

Equinox
Kehillat Beth Israel, Ottawa
Rosh Hashanah, First Night, 1 Tishrei 5786

Shanah Tovah. Thank you for inviting me to return to KBI. It is good to be here again.

Two weeks ago, in the park behind our Jerusalem apartment, Josette and I watched the reddish lunar eclipse. When Earth is positioned precisely between the Moon and Sun, Earth's shadow falls upon the surface of the Moon, dimming it and sometimes turning the lunar surface a striking red over the course of a few hours.

Judaism follows the moon. Our sacred calendar is determined by the lunar cycle. The new moon of Tishrei is tonight. The Talmudic tractate Rosh Hashanah discusses laws and customs related to blowing the shofar, the liturgy of this yom tov, and the process by which the ancient supreme court, the Sanhedrin, would declare and sanctify each Rosh Hodesh, the new month. Torches, *massu'ot*, known in Greek as phryctoria, would be kindled on mountaintops to alert distant Jewish communities that the month and the new year had begun.

The moon played a role in the Zionist effort to settle and sow the land of Israel. This poem *Ha'zorim ba'lailah* (They Who Sow at Night), by Sh. Shalom evokes the dangers faced by these *halutzim*-pioneers

Go slowly, go slowly, oh moon, upon your way.
We are sowing by your light,
Sowing the fields of Galilee.
Enemies rise against us from all sides,
the roaring human desires close upon us-
And we go out to sow at night,
For we want only to sow, and our soul longs for grain.

Guard us from the wandering bullet, from the knife out of the
ambush.
...Guard the seed we have sown, guard it from theft and from
scorching wind.
May our children eat and be satisfied. May they grow tall and
remember us for good.
For them do we sow at night, for their sake are our steps alarmed.
... Go slowly, go slowly, oh moon, upon your way.
(tr. Ruth Finer Mintz)

Today is also the autumn equinox, determined by the orbit of the
Earth around the sun. The sun is not foreign to our tradition. The
solar calendar was displayed in the mosaic art of some ancient
synagogues. In the Galilee of Israel, in the setting for the poem I
just read, the mosaic floor of the Bet Alpha synagogue was
uncovered in 1928 by members of Kibbutz Beit Alfa, during
irrigation construction.

The mosaic floor of the 6th-century synagogue consisted of three
panels: one depicting the binding of Isaac, and a second portraying

the Temple flanked by lions, menorot and a lulav, etrog, shofar, and incense shovel.

The central panel was the real surprise. It featured a zodiac circle, with twelve images, and Helios, the Greco-Roman sun god riding in a chariot, in the centre. Female figures symbolizing the four seasons appear in the four corners outside the zodiac. Why was the zodiac, with its pagan images, in a synagogue? I think it indicates that Jews and Judaism must interact with the general society around us. On a trip out west, I was intrigued by a Haida carving, which also depicts the sun and moon in a complex interaction.

This year, the coincidence of the solar equinox with the lunar Rosh Hashanah also reminds me of the importance of caring for our planet.

Marci Rae Johnson writes about the equinox and, although she is not a Jew, also touches on the themes of these Days of Awe.

Equinox

Longing, the deserted beach, smell of woodsmoke
and poems in a mystery of leaves—

the apple about to fall from the tree.

It's another kind of beginning,
calendar of spirit and of sight,
day turning into night—a prophecy
for release and spark.

The healing of our broken hearts.

We're neither sinners nor saints
but something in between — balance

of the light and dark as these lengthened days
contract, reveal our miracle —
this hope, a flame.

As we enter autumn, the leaves fall and the days contract, the “balance of light and dark,” day and night shifts. The apple, one of our Ashkenazi Rosh Hashanah foods, is ripe, hanging, “about to fall from the tree.”

Is this the end of the year or its beginning? Rosh Hashanah is “another kind of beginning.” What is seen in nature is also reflected in spirit. As the season changes, so does our spiritual vector. As we begin the Days of Awe, are we sinners or saints? The poet says we are neither. Our tradition imagines us at an indeterminate in-between.

Her poem begins with an epitaph by Goethe:

I wish to praise what is fully alive,
What longs to flame toward death.

This contrast of life and death is a major theme for our *Yamim Nora'im*. The healing of our broken hearts might occur when the flame illuminates. It may flame toward death. It may be a flame of hope. We don't know what is ahead for us during the year.

As we begin Rosh Hashanah, as the season changes, as the darkness grows, we do know that the light will return and hope will be reborn. May this new moon of Rosh Hashanah, followed by the full moon of Sukkot, lead us into a year of blessing, eventually bringing us to the spring equinox, to Pesah, and to continued life.