

**VaEra 2017**

**Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick 1/28/17**

It's a beautiful day of celebration here in our shul. Shabbos, a lovely bar mitzvah, and the joy that comes from celebrating Rosh Chodesh, the beginning of a new month in the Hebrew calendar. Every month when the smallest sliver of moon appears in the night sky we Jews celebrate. We read from a second Torah and we sing the Hallel psalms, and we do that each and every new month. Rosh Chodesh is an important holiday in the Jewish calendar even if it is sometimes overlooked. It happens every 30 days or so and, therefore, we tend to take it for granted. (If we lit Chanukah candles every month we'd probably take them for granted after a while, too!) But Rosh Chodesh is such an important celebration for the Jewish People that when the Romans destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE they actually banned the celebration of Rosh Chodesh.

Jerusalem, of course has had two Temples atop Mount Moriah. The first one was built by Solomon and stood for more than 400 years before it was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BCE. The Babylonians were not particularly anti-Semitic, they just wanted to subjugate all the people they conquered. Their goal was not to destroy Judaism so when they took the Jewish People into Exile in Babylonia they still allowed the Jewish People to live together and practice their religion. But the Romans were truly anti-Semitic. They really DID want to destroy the Jewish religion. They wanted to break the spirit of the Jewish People just like Pharaoh tried to do in this week's Torah portion so they chose to ban the celebration of the New Moon - Rosh Chodesh. But why? Why was this so important to the Romans?

I think part of the answer lies in the fact that Rosh Chodesh - and the moon itself, symbolizes the spirit of the Jewish People. Whereas the sun is the symbol of unchanging nature, rising in the east and setting in the west day in and day out every day of the year, the moon changes daily. That seems to be telling us something namely: You can be small and you can diminish until you almost disappear, but then, when things look their darkest, hope springs eternal. You can start looking up again. You can change a situation (and yourself) for the better, no matter how bad it seems. Nothing is static or set in stone. We human beings have free will and therein lies our power of renewal.

The sun determines the length of the year and guides the seasons, one after the other in an endless cycle. And so, in Hebrew the word for a solar year is "Shannah" which comes from the root, "to repeat." The Hebrew word for a "month" however, is "Chodesh" which comes from the Hebrew word "Chadash" which means "new, changing and different." The new month symbolizes the monthly rebirth of the Jewish People and that's why it was such a thorn in the side of the Romans. They knew that the Jewish people compared themselves to the moon. Though we are small, and suffering has been an integral part of our history among the nations, the Jew knows never to give up. As individuals and as a nation, we will rise up again and light up the night.

And so it is, in the series of plagues that we read about this morning that the Torah pauses, right between the 9th plague and the 10th for Moses to address the People. And what does he tell them? He says, from now on you will make a big deal out of Rosh Chodesh. From now on you will mark the monthly renewal of the Jewish People. If we made it through slavery we can make it through anything, so never give up hope, a new moon, a new month, and a new beginning are close at hand. Rosh Chodesh represents the resilience of the Jewish People. But it also represents the resilience of the human soul, the eternal flame that Gd has put in each of us.

But there is more. We look forward to the New Moon with great anticipation. That's why each month, on the Shabbat before the New Moon appears, we rise up and pray, "Gd, make this a new month of physical

vitality." We hope for, and remind ourselves that we need to work towards, maintaining and building our stamina even as we grow older. We pray for financial success as we hope for, and plan for material comforts. We pray for a life rich in honor and we think about what it might take for us to have more of that in the month ahead. We pray for blessings and for the ability to see them when they come our way.

One of the "great teachings" I have shared this past month focuses on our cell phones. I have pointed out that under "Settings" and then "Calendar" you can find a button for "Alternate Calendars" and you can click on Hebrew. And dozens and dozens of people have told me that they added the Hebrew calendar to their daily calendars. And as a result, so many more of us now know when Rosh Chodesh is coming. Let's take the true spirit of this oft overlooked holiday to heart. Imagine if we really COULD see each Rosh Chodesh as a time of personal renewal! We are part of an ever-renewing people, a people who have not let the light of our souls go out, even when they seem dim. Life may wax and wane like the moon, but when we have faith, when we use our faith the way it was intended, renewal is always close at hand.