

## Thoughts on Rosh Chodesh (ראש חודש)

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In the Tanach, the concept of a “month” is usually represented by the word **חֹדֶשׁ**, *chodesh*, formed on the noun **חָדַשׁ**, *chadâsh*, “to make anew,” “to renew” or on the noun **חִדָּשׁ**, *châdash*, “to be new.” The new moon (the reappearance of the thin crescent) marked the beginning of the month for the Hebrew calendar. Throughout the Tanach, the term **ראש חודש**, *rosh chodesh*, literally “the head of the month” is used to denote the beginning or first day of a new month.

### 1. What Does the Torah Say About Rosh Chodesh?

Also in the day of your gladness and in your appointed feasts, and on the first days of your months, you shall blow the trumpets over your burnt offerings, and over the sacrifices of your peace offerings; and they shall be as a reminder of you before your God. I am the LORD your God. (Num 10:10)

Then at the beginning of each of your months you shall present a burnt offering to the LORD; two bulls and one ram, seven male lambs one year old without defect, and three-tenths of an ephah of fine flour for a grain offering, mixed with oil, for each bull; and two-tenths of fine flour for a grain offering, mixed with oil, for the one ram; and a tenth of an ephah of fine flour mixed with oil for a grain offering for each lamb, for a burnt offering of a soothing aroma, an offering by fire to the LORD. And their libations shall be half a hin of wine for a bull and a third of a hin for the ram and a fourth of a hin for a lamb; this is the burnt offering of each month throughout the months of the year. And one male goat for a sin offering to the LORD; it shall be offered with its libation in addition to the continual burnt offering. (Num 28:11–15)

Note that there is no command to assemble, nor is there any command for specific blessings or ceremonies. What is required are additional sacrifices offered in the Tabernacle/Temple along with their libations, and the blowing of the trumpets (**חֲצוֹצְרָה**, *chatzôtz'rah*) in connection with those sacrifices. These trumpets were made of silver (Num 10:2). In Hosea 5:8, “shofar” (**שׁוֹפָר**, *shôfar*) and “trumpet” (**חֲצוֹצְרָה**, *chatzôtz'rah*) are in parallel and this may indicate that at times they were used interchangeably.

### 2. What Seems to be the Purpose for the Torah Commands Regarding Rosh Chodesh?

The purpose for these Torah commands is to keep the community aware of the change of months so that each person can adequately obey God in regard to the appointed times. That is, marking the beginning of each month in a significant way helps the community prepare, both in body and soul, for the coming appointed times (festivals). It is also another reminder that we live our lives according to God’s calendar, not ours.

### 3. What Aspects of the Torah Commands Regarding Rosh Chodesh Can We Actually Do?

Obviously, all those aspects of the Rosh Chodesh celebration which require the Tabernacle or Temple, priests, and sacrifices, cannot be done until the Temple is rebuilt. We can, of course, blow the shofar or a silver trumpet to mark the beginning of the month. While this may not require the assembling of the congregation, it certainly

seems that having the opportunity for the congregation to hear the shofar or trumpet ought to be made available. If we adopt the principle that we are presently “practicing” those things which will be fully implemented in the millennial reign of Messiah, and that while we may not be able to do all of the things God commanded regarding any certain festival or ceremony, we can do at least some of them, then it appears we should make sure that the blowing of the shofar or trumpet is consistently done to announce Rosh Chodesh.

#### 4. Other Scriptures Which Might Bear upon our Understanding of Rosh Chodesh

Hear this, you who trample the needy, to do away with the humble of the land, saying, “When will the new moon be over, so that we may sell grain, and the sabbath, that we may open the wheat market, to make the bushel smaller and the shekel bigger, and to cheat with dishonest scales, so as to buy the helpless for money and the needy for a pair of sandals, and that we may sell the refuse of the wheat?” (Amos 8:4–6)

Comment: It is clear that in the course of history, Israel raised the sanctity of Rosh Chodesh to that of a Shabbat, putting the same regulations on that day as were attached to the weekly Shabbat. However, the Torah does not teach this, and so we should presume that this text in Amos is presenting what had become a tradition among the Israelites, not what God had sanctioned. The fact that they were actually not observing the weekly Shabbat from a true heart of worship may also indicate that their added traditions in regard to Rosh Chodesh were likewise off the mark.

I will also put an end to all her gaiety, Her feasts, her new moons, her sabbaths, and all her festal assemblies. (Hosea 2:11, Hebrew 2:13)

Comment: In this text, “new moons” (חַדְשֵׁי הַיָּרֵחַ, *chad'shah*) is including in the list of “feasts, sabbaths, and festivals,” indicating that the New Moon festival was just that, a festival. The fact that in the Torah additional sacrifices were prescribed for Rosh Chodesh does indicate that it was viewed as a festival of sorts, and that it was to be marked off as different than the other days. However, there is nothing in this text to warrant the idea that God had commanded Rosh Chodesh to be a Shabbat requiring the cessation of work.

#### 5. Summary Thoughts

1. Rosh Chodesh, the beginning of each month according to the Hebrew calendar, was to be marked and noted publicly for the purpose of reminding the nation of Israel that God’s calendar is to be that by which life is to be regulated. This is particularly the case in regard to the appointed times or festivals which are to be observed, each containing days that are to be treated as Shabbats.
2. The primary Torah commandments attached to the observance of Rosh Chodesh pertain directly to the priests and their duties at the altar in the Tabernacle/Temple. These included (a) additional sacrifices to mark the day of Rosh Chodesh as akin to other festival days, and (b) blowing silver trumpets (or shofarim) to announce the arrival of the new month, thus indicating that the observance of Rosh Chodesh had as its primary purpose the public announcement of the arrival of a new month. Beyond these, no Torah commandments attach to the observance of Rosh Chodesh.
3. The later elevation of Rosh Chodesh to that of a Shabbat, on which normal work and commerce ceased, was not something compliant with divine sanction, but was apparently instituted by the Israel’s priesthood itself. As such, it does not have divine authority and is not therefore binding upon the people of God.

4. In practical terms, the observance of Rosh Chodesh in our times, when no Temple or legitimate priesthood is extant, is primarily done in anticipation of the restored Temple at the time of Yeshua's return. Since all of the Torah stipulations relating to Rosh Chodesh pertain directly to the Temple and priesthood, in our times the only part we may duplicate is the blowing of trumpets or shofarim, and making a public announcement as to the arrival of the new month. Traditionally, blessings for Rosh Chodesh were formulated during the rise of rabbinic Judaism (and are therefore contained in all standard Siddurim), and these blessings might also be included at the celebration of Rosh Chodesh.

However, since the Torah makes no specific stipulations regarding how the non-priestly community of Israel was to celebrate Rosh Chodesh (there is no commandment to assemble; no commandment to treat the day differently than the six days of work; no commandments for specific duties or ceremonies required on the day), and since we find no further stipulations in the remainder of the Scriptures, we should recognize that much freedom exists for individual communities or congregations to develop their own form of celebration for Rosh Chodesh, or even to decide not to have such a celebration. Some may simply want to blow the trumpet or shofar and make a public announcement. Others may want to gather on the day for a meal, blessings, sounding the trumpet/shofar, etc., while others may want to do none of these. It seems that at a minimum, a public announcement alerting the community to the arrival of the new month is appropriate in order to appreciate the spirit of the Torah commandment in Num 10:10 and 28:11–15. Practically speaking, however, since we now use a fixed calendar,<sup>1</sup> the arrival of the new month is widely known even apart from a public announcement, and thus being cognizant of the new month is no longer dependent upon a public announcement from leaders of the community.

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<sup>1</sup>Discussion on the use of the fixed calendar is beyond the scope of this short essay. Suffice it to say that those who wish to create their own calendar based upon the sighting of the moon, or the observance of ripened barley in the Land of Israel, have wrongly usurped a level of authority which rightly belongs only to appointed leaders representing the entire nation of Israel. Until such time as such leaders are re-instituted, the fixed calendar should remain the standard for all communities who identify themselves within the broad scope of the people of Israel.