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## Rosh Chodesh, Student Walkouts, and Controlling Our Time

In Judaism, we like to be meta. In the Tefillin is the section that tells us to wear a Tefillin. In the Shema we read the section that tell us to say Shema. On all of the holidays we read sections from the Torah that tell us about that holiday.

Today is extra Meta. Not only is it Rosh-Chodesh Nissan, the first of Nissan, for which we read the section about the Korban brought in honor of Rosh-Chodesh, but today we also read Parshat HaChodesh, a section from Sefer Shemot which teaches us that there is such a thing as Rosh-Chodesh, and that the first of them is Rosh-Chodesh Nissan, which is today.  
My head is already spinning.

But I never really understood Rosh-Chodesh. What is it all about? It is hard to convince myself that I should be saying Hallel when it falls on a random Tuesday just because it happens to be the first day of the month. Yet in the liturgy and tanakh, Rosh-Chodesh is ascribed a large importance.

Bamidbar Chapter 10 states that the trumpets were blown in public on “your happy days, your holidays, and your Rosh-Chodesh-es,” Rosh-Chodesh being lumped together with the major holidays.

In Second Kings, the Prophet Elisha is surprised to see the Shunamite woman visiting him on a day that is “neither [rosh] chodesh nor shabbat,” Rosh-Chodesh being seen as a special time reserved for tending to spiritual needs.

But what is the big deal about Rosh-Chodesh?

In the section we ready today from Shemot Chapter 12 it says, referring to Rosh-Chodesh Nissan: Hachodesh Haze Lachem Rosh Chodashim. This month is for you the head of months. Traditionally, we learn from this verse both that Nissan is called the “first month” in the torah, and that this Rosh-Chodesh thing repeats every month, on the first of the month.

Ibn Ezra cites an opinion from the Medieval Grammarian Moshe Ibn Gikitilla that interprets this verse a bit more literally. He says that the only Rosh-Chodesh is Nissan. According to this explanation, the celebrations of Rosh-Chodesh only happen once a year, today, Rosh-Chodesh Nissan. He reads the verse as “this month is the Head of all months,” Rosh Chodashim. It’s not actually clear that the moniker of “Rosh-Chodesh” applies to every month. According to this approach, the beginning of the month of Iyyar is equally as significant as the beginning of the month of March, in that it’s not.

Ibn Ezra ultimately rejects this approach, yet it is quite interesting that he even cites it considering how radical it is. I wonder if Ibn Ezra was also confused about the nature of Rosh-Chodesh. Nowadays, living in a time of a set calendar, Rosh-Chodesh has lost its resonance. It has become just another day on the calendar, just with longer prayers.

But that’s not how it was supposed to be, and I would like to suggest that we have lost the meaning of Rosh-Chodesh.

Originally, the date of Rosh-Chodesh was *subjective*.

Because lunar months are not consistent — some are 29 days and some are 30 — God left it up to our hands to determine Rosh-Chodesh. It is not Rosh-Chodesh until a Beit Din, Rabbinical court, decided it was Rosh-Chodesh, based on the testimony of two Jewish men who can verify that they saw the new moon (or lack thereof). Nobody knew when Rosh-Chodesh would be until it was declared on *that* day.

Sforno, a Medieval Italian commentary, commenting on the word “for you” in this verse in Shemot, writes that “from now on, your months are yours. But when you were enslaved, they weren’t yours, they belonged to your persecutors. This is the first Rosh-Chodesh because this is the first time that you are free [and can control your own time].” The significance of Rosh-Chodesh is specifically that we have the ability to control our time. Rosh-Chodesh, and thus the calendar and the holidays, determined by *our* hands!

Our power in determining Rosh-Chodesh speaks to both the Jewish People’s freedom from Pharaoh and also our ability as a community to come together and determine our *own* destiny.

This past Wednesday I had a meeting in Manhattan. At 10am we had to stop the meeting because we heard loud chanting coming from outside — it was students from a local school participating in the national walk-out in response to the tragic shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Florida.

They were marching loudly and proudly through the streets of Manhattan, with signs in their hands, standing up for a cause they deeply believe in, in unity with so many all over the country.

I cannot help but be inspired and in awe of what I witnessed. We cannot ignore the cries of millions of *kids* in the streets, indicting us, the adults in the room, for our failures to protect them from gun violence, whatever the practical and policy solutions may be.

This was America’s Rosh-Chodesh moment; of saying that we are not going to sit and wait for history to happen to us. We will take matters into our own hands.

And it is so powerful that the students chose to do so via a walk out — taking their *time*, usually controlled by their parents and teachers, into their own hands. When you are disempowered, the ability to control your own time is freeing.

Rosh-Chodesh is a reminder that we have control over our destinies. Even the most disenfranchised group — kids who don’t even have the ability to vote — owned the fact that they have a responsibility towards their fellow students to take action in the form of taking control of their time. No matter what we think the practical solution to school shootings is, that is inspiring. And these students have reclaimed Rosh-Chodesh for me.

My blessing to us this Rosh-Chodesh is that we find inspiration in disempowered kids taking to the streets; taking their time into their own hands, in realizing that for us too, our freedom is ultimately in our own hands. However it is that we feel disempowered in life, we have the agency to create real change.