

What is Rosh Hodesh?

▶ *Rosh Hodesh* literally means “Head of the Month.” It refers to the start of the new month. Each Jewish month has either twenty-nine or thirty days. *Rosh Hodesh* is a two-day holiday when the previous month contains thirty days—the last day of the old month and the first day of the new one—otherwise, it is a one-day holiday.

Why is Rosh Hodesh a special holiday for women?

▶ According to legend, *Rosh Hodesh* was given to the women of Israel because they refused to be involved in the creation of an idol. They didn't give their jewelry to make the golden calf, although later they did give generously to the building of the *Mishkan* (portable temple). Because of their righteousness, the women were excused from working on *Rosh Hodesh*.

▶ A woman's monthly cycle is similar to the cycle of the moon. The English word, “menstruation” comes from the Latin word meaning “monthly.” When women live in close proximity to one another, their cycles often sync up. In many ancient cultures, a woman's menstrual period or “moontime” was considered sacred and she took time to rest, renew, and regenerate. Women gathered in “moon huts,” “moon lodges,” or “red tents,” because they often cycled together in harmony with the moon. In these places, women nurtured themselves and each other (see *The Wise Wound: Myths, Realities, and Meanings of Menstruation* by Penelope Shuttle and Peter Redgrove for more on the history of menstrual rites). These traditions may lie behind the connection between women and *Rosh Hodesh*.

Why was the new moon so important to ancient Jews?

▶ God first commanded the Children of Israel to mark time by the moon in anticipation of freedom from slavery in Egypt, where time was marked by the sun. By defining time in their own terms, they took control of their own history.

▶ In ancient times, before the Jewish calendar was fixed, the sighting of the New Moon determined when a new month would begin. By law, the new month began when at least two witnesses observed the first sliver of the moon and reported what they saw to the court in Jerusalem.

▶ The news of the New Moon's appearance was communicated from Jerusalem to Jewish communities throughout Israel and the world by hilltop fires.

▶ Once the New Moon (*Rosh Hodesh*) was declared, communities all over the world would know when to observe that month's holidays. For example, Passover begins on the 14th of *Nisan*. Once *Rosh Hodesh* was declared, people could count 14 days and begin celebrating Passover.

What are some ways that *Rosh Hodesh* was observed in the past?

- ▶ In the days of the first and second Temples (1000 BCE–70 CE, people offered special sacrifices, blew horns and recorders made out of silver, and ate festive meals on *Rosh Hodesh*.
- ▶ Since ancient times, people say special prayers in synagogue, both on *Rosh Hodesh* and on the Shabbat before it, called Shabbat Mevarehim (Sabbath of Blessing).
- ▶ Women refrained from harder labor on *Rosh Hodesh*, things like laundry, which without a washing machine, was a more difficult chore. Ashkenazi women also said special prayers on *Rosh Hodesh* called techines

What are some ways that *Rosh Hodesh* is observed today?

- ▶ Fasting and mourning are forbidden on *Rosh Hodesh*. In this *Rosh Hodesh* group, we will have a lot of food for everyone to enjoy.
- ▶ Recently, *Rosh Hodesh* observance has been revived among women across the country. Women meet monthly, often in one another's homes, to share, learn, and connect with one another and their heritage in celebration of the new month.

Why do women and girls light candles today?

- ▶ The ritual of lighting candles, particularly to welcome Shabbat, has been historically considered a mitzvah for women. Some sources consider this ritual as a rectification of Eve's sin in the Garden of Eden, while others consider it a reflection of the woman's role of the Shabbat Queen, bringing Torah and light into her home and the world.