



## Shabbat Vayakel - Mevarchim HaChodesh

This Shabbat, as we conclude with great fanfare the Book of Exodus, we will simultaneously be observing another, quieter rite, one enacted each month as the moon slips from view. It is known as Mevarchim HaChodesh, the announcement of the new month.

In the Hebrew calendar the new month begins, somewhat counter-intuitively, when the night sky is at its darkest. We time our celebration of that which is bright and promising to coincide, not with the pinnacle of lunar florescence but rather with the point in time when only a tiny sliver of the moon's face is illuminated in the otherwise dark sky. However, our knowledge of the lunar cycle brings with it an awareness that better, brighter things are on the horizon.

So, too, the Jewish people's greatest gesture of hope – our annual recounting of the story of our Exodus from Egypt and our transition from an enslaved multitude without a future into an autonomous nation in control of our own destiny – is told beginning from a place of darkness and hopelessness. The seder rite, which we will enact together in just a fortnight (the first night of Pesach is March 27), begins with the descendants of Jacob stooped with pain under the oppression of their circumstances, their eventual redemption still two cups in the future.

This recurrent return to dark places, this seeming obsession with moments of hopelessness, is not, I think, an indicator of morbid pessimism. Rather, it reflects a deep wisdom in our tradition, which understands that the darkness in our lives needs space for expression, and that only by acknowledging our fears and sorrows can these be (dis)articulated and contained.

But Judaism's wisdom doesn't end there. Our tradition understands, too, that our need for spiritual uplift is most poignant in the dark before the dawn. That's why Jews celebrate the appearance of the first light of dawn (*shachar* in Hebrew) with the daily recitation of Shacharit (morning prayers). We celebrate the completion of the moon's cycle when it arrives at its most obscure position relative to the sun, and we celebrate the end of a long, dark winter by proclaiming the month of Nissan, corresponding with the arrival of spring's first (meager) bounty, to be "the first of months."

We stand this Shabbat (or more precisely, this Sunday) at the beginning of new beginnings that promise radical change, and not just in the weather. Indeed, Rashi claims our embrace of this aspirational accounting of time to be the first and, perhaps, most consequential mitzvah in the Torah: the determination to find hope, to cling to it, and build on it.

Wishing everybody light and happiness as we enter the month of Nissan and prepare for a *zissen* Pesach (sweet and joyous Passover celebration),

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