CHAPTER NINE

ROSH ḤODESH AS A WOMEN’S HOLIDAY –
THE ORIGIN OF A MINHAG

In this chapter, I explore yet another transition from profane to sacred time, related to the lunar cycle as represented by the Rosh Ḥodesh festival. This transition is only sacred for a limited segment of the Jewish people – the women, who, according to PRE, should be exempt from work (melakhah) on Rosh Ḥodesh. The practice has gone, for the most part, by the wayside but the association between women and Rosh Ḥodesh is well known, though the story of its origins may have been forgotten. The first record of the tradition appears in the Palestinian Talmud, with no explanation as to the origins of the gender bias.¹ The author of PRE (chapter 45), provides an etiological narrative for the tradition. Because the women did not contribute their jewelry in the making of the Golden Calf, they were rewarded with the festival of Rosh Ḥodesh. The connection between the two – their piety and God’s gift – is tenuous; the halakhic responsa thus conjecture a reason behind the minhag. First I will examine the source in PRE, engaging in a comparison with parallel midrashic passages, and then move on to the halakhic literature.

The midrash sketches a scene intended to exonerate Aaron of responsibility in the sin of Golden Calf. His apparent complicity in the biblical text – asking them to contribute their jewelry (Exod. 32:2), making the mold for the molten calf (v. 3), building an altar (v. 5), and declaring a “Festival to the Lord” for the next day (v. 5) – is reformulated in the midrash as a series of delay tactics.² He had just witnessed

¹ y. Pesahim 4, 1. 30d; y. Ta’anit 1, 6. 64c. The minhag is not recorded in the Babylonian Talmud, which reinforces (as Friedlander suggests) the scholarly consensus on the provenance of PRE (Friedlander 1981: liv, and JE, 1905 10:59a). In b. Megillah 22b and b. Hagigah 18a, it is stated explicitly that melakhah is permissible on Rosh Ḥodesh, without qualification. But see the ‘addition’ to Rashi on b. Megillah 22b, and the Tosafot on loc. cit., which mention the exemption made for the women but not the men – probably based on the tradition recorded in PRE. See also the Tur and the Shulhan Arukh, Orah Haim 417, to be discussed later.

² The midrash (Lev. Rab. 10:3) fills in the picture more fully as to what Aaron
the murder of Hur, who had been rebuking the Israelites for hankering after idolatry. Instead of dissuading them directly, which would cost him his life, Aaron prevaricates:

Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer, Chapter 45

1. Aaron deliberated, saying to himself: If I say to them ‘give me your silver and gold’, they will immediately bring it to me. But if I say give me the rings of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, the whole project will fail, as it says, “And Aaron said: ‘Take off the gold rings [that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters...’]” (Exod. 32:2).

2. The women heard and refused, unwilling to give over their rings to their husband. Instead they rebuked them, saying, “To make a calf and an abomination [נเสมอ], that has no power to save! No we will not heed you [לא נשמע לכם].”

3. And the Holy One, blessed be He, gave them their reward in this world, for they are to observe the New Moon (celebrations) more than the men. And He gave them a reward in the World to Come, for they saw. With a play on words, the verse: “And Aaron saw (Rails) and built an altar (Rails)” (Exod. 32:5), is reread as: “Since he heard, so he feared...and understood from the slaughter (Rails) before him [i.e. the murder of Hur].” See also b. Sanhedrin 7a, Tanhuma Tetzaveh 10, Be-ha’alotecha 14, Exod. Rab. 41:7, Num. Rab. 15, PRE 45, and Yalkut Exod. 391. Radal on PRE suggests that the drash deliberately misreads the term “he saw (Rails),” as “he feared (Rails)” (PRE 45, n. 17).

This translation is based on the 1st ed., checked against Börner-Klein, 2004: 607–609, supplemented with reference to the other printed editions and manuscripts; parallel sources: Tanhuma Ki Tissa 19, and Zohar, Exod. 192a.

4 Radal’s edition, as well as the En866 manuscript, are both missing “your sons,” though it is found in the biblical text as well as in the printed and Higger’s editions (based on Ca2858), as well as Gi75.

5 The printed editions, as well as Gi75, truncate the quote; likewise, En866 only selectively quotes: “And Aaron said to them: take off the gold rings on the ears of your wives....” Higger’s edition (Ca2858) does not provide a prooftext at all, but paraphrases: אלוהי אבות אבותך ותלך אני נ станет אתה לה capacitatem תחת שד.”

6 The printed editions, as well as Higger’s, Radal’s, and Gi75 reads: “an abhorrence and an abomination (שקרן ותועשא) (common euphemisms for idolatry), rather than “a calf and an abomination (נעשית ותועשא);” Friedlander (based on the Epstein manuscript) translates the whole phrase as: “Ye desire to make a graven image and a molten image” (Friedlander 1981: 354), a command hendiadys (cf. Deut. 27:15, Judg. 17: 3, 4; Nah, 1:14); it is the same phrase found in Rashi’s comment to b. Megillah 22b: מiframe ממקימה, and is certainly closer to the original biblical text – molten calf (Exod. 32:4).

7 Based on Ezek. 7:19. See Radal’s comment to PRE 45, n. 21.

8 In the En866 manuscript, the phrase “World to Come” is missing; only the messianic “Future” is mentioned: “In the Future to Come, the Holy One, blessed be He,