

Rosh Chodesh and the Transformation of Ritual

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <https://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/rosh-chodesh-and-transformation-ritual>.

Introduction

Rosh Chodesh means “head of the month,” and refers to the minor Jewish holiday that occurs at the beginning of each new month in the Hebrew calendar. The ancient Rabbis interpreted the Biblical verses Exodus 12:1-12:2 as requiring that the new month be determined by eyewitness testimony. Just as God showed Moses and the high priest Aaron the new moon, witnesses were supposed to testify before the judges of the Sanhedrin, the Great Court in Jerusalem, that they had seen the new moon. The officiants at the Holy Temple would then mark the occasion with a sacrifice, feasting, and fanfare. After the destruction of the Second Temple, this eyewitness procedure was replaced by astronomical and mathematical calculations that were used to determine when each month began. Bonfires were lit on the mountains between Jerusalem and Babylonia to announce the arrival of the new moon. In later years, as witnesses and messengers were replaced with a fixed calendar, few Rosh Chodesh rituals remained, although it continued to be marked liturgically by the *birkat ha-chodesh* (or, in Ashkenazic pronunciation, *birkas hakhoydesh*), the blessing of the month, which is recited on the Saturday before each new month begins.

Because of associations between women and the moon, Rosh Chodesh has long been considered a special holiday for women. This association was taken up by Jewish feminists in the 1970s as they innovated to create Jewish rituals that affirmed women’s strength and created empowering female community within Jewish ritual life.

This kit looks at the commemoration of the new month as it is depicted in a wide range of cultural texts, with a focus on the role of gender in Rosh Chodesh rituals.

Cover image: Jews during *Kiddush levana*, the ritual of sanctifying the moon. Painting by Wacław Koniuszko in the National Museum in Warsaw.

Subjects

Feminism, Jewish Holidays, Religion

Reading and Background:

- Teachers wishing to learn more about the history of Rosh Chodesh, to find references to traditional sources that establish customs for Rosh Chodesh, to learn about Rosh Chodesh practices throughout the Jewish world, or to learn more about the feminist reinterpretation of the holiday are strongly encouraged to consult *Celebrating the New Moon: A Rosh Chodesh Anthology*.
- Teachers who are particularly interested in feminist reinterpretations of the holiday, and in the American Jewish feminist movement more generally, can turn to *Women Remaking American Judaism*, or to the [online exhibit on Jewish feminism](#) at the Jewish Women’s Archive.

Resources

1: Novel excerpt, Isaac Metzker's "Grandfather's Acres," 1953.

Isaac Metzker (1901-1984) was a Yiddish novelist and short story writer, a regular contributor to the New York Yiddish newspaper *Forverts* (*The Forward*), and a teacher and advocate of Yiddish. His novel *Afn zeydms felder*, translated as *Grandfather's Acres*, describes life among a mixed Jewish and gentile rural community in Eastern Galicia (modern-day Ukraine) at the end of the



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nineteenth century. In this passage, he describes with reverence the rituals of the Jewish community surrounding Rosh Chodesh, and also the way that these rituals appeared to outside observers.

Suggested Activities: Have your students read the passage and discuss the following questions: Does Metzker treat the Jews and their ritual with reverence? Does he find their practices odd? What does the excerpt tell you about the relationships between Jews and their neighbors? What do you learn from the passage about the ritual of blessing the new moon? Describe, in your own words, the custom of blessing the new moon – who performs it, where, and how?

Source: Isaac Metzker, *Grandfather's Acres*. trans. Yossel Birstein. (Jerusalem: Gefen Publishing House, 2005), 30-31.

2: Prose excerpt, Hava Shapiro's "Sanctification of the Moon," 1909.

Hava Shapiro (1878-1943) was a Hebrew writer of short stories, literary critic, Zionist activist, and journalist. She was one of the only women to have been published in the major Hebrew journals of the early twentieth century. She is also the first woman known to have kept a diary in Hebrew, and in her diary she mentions her interactions with pivotal literary figures of her day. This excerpt comes from a semi-autobiographical sketch in which the female narrator sneaks outside to join her brothers in participating in the ritual of blessing the new moon.

Suggested Activity: Have your students read the text and describe what happens in the protagonist's family when it is time for Rosh Chodesh. Ask: How is this text similar to or different from the text in Resource 1 of this kit? Why does the narrator want to participate? Why isn't she allowed to participate?

Have your students write their own narratives about a time when they were excluded from something. Why were they left out? How did it make them feel? How did they respond to or resolve the situation? After they have written these narratives, ask them to consider how their situations compare to Shapiro's protagonist's, and also how their responses may be similar to or different from hers.

Source: Reprinted from "Sanctification of the Moon" from *To Tread on New Ground: Selected Hebrew Writings of Hava Shapiro*, Wendy Zierler and Carole Balin, translators. Copyright © 2014 Wayne State University Press, with the permission of Wayne State University Press.

3: Prayer in Hebrew with English translation and recording excerpt, Gershon Sirota performing "Rosh Chodesh Benchen," nd.

Gershon Sirota (1874-1943), was one of the leading cantors of Europe during the "Golden Age of *Hazzanut*" (cantorial music, "*khazones*" in Ashkenazic Hebrew), nicknamed the "King of Cantors" and the "Jewish Caruso" in reference to the legendary opera and recording star Enrico Caruso. He served as cantor in Odessa, at the Shtatshul (State Synagogue) of Vilna, and as head cantor at the Great Synagogue of Warsaw. During his tenure at the Great Synagogue, thousands of people flocked to hear him perform. Sirota also performed in concerts throughout Europe, and his commercial recordings were so popular that he became one of the first recording celebrities in the Jewish world. He perished with his family in the Warsaw ghetto in 1943. In this recording, Sirota interprets the beginning of the blessing of the new month in the classic cantorial style of Eastern Europe, notably characterized here by *dreydlekh*, or florid vocal ornaments. The excerpt contains the first part of the blessing, which can be found in the first paragraph of the PDF, up to the words translated as "a peaceful life with goodness and blessing."

Suggested Activity: Have students read the words of the prayer and then listen to the recording and discuss the following questions: Does hearing the prayer change the way you interpret the words? How would you describe the emotional tone of this recording? Aside from establishing the calendar, what do you think Rosh Chodesh is about? What kinds of hopes or intentions does the prayer, or Sirota's performance of the prayer, invest in the holiday?

If your students are interested in exploring more interpretations of the prayer, you may wish to send them to the [website](#) of the Florida Atlantic University Recorded Sound Archives to search for "Rosh Chodesh," or to this [version](#). After listening to various interpretations of the prayer, if your students are musically inclined you might ask them to write or perform their own version, or to describe some qualities they would try to bring to the piece if they were to compose a new setting for it or perform it.

Sources: Gershon Sirota, "Rosh Chodesh Benchen," *The Art of Cantor Gershon Sirota, Volume 2*. Greater Recording Co., nd. Used with permission from the [Florida Atlantic University Recorded Sound Archives](#).

Siddur Sim Shalom: A Prayerbook for Shabbat, Festivals, and Weekdays, ed. Rabbi Jules Harlow (New York: The Rabbinical Assembly and the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, 2004), 418-19.

4: Drawing, Hermann Junker's "New Moon Rosh Chodesh Service," nineteenth century.

Hermann Junker (1838-1899) was an artist whose work represented Jewish life in nineteenth-century Frankfurt am Main. Born in Frankfurt, Junker studied and traveled in France, Flanders, and the Netherlands before returning to his native city to work as a painter of scenes from both everyday life and historical events and as an illustrator for *Kleine Presse*, a Frankfurt newspaper. In this illustration of the Rosh Chodesh service, men gather in the streets to gaze at the stars and offer blessings for the new moon.

Suggested Activities: Have your students view the image and ask the following questions: Who do you see participating in the ritual? What does this painting tell you about the community and the ritual? Have your students choose one or two figures from the painting and imagine their experience in greater detail. You may ask them to write a dialogue between figures in the painting, or a monologue for one figure, in which they discuss their thoughts about the ritual or participate in it in some way.

Source: Photographic reproduction of drawing by Hermann Junker, *New Moon Rosh Chodesh Service*. Paul Arnsberg Collection of the Leo Baeck Institute, New York/Berlin. Digital rights belong to Historisches Museum Frankfurt am Main.

5: Novel excerpt, Anita Diamant's "The Red Tent," 1997.

Anita Diamant (b. 1951) is a journalist, novelist, and Jewish ritual innovator. Her first novel, *The Red Tent*, reimagines the narratives of matriarchs in the Bible, told from women's perspectives that are marginalized in the Biblical text. *The Red Tent* was a bestseller, embraced by book clubs and women's groups for its message of women's empowerment. In the novel, Diamant describes a new moon ritual centered on a celebration of women's menstruation and the power of women's bodies. Linking life cycles and menstrual cycles with calendrical and lunar cycles, Diamant finds beauty and power in parts of the biological experience of womanhood that have long been considered shameful or ugly.

Suggested Activity: Have your students read the passage and discuss: How does the practice described in this passage relate to the Rosh Chodesh practices described in other resources in this kit? Does this ritual share any common roots or goals with the traditional Rosh Chodesh rituals? Why does Diamant link the moon with women's bodies, and in what ways do you think this linkage might be empowering for some women?

Source: Anita Diamant, *The Red Tent* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2010), 118.

6: Painting, Judith Margolis's "Full Moon Dancing," 2007.

Judith Margolis, an Israel-based American Jewish artist, is an activist and a feminist whose work reveals a commitment to merging the spiritual with the political. "Full Moon Dancing" was inspired by Rosh Chodesh rituals and their connection to women.

Suggested Activity: Have your students describe the image in their own words. What emotions does it evoke? Which aspects of femininity or womanhood does the painting accentuate, and which aspects does it deemphasize or neglect? How does it connect Rosh Chodesh and the moon with women? Ask students if the connection between Rosh Chodesh and women feels important to them, if it resonates.

If you have time, ask your students to create an image—using paint, crayon, marker, pencil, or whatever art materials you are able to offer them—that represents their own vision of Rosh Chodesh. Their images can draw on, or be radically different from, the texts and images they have encountered in this resource kit.

Source: Judith Margolis, *Full Moon Dancing*, 2007. Gouache on acid-free quadrille paper, 9.5 by 11.5 in. Accessed June 28, 2018. www.judithmargolis.com. Used with the permission of the artist.