

Sue Morningstar's vort given 1/11/05 at Boulder Ohala:

In my other life I'm a midwife and nurse practitioner for women's health. This is also very holy work.

The midwife is privileged to be at the doorway as the veil is lifted between the worlds. Midwives are intimate with women and with the divine shefah. Midwives, by definition, are women of power. As we read a few weeks ago in parshat shmot, the midwives Shifrah and Puah were the first resisters of פרעה. They were revolutionaries, and the rabbis say that it was on their merit that bnei yisrael were redeemed from Egypt.

It is written in ויִטַב אֱלֹהִים לְמִילְדוֹת שְׁמוֹת פְּרָקָא פְּסוּקָא כ
and God made it good for the midwives. I love this sentence, because I believe that there is nothing as good as being a midwife. Even in the midst of the most horrendous oppression, the midwives had it good. What could be better than to work closely with the shechinah, welcoming neshamas as they enter our world.

I've had some interesting spiritual insights in my work that I'd like to share with you.

Sometimes for one reason or another I need to check the cells of the inner lining of the uterus to rule out cancer. In order to do this is you need to take a very thin tube and insert it, into the vagina, down to the cervix, through the mouth of the cervix, down the cervical canal and into the uterus itself. As I was doing this recently, I had a flash! I felt as if I was going through the ulam, past the heichal, up to the dvir and through the curtain into the kodesh kodashim, the holiest of all holies, into the innermost chamber. Here is *where life itself is created*. What can be more sacred than that??

As I explored this further, I learned that Rabbis Kook, Steinsaltz and Gafni have all written about the sacred eroticism of the kodesh kodashim, but Bonna Dvora Haberman makes the link between the structure of the female body and the structure of the **בֵּית הַמִּקְדָּשׁ**. In her article "The Yom Kippur Avoda within the Female Enclosure" she describes the mishkan, and the kodesh hakodashim as a uterus, nested protected chambers that enclose holy objects. The deepest internal space within the temple is where the body of Israel engages in the most intimate, sensitive, sacred, erotic connection with God.

My patients and experience tell me that we are more intuitive around the time of our menses. We feel more open, yet more introspective. There is a desire to be alone, quiet, or with other women. This is the *red tent time*.

Before artificial lighting, our cycles were governed by the pull of the moon on our pi-neal gland (or “Pnai el” gland as Rabbi David calls it). Women generally cycled together. (This still happens to women living in close proximity, college dormitories... In fact, in my practice, when patients complain of irregular periods, one of the treatments that I might advise, among others, would be moon sleeping.) Full moon was the time when the egg burst forth from the ovary, and new moon was the *Red Tent time*.

The time of Rosh Chodesh. In fact, the rashey tayvot of ראש חודשים are רחם = womb. Rosh Chodesh is “womb time”

Of course this makes sense. Full moon festivals occurred during the time of ovulation, celebration and fertility all intermingling.

We’ve all heard the midrash that the women were rewarded with the Festival of Rosh Chodesh because they refused to give their gold for the making of the עגל הזהב BUT... We know that moon celebrations are an *ancient female experience*. They already existed among the indigenous Canaanites and surrounding cultures. Holly told us yesterday about the traditional “bleeding Sabbath.” Women were gathering in the red tent during their monthly menses at the time of the new moon, connecting with shechinah and with each other in community. Perhaps Moshe saw the value of the ritual and decided to incorporate it into the fabric of observance, rather than the other way around. Maybe the women were the “givers”, not the “given” of RH.

Rosh chodesh is a time of rosh chadash, new head. Monthly realignment to the divine.
Gematria: chodesh adds up to 312. If you divide 312 by 12, the # of months, you get 26, God’s name. The teaching here is that each month we are given the opportunity to re-align our soul with the divine flow.

According to the Zohar, a **menstruating woman will be more successful in the use of magical arts than at any other time.**” Tum’ah is a very powerful state of being. Similarly, we have a greater capacity to see into the future on rosh chodesh. Moon energy is associated with prophecy. It is a time when, as Reb Leah says, the Shechinah is more present and available to us. This morning Reb Zalman referred to the “infinite potential of the darkness.” Anyone who lives in the country away from city lights knows that the dark of the moon is the time when **entire universes are opened up to us if we just look up.**

In Kohelet, King Solomon says, אין חדש תחת החמה, Why doesn’t he just say אין חדש?? The רמז is in the word חדש, like חודש. If you want something new, don’t look under the sun, look under the moon.

Today was Rosh Hodesh Shvat, and the parshat hashavuah this coming Shabbat is שמות פרשת בא, where the origin of the rosh chodesh celebration comes from in chapter 12 פסוק ב :

החודש הזה לכם ראש חדשים ראשון הוא לכם לחדשי השנה

This was the very first mitzvah that was given to bnei yisrael as we were readying to become a free people.

RH actually occurs on the molad, or birth of the moon, which Rambam describes as “one of God’s *great and marvelous works*.” This is *the moment* when the moon is directly between the sun and the earth, they are lined up, and according to the Sa’adiah Gaon, the **נפש רוח** and **נשמה** *are all in alignment*. At this most harmonious moment of conjunction, the end and the beginning are one, reflecting infinity, the Ayn Sof, the Source of all being.

Rosh Chodesh in the times of the prophets was a holiday on a par with Shabbat. In **מלכים ב** chapter 4 verse 23, when the unnamed Shunamite woman goes to Elisha, her husband asks, **מדוע את הולכת אליו היום? לא חדש ולא שבת**

The Red Tent gradually evolved into monthly women’s gatherings. In the Middle Ages, women lit *yahrzeit* candles on Rosh Chodesh. In Yemen, candles were lit in homes and synagogues, and in Algiers, gold coins would be placed inside the burning candles for good luck ⁸. In Europe, some women held feasts and collected **צדקה** on RH. (At one point the rabbis declared a ban on Rosh Chodesh gambling. Wonder what that was all about?)

Starting in the 1970’s, Arlene Agus, Penina Adelman and Susan Berrin helped revive Rosh chodesh celebration with their publications of articles and books containing historical information and practical suggestions for honoring each month.

Jewish women and girls around the world now meet for monthly rosh chodesh gatherings rich in ritual, song, celebration, food, honouring our foremothers and connecting with the Shechinah.

On this rosh chodesh shvat **חסרה**, I’d like to offer us a Bracha: **מי שברך אבותינו ואמותינו**
May the One who blessed our ancestors bless us today
to bask in the dark rays of the new moon of Shvat
and to leave this Ohala open to the universe,
realigned with the divine shefa
refreshed and renewed with roshim chadashim.

אמן