

RITUAL AND MEANING: Birkat Haḥodesh

A ritual is more than a behavior. Through ritual action we assert our commitment to ideas and values more powerfully than by simply speaking of them.

For many, rituals are repeated behaviors that are devoid of message because we don't understand the "language" that rituals use to express meaning. Their familiarity may provide comfort at times, yet rituals do not speak for us or to us. But listen to the language and meaning of the following ritual.

Birkat Haḥodesh: Announcing the New Month

In Second Temple times, each month the Sanhedrin court would await testimony that the new moon's crescent had been sighted and then officially proclaim the start of a new month. The calendar for the new month—including holidays observances—could then be established and publicized.

Today we rely on centuries-old calculations that determined when all future months would begin. Even so, when a community gathers for prayer on Shabbat preceding a new month, the leader *announces* the upcoming Rosh Ḥodesh, a reminder of the ancient court's proclamation.

The Torah scroll is brought forward (if 2 scrolls are present, only bring forward the 2nd), as on other occasions, to add solemnity to the ceremony. We open with words based on an ancient prayer of Rav (Talmud Berakhot 16b), expressing hope for well-being, prosperity, commitment to Torah, and reverence for God in the month to come. This reflects our tradition that the light of the moon is a symbol of redemption and new beginnings.

Next, *the leader holds the scroll* for the announcement formula. The Torah scroll transmits authority *from the ancient court to the leader* to announce the new month. The formula consists of: (1) מִי שֶׁעָשָׂה נֹסִים *mi she'asah nissim*, alluding to our redemption from Egypt and future redemptions, and (2) a statement of the specific day(s) during the coming week on which Rosh Ḥodesh falls.

In Temple times, after the court would make its proclamation of Rosh Ḥodesh, the gathered masses would affirm aloud that the new month had indeed been proclaimed. Similarly today, upon hearing the statement of Rosh Ḥodesh day(s), the congregation affirms by repeating that statement.

Thus, our current ceremony, replete with ritual riches, combines ideas and values spanning millenia, including:

- We relive our past through adapted reenactments of past events.
- The words of our prayers link us to our great sages of old.
- The Torah scroll transmits authority from past leaders to present ones.
- The ancient religious calendar continues to give structure to our lives.
- Our tradition offers recurring opportunities for a fresh start.

Ritual speaks through history, symbol, role-playing, allusion, and metaphor. Let us attune ourselves to the language and meaning of ritual so it speaks to us as well for us.