

## **Multiplying Radiance**

A long time ago, before wall calendars or day planners or Google calendars, a very long time ago, the Great Sanhedrin, the rabbinical court, would proclaim the first day of the month when the new moon showed the first sliver of her face.

To spread the news, a messenger would go to the top of the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem and light a torch of cedar branches. The messenger would wave the torch back and forth and up and down until they could see that the watch on the next mountain had received the message and lit their torch. The watch on the second mountain would wave their torch back and forth and up and down until they could see that the watch on the third mountain had received the message and lit a torch. And so on, the rabbis teach, until torches lit the mountaintops all the way to Pumbedita, on the Euphrates, the closest city in the Babylonian diaspora.<sup>1</sup>

This is how the first of the month, Rosh Hodesh, was announced each month. Announcing the first day of the month was particularly important for months including festivals or holidays, like Tishrei. Rosh HaShanah is the first of the month of Tishrei.

One reason I'm telling this story is because I love the image of the torches lit across the land, mountaintop to mountaintop. It's a beautiful visual image, and it feels both distant from and connected to the way we communicate now, through our glowing screens.

The second reason I chose this story is because it resonates so strongly with my own experience of beginning to follow the Jewish calendar, a lunar calendar. For me, attaching the meaning of our year cycle to the moon, which I could see waxing and waning, was a foundational shift in the way I perceive the world: even the sky looked different. Suddenly, ritual and celebration felt deeply rooted in the experience of being human on this planet and measuring time by looking up at the sky.

The third reason is that I also want to tell you about how the ancient rabbis decided when the new moon had appeared. The rabbis didn't just look up in the sky. Instead, they took testimony from witnesses, regular people like you and me. People who had seen the new moon would go to the Great Sanhedrin, the rabbinical court, and the rabbis would ask them questions: Where in the sky did the moon rise? In what direction was the crescent of the moon pointing?<sup>2</sup> When the rabbis were satisfied that two witnesses had independently confirmed

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<sup>1</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Rosh HaShanah 23b.

<sup>2</sup> Mishnah Rosh HaShanah 2:6.

seeing the new moon, they would announce the new month, and the torch would be lit on the Mount of Olives.

We learn from this that the news about the moon had to come from the people: from the people's lived experience of the world. I like to imagine who the witnesses might have been: a parent pacing outside with a fussy baby; a person working in the field or the orchard; incurable romantics gazing at the sky. The witness testimony was so crucial that the rabbis designated a courtyard in Jerusalem where the witnesses would wait to testify. There they received *s'udot g'dolot*: great meals. The Mishnah explains these great meals were provided so that the witnesses would come back and testify again; there was a monthly need for volunteers.<sup>3</sup> This is perhaps the first recorded teaching that Jewish communal programs are more successful when they have food!

The food was there because the rabbis couldn't do this alone. They needed the people. They needed people with different viewpoints: literally (not metaphorically), someone's courtyard or field or roof had a clear view of the moonrise.

The rabbinical court also made accommodations for people who might have trouble answering all of the questions about what the moon looked like and where it rose in the sky. Rabban Gamliel kept a moon chart on the wall. He kept this chart specifically so that people with different abilities could provide testimony: he would point to the drawings and ask people: "Did you see a shape like this one, or like this one?"<sup>4</sup>

Once the court accepted two witnesses' testimony and proclaimed the new month, the people would repeat: "*m'kdushah, m'kdushah*," meaning "it is sanctified; it is sanctified." They did this because in the Torah, the passage setting the calendar commands: "You shall proclaim them as sacred occasions." (Lev. 12:3). The Torah is clear: God sets the calendar for the year, but it's the people's obligation, it's our obligation, to proclaim each sacred occasion, each time. So the people's role was not only giving the testimony but also repeating the proclamation.<sup>5</sup>

For more than a thousand years, there has been a fixed Jewish calendar: we know, years in advance, when each new month will begin. We don't have to look to the sky. You and I, we, the people, are no longer part of setting the calendar.

But I want us to hold onto this heritage that we've been given. This ancient practice recognizes that to be a Jewish community, we need people's different viewpoints: we, the community, need your testimony and your voices. We all need you to share what you see when you open your eyes, how you experience the world. We need people who will come back again and again, month after month, to participate by sharing your stories (and yes, there is space for

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<sup>3</sup> Mishnah Rosh HaShanah 2:5.

<sup>4</sup> Mishnah Rosh HaShanah 2:8.

<sup>5</sup> Mishnah Rosh HaShanah 2:7; BT Rosh HaShanah 24a.

you, there is food for you!). And we need the voices of the whole community to join together to proclaim what is sacred. We need all of this to co-create and live in Jewish community.

Tonight, on Erev Rosh HaShanah, as the new moon of Tishrei first reveals her face and a new year begins, I'm asking each of us to think about how we take part in co-creating our community. What is the testimony that you bring to our community? How could your unique viewpoint contribute? What are the acts you will do or the stories you will share that will set in motion ripple effects, spreading light all across the Jewish world? How can each one of us be more like that person who saw the new moon and invested their time, thinking: I'll walk over to the rabbinical court; I'm not going to assume that someone else will do it or that my participation is not important.

I'm also asking you, please speak up – tell Rabbi Zeff and me, the lay leadership, the staff – when you need a proverbial moon chart. We try to make GJC accommodating, but we know we have room to grow. When there are tools that could enable you to participate at GJC, and bring your voice into our community, please share them.

Finally, I'm asking each of us to think about what we can do this year to create the kind of community in which we affirm everyone's sharing of their stories. GJC is a special place that can feel warm and inclusive, but, especially with the challenges of the pandemic, we don't all know each other. As Rabbi Tamar Elad-Appelbaum teaches, "Community is the realm in which individuals make their voices heard, in which their voices are woven together, and in which the boundaries of our awareness are expanded to make way for shared contact with others." We can only create that community by seeing and hearing each other.

Going back to where we began in the mishnah... when the message about Rosh Hodesh reached Pumbedita, the city on the edge of the diaspora, something changed. In Pumbedita, the Talmud teaches, ordinary people would go onto the flat roofs of their houses, and *kol ehad v'ehad*, each and every one, would light a torch, "until the Diaspora looked like a bonfire."<sup>6</sup>

Let us begin this new year with that image in our minds: Jewish communities, invested so deeply in proclaiming what is sacred that radiance multiplies outward from the center, empowering *kol ehad v'ehad*, each and every person, to participate. May that radiance empower each and every person to join in proclaiming our sacred times and in co-creating a new year together.

*Shanah Tovah u'Metukah.* May it be a good and sweet new year!

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<sup>6</sup> BT Rosh Hashanah 23b.