

EREV ROSH HASHANAH  
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It is common knowledge among those of us who work at Jewish summer camps that every year, you grow and learn in ways you never imagined when the season began. For me, my latest moment of insight came during our last havdalah ceremony together. Each week, the entire camp community gathers standing in concentric circles. In each circle, campers and staff stand with their arms around each other in a communal embrace as we usher out the Sabbath Bride. The last week of camp arrived in the month of Av, and we had recently marked together the traditional day of Jewish mourning and fasting for the destruction of the Temple, Tisha B' Av (the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av). The camp director, in his final address to all of us, asked us to look at the beautiful night sky, one of my favorite things about camp. He reminded us that because the Jewish calendar is dictated by the cycles of the moon, the moon that is in the sky on every Jewish festival is the same moon.

Rosh Hashanah is no exception. In fact, tonight if you look up, you will be able to witness a new moon in the sky, with no glow to light up the night. Every year, we are part of an ancient, intentional tradition based on cycles and circles. Unlike all of us, the Jews of the past could not access

their phone to check the date or Google the exact time to light their new holiday candles. The Rabbis who set up our current calendar system chose the moon and the lunar calendar because of its identifiable visual elements and reliability. Dates for major festivals were laid out based on the dates given in the Torah, but they looked to the night sky first to ensure an accurate date of celebration. Once witnesses confirmed that the moon matched the correct day, fires lit up the hills all over the land of Israel to tell the people that the time had yet again come to mark a new month, a new year, or to celebrate a harvest festival. I always find myself moved and inspired by this image—the dozens hilltops in communities all over igniting, one after the other to bring the Jewish people together in a single holy moment. The Rabbis valued the cycle of time, the circle of repetition. The reliable phases of waxing and waning light served as a guide to understanding special Jewish time and space.

This is crucial for us to remember as we approach a new year, a new month, a new instant in our own lives. Our own personal calendars also probably contain important milestones we approach each year—birthdays, dates of the deaths of loved ones, anniversaries, new jobs, college reunions. These are just a few examples of cycles of time that do not rely on the moon, but they come around each year for us to mark. There are two ways we can

approach this concept of cyclical time. One is to dread it, to fear the next coming moment—to create an image for you, we may feel stuck on a hamster wheel, going round and around without any real movement. The other is to approach the circle coming back around again as an opportunity, a moment where we can do the same thing a little differently this time. When you think about it, what’s your gut reaction about returning to these same moments year after year? It might be difficult to see a spiral of time as exciting, but the scholar and author Thomas Cahill suggests that seeing a repeated event or occasion with fresh eyes on a regular basis is a uniquely Jewish approach to placing oneself in time and space. Let me elaborate on his theory.

Cahill’s bestselling book “The Gift of the Jews” examines the profound impact that the rise of Judaism made on all of human history. Up until the emergence of the Jewish people and even after it, civilizations from the Sumerians to the Greeks saw the world with essentially the same point of view. Everything that has ever happened will happen again, there is nothing new to see or learn. Time is a cycle that goes around and around with no end in sight. We live as victims of our own fate, playthings of the gods. Cahill claims that the Jews broke the mold and shattered this conception of time and space. The stories of our ancestors taught the world a new way of

thinking. Each event created a new step in the cycle, a fresh adventure waiting to be taken as each day, week, and year flew by over and over again. The wheel of history no longer held us captive—it opened doors and exposed possibilities. The cycle of our lives and of time itself came from the Jewish view of the world. He sums it up in his writing as follows,

*“The Jews gave us the Outside and the Inside, our outlook and our inner life. We dream Jewish dreams and hope Jewish hopes. Most of our best words, in fact --new, adventure, surprise; unique, individual, person, vocation; time, history, future; freedom, progress, spirit; faith, hope, justice --are gifts of the Jews.”*

I think Rosh Hashanah provides for us a renewed chance to remember the gifts of Jewish heritage and history. Each year when the New Moon appears in the sky some time in the month of September, it’s a signal to all of us. The night sky reminds us that a new year is beginning. We arrive at the same date every year, but we are different when we arrive there. Our personal lives have changed, we have grown and been challenged in countless ways, we look and feel completely different than last Rosh Hashanah. Next Rosh HaShanah, the same cycle and different behaviors will be repeated. The turning of the year in itself gives us a radical opportunity. We can prepare ourselves to change. In the time between Rosh

Hashanah and Yom Kippur, when the moon is half in light and half in the darkness, we are charged with the responsibility to engage in teshuvah. Like the moon, we too will dwell in an in-between space. The Jewish people on the Days of Awe flutter from the light of compassion and forgiveness to the darkness of sin and self-doubt and back again. Each person must atone for our wrongdoings, apologize to those we have hurt, and resolve to be better. This is not simply by chance.

I believe that the Torah and the Rabbis, each in their own age, were acutely aware of human nature. One new moon brings adventures, open doors, and positive developments in our relationships with others. When the next month comes around, it is extremely likely that we may have slipped up, missed the mark, or damaged our connections with our loved ones. Our pride and maybe stubbornness can interfere with our ability to heal or improve. Then, when we aren't even ready for it, the cycle brings us again the occasion we need to change. We can decide to do better, to make more of an effort, and to make a difference in our world. Teshuvah comes from the same root as the verb "to return." We need to wake up, remember where we are, and return with renewed commitment to our own existence. In fact, it is our Jewish obligation to be active participants in shaping our own fate. In the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Tamid, the Sages ask, "Who is wise?

The one who sees the new moon in the sky.” I love this quote because it takes a second or two to understand fully. With the new moon we see dark, so technically you cannot see the moon or its shape. However, if you know and believe that it is there, if you see the potential for the cycle of the moon to begin again, that is true wisdom. When you go back to your car tonight look at the sky above and remember that it isn’t just darkness—the sky is full of possibilities, our future, and it signals to us to be ready for a new year ahead.