

# Parshat Va'eyra

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## The Haftara for Shabbat Rosh Chodesh.

The connection between Rosh Chodesh and our haftara<sup>1</sup> is rather easy to detect. The framework for the haftara is an eschatological vision - a vision of the world at the mysterious "end of time" - in which the entire world population arrives at a recognition of the majesty of God. In that era, the Navi Yishayahu tells us that;

"... On each new moon and each Sabbath, all mankind shall come to worship Me" (66:23)

So Rosh Chodesh is a global day of homage to God. If it is not the case nowadays, then it is destined to be that way in messianic times.

This very clearly draws us to a question of definition as regards Rosh Chodesh. What is Rosh Chodesh about? Is it a festive day? If so, how should we all celebrate Rosh Chodesh? And what are the dimensions of this day beyond its celebratory nature? – In our mussaf prayer we describe it as a "time of atonement." Clearly, a thorough investigation is necessary.

### **PART 1 – ROSH CHODESH IN TANACH**

In the Torah, Rosh Chodesh's festive status reflects a certain ambivalence. It is not mentioned amongst the Chagim when they are listed in terms of their dates and special practices (eg. in Vayikra Ch.23.) On the other hand, when the special Mussaf korbanot are listed, Rosh Chodesh is detailed alongside Shabbat as a day for additional festive sacrifice (See Bamidbar 28:11-15). So what is the precise festive nature of this day?

One text stands out quite clearly delineating Rosh Chodesh as a festival or holiday.

"And on your festive days, your holidays and **New Moons**, you shall sound the trumpets, over your sacrifices ... and it shall be a remembrance before God." (Bamidbar 10:10)

Here Rosh Chodesh is equated with festivals as a day of celebration and connection before God.

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<sup>1</sup> The haftara for Shabbat Rosh Chodesh is always the same. It comes from the final Chapter of Sefer Yishayahu - Isaiah ch.66.

Rosh Chodesh as a day of national celebration is evident from a number of places in Nakh. In the court of King Saul, the day of Rosh Chodesh was a day of feasting and family (I Sam 20). It would appear that the custom of joining one's family in a special seuda on Rosh Chodesh was still around even in the times of the Gemara. The Talmud Yerushalmi in Megilla 1:4 states:

"Both the se'uda of Rosh Chodesh and that of Purim should not be celebrated on an earlier date but rather (if those days fall on a shabbat) it should be postponed."

Here we see that Rosh Chodesh was an occasion for a seudat mitzva just like Purim.

But it would seem that Rosh Chodesh had additional significance in the times of the Nevi'im. In the story of Elisha and the Shunnamite woman, the woman goes to see the prophet and her husband proclaims:

"Why are you visiting him today? It is not Rosh Chodesh nor is it Shabbat." (Melachim II 4:23)

In other words, Rosh Chodesh was a day for visiting the prophet, one assumes, to hear his wisdom. This clearly informs us regarding Rosh Chodesh as a day of the spirit, a day for limud Torah.

From the story about Shaul and from this source, we may deduce that Rosh Chodesh was a day of rest, having some sort of "Issur Melacha" during which the people would have a public holiday, some leisure time. During these days, the family would be able to celebrate together but this would also allow family members to travel to the Navi and to spend their "day of rest" with the prophet – a man of God – and to study Torah with him.

So to summarise this section, Tanach certainly categorises Rosh Chodesh as a happy day of rejoicing, Torah, additional sacrifice and family feasting.

### **PART 2 - ATONEMENT**

Earlier, we mentioned the Mussaf of Rosh Chodesh. The Torah parsha there – Bamidbar 28- should attract particular attention, and this, due to an unusual choice of phraseology in the Biblical text.

Let us explain. All Yamim Tovim, in their sacrificial retinue, require the offering of "a single goat as a sin offering for atonement" (28:22, 29:5 and in other variations 28:30, 29:11, 16, 19 etc.) In the case of Rosh Chodesh the text speaks of "a single goat as a sin offering TO THE LORD" and this phrase - the addition of the "to the Lord" - is noted by the classic commentators as greatly significant.

Rambam in the Moreh Nevuchim understands this phrase within the cultural milieu of the ancient near-East. He explains the unusual phraseology in the following manner:

" ...Due to the concern that one might draw a comparison between the goat of Rosh Chodesh and the sacrificial goat offered by the Egyptians to the new moon, the Torah put special emphasis that this sacrifice is a result of the command of God – not for the moon" (Moreh 3:46)

But this is not the only possible approach<sup>2</sup>. The Sephorno takes a very different, symbolic line:

"The survival of Am Yisrael is just like the moon which has no independent illumination whatsoever, except that which it receives from an external source. ... When they sinned, they were removed from statehood - unlike other nations. But they continued in accordance to God's abundant radiance towards them without which they would walk in darkness. Just like the moon when it does not receive the rays of the sun, for "*Ein mazal LeYisrael*" - Israel lie above the natural order of things. They have no independent light except the light of God. ....Thus God is referred to by metaphors of light (Isaiah 10:16, Tehillim 27:1 - Hashem ORI veYish'i) and when Israel sin, their sins eclipse God and divide them from him: "Your sins have separated you from God and your evil deeds have hid (God's) face from you." (Isaiah 52:2)

The atonement sacrifice of Rosh Chodesh is an atonement for Israel on having diminished the light (by sinning and distancing themselves from God) as we say in our Mussaf prayer : "The sin offering to atone for them, it should be a memorial to them all, and a REDEMPTION FOR THEM FROM THE HANDS OF THEIR OPPRESSORS." ... The diminishment of the moon is the Galut of Israel and the hiding of God's face from them."

This explanation is rather metaphorical, but it is powerful in its symbolism. The sun is a metaphor for God, the moon a metaphor for the Jewish people. At Rosh Chodesh the contact between moon and sun is at an all time low. Rosh Chodesh is therefore a time of atonement and reflection upon the situations in which we let ourselves drift from God to the point of galut and "God's hidden face."

Of course here we see a certain duality or ambivalence in Rosh Chodesh, because the very reason for atonement is also a cause for rejoicing and celebration. As Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch points out (Torah commentary Shemot 12:1-2), Rosh Chodesh is the turning point of the month. Yes, the moon is estranged from the sun on Rosh Chodesh, thus we feel a sense of "Hester Panim." But, in fact Rosh Chodesh is the first glimpse of light AFTER the darkness, the first sliver of illumination after the eclipsed moon. Rosh Chodesh is the REBIRTH of the moon, the

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<sup>2</sup> Rashi gives two explanations; the first Halakhic; the second, a somewhat baffling and theologically daring Midrash:

*"TO THE LORD: This teaches us that this goat is a special atonement sacrifice for inadvertent sins. Here no-one knows of the sin other than God (hence a sin offering to the Lord.) ... The Midrashic explanation: God said, 'Bring an atonement sacrifice for me, because I diminished the moon.'"*

The Sephorno talks about Israel's atonement on Rosh Chodesh. Here it would appear that Rashi suggests that God Himself is in some need of atonement. This certainly has a radical ring to it.

moment in which the moon receives the first new rays from the sun after a period of total darkness.

"...each time the moon finds the sun again, each time it receives its rays of light ... God wants His people to find Him again and to be illuminated with fresh rays of His light wherever and however, in running their course, they have had to pass through periods of darkness and obscurity. ...The moon finding itself again in conjunction with the sun is only to be a model for our finding ourselves again with God, the rejuvenation of the moon, a picture of, and incentive to, our own rejuvenation. Moed is literally a conjunction (meeting)..."

Hence, we might understand why our major festive holidays (Pesach and Sukkot) are on the 15th of the month - a day of maximum contact between sun and moon - symbolising maximal hashgacha between Israel and God.

On this basis, we should be able to grasp the serious side of Rosh Chodesh but we can also understand why Rosh Chodesh is a festive day. (Much like the most "famous" Rosh Chodesh of them all – Rosh Hashanna which is a fully fledged festival, and yet one of our days of awe, judgement and atonement.)

### **PART 3 – OUR HAFTARAH . YISHAYAHU CHAPTER 66**

So much for our historical-philosophical background to Rosh Chodesh. Let us give a quick summary to our chapter in Yishayahu so that it will begin to take shape:

1-6 : God expresses his distaste of those who express religious sentiment (especially towards the Temple and its rituals) outwardly but who are immoral in their personal conduct. He promises to visit retribution upon these people.

7-14 : A swift redemption: The people will return to Jerusalem so quickly that it will be as if an entire nation has been born in a moment. Prosperity will return to Israel (actually, it only mentions Jerusalem.)

15-17 : God's vengeance against the sinners

18-24 : The Gentile nations will recognise God and pay homage to Him in Jerusalem.

Note an interesting "time warp" here. Yishayahu switches very easily from his own time and its problems to future messianic "end of days". He also mixes two themes: destruction and rebirth. The destruction of the wicked and the rebirth of Israel are mixed together, without a sense of contradiction, despite the dichotomy between them. He predicts devastating destruction and in the very next breath predicts a national and spiritual rebirth of phenomenal speed and proportions.

Yishayahu is talking at a time - towards the end of the First Temple - in which corruption is rife and Jewish priorities are warped. In the first Chapter of Yishayahu, God relates how he cannot bear sacrifices from people who are sinners.

" Incense is offensive to me. New Moons and Shabbat ... I cannot abide" (1:13)

Why are the days upon which people visit the Temple bringing additional, special sacrifices abhorrent to God? Because the people are hypocritical to the core, practising their religion as an external gesture, a ceremonial ritual, but within their lifestyles, they lead unethical and violent lives. That is Chapter 1. In our perek, Ch.66, we see God's intent to destroy that world and the promise of rebirth to a new world. In that reality, not only would God will reign supreme, but the ethical, spiritual and moral values of God shall permeate civilisation. Here in Chapter 66 it is Rosh Chodesh and Shabbat that are singled out for special attention. These days would appear to reflect the disparity between the corrupt "old world" and the "new world."

#### THE UNIVERSALISM OF THE MESSIANIC ERA

The prophet Yechezkel (Ezekiel) in his description of the Temple of future times, states:

The gate of the inner court ... shall be closed on the six working days; it shall be opened on the Sabbath day and it shall be opened on the day of the new moon. ... The common people shall worship before the Lord on Sabbaths and New Moons at the entrance of the same gate " (46:1-3)

Here once again, we see Shabbat and Rosh Chodesh alongside each other as they are described as days of divine worship at the Temple. In the same manner that in earlier times the people visited the prophets, now the people will visit the Temple itself. What Yishayahu adds in our haftara is that this practice will not be limited simply to the Jews. Non-Jews will be invited to join as well:

"... on each new moon and each Sabbath, ALL MANKIND shall come to worship Me" (66:23)

One of the astounding features of the messianic vision described in this perek is the universality of it all. What I mean, is that in future times there will be a brotherhood of man to all unite and live life in recognition of God's presence. (Not like Lennon's "brotherhood of man" in "Imagine" which was God-less.) The Jewish vision of Redemption is not limited to the Jewish Nation. It is a worldwide vision of peace and spirituality. This notion of universality is reflected in this chapter, where ALL nations come to Jerusalem to proclaim God's sovereignty, but this is a theme throughout Nach:

"... then I will transform the nations to speak in a clear voice proclaiming, one and all, the name of the Lord and serving Him with one accord." (Zephania 3:9)

"all the nations .. shall make a pilgrimage year by year to bow down to the King, Lord of Hosts and to observe Sukkot" (Zecharia 14)

It is apparent that their pilgrimages and acts of dedication to God will take place on our shabbatot, chagim (here - Sukkot) and Rosh Chodesh.

But our perek takes this universal theme a stage further, when it talks about Non-Jews being taken as Levitical priests in the Beit Hamikdash (66:21). Amazingly, this is taken as the normative Halakha in the Rambam:

"Not only the tribe of Levi, but ANY PERSON FROM ANY NATION OF THE WORLD WHOSE SPIRIT MOVES HIM and has concluded by logical reasoning to separate himself and stand before God: to serve him and minister to him , to know God and to walk in the straight path which God has set for him. If this person removes himself from his financial worries ... HE THEN BECOMES SANCTIFIED IN THE HOLIEST POSSIBLE MANNER (KODESH KODOSHIM) AND GOD IS HIS PORTION FOR ALL TIME..." (Mishne Torah. Hilchot Shmitta Ve'yovel 13:13)

Here, we could not have a more universalistic image. A non-Jew is attracted to the God of Israel. Nowhere does it say that he becomes Jewish. The entire perek in the Rambam is talking about the role of the tribe of Levi and their single-minded dedication to God. In this vision of Shevet Levi, all are invited. The whole of mankind are invited to join Shevet Levi and turn their entire life to God's service. (This also is an important source-text to counter any attacks of racism in the notion of a "chosen people". We have no racists thought or agenda. Judaism is about national recognition of God. For that purpose and function were we "chosen".)

#### IN CONCLUSION

Rosh Chodesh then, has certain particular Jewish dimensions. The Torah even calls it (Bamidbar 28:11) "Rashei ChodsheCHEM" - YOUR Rosh Chodesh. Even though Rosh Chodesh is an astronomical phenomenon, it still has particular significance to Am Yisrael. Maybe that is because we have a specific role of recognising God in the world. This is our mission and our meaning.

And yet, in future times, the entire world will recognise God, His rule over the world and his values and morals. Then, the entire global village will recite Hallel on Rosh Chodesh, collectively singing in multicultural harmony: "Hodu laShem ki tov!"

Shabbat Shalom and Chodesh Tov