the Psalmist tells us that God created the moon for *mo'adim* (the appointed times), he means that the moon was created to determine the time of the *Mo'adim* of Adonai – the Biblical High Holidays.

This verse clearly teaches us that the holidays are related to the moon. But when the *Torah* was given Psalm 104 had not yet been written, so then how did the ancient Israelites could have known this. The answer is that the Hebrew word for month (*chodesh*) itself indicates a connection to the moon. We can see this connection in a number of instances in which *chodesh* (month) is used interchangeably with the word *yareach/yerach*, the common Biblical Hebrew word for moon, which by extension also means “month”. For example: “...in the month (*beyerach*) of Bul, which is the eighth month (*chodesh*)...” (1 Kings 6:38) and “at the feast, in the month (*beyerach*) *Ethanim*, which is the seventh month (*chodesh*)” (1 Kings 8:2). Another proof that *chodesh* is related to the moon (*yerach*) is the phrase “And he stayed with him a month (*chodeh yamim*)” (Gen 29:14) [that is, a period of 29 or 30 days] which is equivalent to the phrase “and mourn her father and mother a full month (*yerach yamim*)...” (Deut. 21:13) Clearly then *chodesh* is related to *yareach*, which itself literally means the moon.

***Chodesh* Means New Moon (Day)**

The primary meaning of *chodesh* (month) is actually “New Moon” or “New Moon Day” and it is only by extension that it came to mean “month”, that is, the period between one New Moon and the next. This primary meaning is preserved in a number of passages such as *1 Sam 20:5* in which Jonathan says to David “...Behold, tomorrow is the new moon (*rosh chodesh*)...” Clearly, in this verse *chodesh* is used to refer to the specific day on which the month begins and not the entire month. Another passage is *Ez. 46:1*: “...but it shall be opened on the sabbath day and opened on the day (*yom*) of the new moon (*hachodesh*)...” Clearly in this verse *chodesh* (New Moon) is a specific event and the beginning of the month is the day on which this event (New Moon) occurs.

The Biblical New Moon is the “First Crescent”

Chodesh (New Moon) is derived from the root *chet-dalet-shin* (.ח.ד.שׁ) meaning “new” or “to make new/renew”. The Crescent New Moon is called *chodesh* because it is the first time the moon is seen anew after being concealed for several days at the end of the lunar cycle. At the end of the lunar month the moon is close to the sun (from the perspective of an observer on the earth) and eventually reaches the point of “conjunction” when it passes between the Sun and the Earth (it is on the same plane as the Sun and the Earth). Around the time of conjunction very little of the moon's illuminated surface faces the Earth and it is not visible through the infinitely brighter glare of the sun. After the moon moves past the sun it continues towards the opposite side of the Earth. As it gets farther away from the sun the percentage of its illuminated surface facing the Earth increases and one evening shortly after sunset the moon is seen anew after being invisible for 1½ -3½ days (in the Middle East). Because the moon is seen again after being invisible it was called “a New Moon” or *chodesh* (from *chadash* meaning “new”).

The Crescent New Moon vs. The Astronomical New Moon

Many people have been led astray by the inaccurate use in modern languages of the term “New Moon”. Modern astronomers adopted this otherwise unused term, which had always referred to the first visible sliver, and used it to refer to conjunction (when the Moon passes between the Earth and the Sun, at which time it is not visible). The astronomers soon realized that the inaccurate use of “New Moon” to refer to conjunction would lead to confusion so to be more accurate scientists now distinguish between “Astronomical New Moon” and “Crescent New Moon”. “Astronomical New Moon” means New Moon as is used by astronomers (conjunction). In contrast, “Crescent New Moon” uses the term in the original meaning of the first visible sliver. A good English dictionary should reflect both meanings. For example, the Oxford American Dictionary of the English Language widget in the McIntosh Computer defines New Moon as: “*The phase of the moon when in conjunction with the sun and invisible from the earth [Astronomical New Moon] or shortly thereafter when it appears as a slender crescent [Crescent New Moon]*”