



A Sacred Journey: Rosh HaShanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, and Shemini Atzeret

Excerpted from "Live With the Times," by Rabbi Marcia Prager

In his preface to a paper on the Hasidic master, Tzvi Elimelech Shapira of Dinov, (d.1841) often called the B'nai Yissasschar, my colleague and friend Hillel Goelman wrote:

"We often conceive of the Jewish year as a progression of holidays/Holy Days ... tied to historic episodes in our past ...[or] tied to the seasonal periodicities of the earth. Certain Holy Days seem to stand alone, not tied to either. What [may be less evident is that] ... the placement of the Holy Days throughout the year is a manifestation of an underlying Divine intention to make the Divine Presence manifest to our human understanding... the days themselves are not isolated oases in barren stretches of emptiness. They are heartbeats in an endless, continuing, rhythmic, pulsating flow that accompanies the breathing of the Divine Name in every moment of existence ... Cosmic time, in the Jewish sense, is not a linear sequence of moments strung together... Time is a pulsating energy that ebbs, flows, and manifests in different ways ... [and we] can attune to the divine energy suffusing time."

Learning to walk the divine, energetic rhythms of the Jewish year and attuning one's own inner rhythms to the cycles of sacred time can be of great value in growing our own souls.

Each month and each holy day calls on the soul to respond and take new risks, to feel the pulse of Divinity more strongly and open up to new possibilities.

New moons and full. Full moons and new. The cycle of the year carries us. Months are, as we see, quite literally tied to the moon. Each new moon inaugurates an energy shift we can learn to feel. Each month inaugurates both a new quality and a new experience of God to influence our actions.

The Months of Fall

"Where does the circle start? When does the year begin?" asks author and educator Rabbi Arthur Waskow. As with many Jewish questions, he notes, "There are at least two answers—and both of them are right. The year starts twice."

The month that Torah itself calls the New Year is Nisan, the month of Aviv, of spring, rebirth, and new life. The new moon closest to the spring equinox is the new moon of the earth softening, opening, birthing. When it waxes full, our people, Israel, are again birthed from Mitzrayim into a new existence as a free people dedicated to serve only the One God.

Since the time of the Talmud, however, we have celebrated Rosh Hashanah, the New Year, not in Nisan, but on the new moon of Tishre, the seventh month that brings us the cooling, introspective turning of fall. Like Shabbat on the seventh day, the seventh month calls us to rest and renewal, to a time of inner reflection and return. The now-ripened fruit will plant its seed in the earth's womb anew to gestate and await the "birth-time" of spring.

In the Rosh Hashanah Musaf service we say, "This is the day of the beginning of Creation." As the new moon of Tishre rises, *ratzon*, divine desire, increases. On Rosh Hashanah we link our souls again to God's creative will, God's desire to emanate goodness into the unfolding creation. It is a time pregnant with potential for goodness, for mitzvot and acts of chesed, loving-kindness. In Tishre we call out to God: "*Hashiveynu eylecha v'nashuva, chadeysh yameynuk'kedem*—Return to us and we will return to You! Renew our days as they were k'kedem."

K'kedem is a curious phrase. It carries the dual meanings of "as once long ago" and "as yet to be." This is the "onceandfuture promise"—that we will be held in such love and delight in the heart and mind of God, that the mere thought of us would be enough to trigger the creation of time and space.

On Yom Kippur, dressed in a kittel, a clean, white penitential robe reminiscent of burial shrouds, we step beyond life itself to atone and return, that we may live and not die, that we may be worthy of the love that creates and sustains us.

With the full harvest moon of Tishre in the sky, we rejoice in the leafy harvest in the *chuppah*-like structure of the sukkah, joining the etrog with the lulav in trembling embrace to celebrate the consummation of this celestial/terrestrial love. As the new moon of Tishre swells, it is Shechinah, the divine Presence herself, who comes near. Each night the moon brings Her closer, as it were, to her wedding chuppah, for the kabbalists envisioned the moon as the "feminine face of God" coming to cosmic union. They also identified the Shechinah with us, opening our hearts to the Beloved in rapturous joy.

The moon of Tishre wanes and the harvest is done. Fields are bare, seeds hidden away in cellars and earth. The rains of winter and a time of inward gestation begin. In ancient times when the Holy House still stood, three pilgrimage festivals drew us to Jerusalem, one to anchor each season. But the torrential winter rains that flood the roads make a winter Temple festival in the Land of Israel impossible. Yet to dispense with a ritual marker of winter's onset—also impossible! So Shemini Atzeret was carefully tucked in at the end of the seven days of Sukkot, for we had not yet departed Jerusalem and could still initiate the onset of winter together.

The expansive *simcha*/joyous celebration of Sukkot concludes with chanted pleas for life-giving rains that will continue until Pesach, and echoes of Yom Kippur as we offer culminating prayers for repentance and forgiveness. Then it is time to parade and dance joyously with the Torah, to formally end one Torah cycle and begin anew. Simchat Torah marks one final burst of celebration before winter, a time of inwardness and restraint