

Work on Rosh Chodesh

Rabbi Akiva Niehaus

Due to the special nature of Rosh Chodesh, many women have a custom to avoid working on that day, treating it like a Yom Tov.

SOURCE

The custom to avoid working on Rosh Chodesh has ancient origins, mentioned in the Yerushalmi (Ta'anis 1:6) and Pirkei D'Rebbi Eliezer (perek 44), as well as Rashi and Tosfos (Megillah 22b). Some write that this custom actually dates back to the times of Moshe Rabbeinu (Shibolei Haleket siman 169). Rashi (ibid.) brings support for this custom from the pasuk in Shmuel (Shmuel I 20:19, haftorah for Shabbos Erev Rosh Chodesh) which refers to Erev Rosh Chodesh as "השעמה סו" – the day of work," implying that Rosh Chodesh itself is not a day of work.¹

This custom is recorded in the Shulchan Aruch (417:1) who notes that it is "a good custom." Men do not have such a custom; in fact, those men who refrain from work on Rosh Chodesh are acting in error (Mishnah Berurah 417:2).

REASONS FOR THE CUSTOM

Numerous reasons are given for this custom to refrain from work on Rosh Chodesh:

1. Tur (417:1) explains, based on Pirkei D'Rebbi Eliezer (perek 44), that when Klal Yisroel approached Aharon HaKohen to fashion the Eigel Hazahav (the Golden Calf), Aharon attempted to stall the production by advising the men to ask their wives for their jewelry. He knew that the righteous women of the generation would object to the construction of an idol and would refuse to participate, and indeed, they refused to take part. To commemorate the refusal of the women, Hashem gave them a reward: Rosh Chodesh would be celebrated more fully by women than by men.

Why were they specifically given Rosh Chodesh as their reward? Tur (ibid., citing his brother, Harav Yehuda) explains as follows: The three Yomim Tovim of Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkos correspond to the three Avos, Avrohom, Yitzchok and Yaakov, respectively. The twelve days of Rosh Chodesh correspond to the twelve shevatim. When the nation sinned with the Eigel, the twelve days of Rosh Chodesh were transferred to their wives as a remembrance that they were not involved in that sin.

2. Rosh and Daas Zekeinim m'Baa'lei HaTosfos (Shemos 35:22) and Avudraham (Hilchos Rosh Chodesh) explain that contrary to giving donations for the Eigel, the women hastened to donate their jewelry for the construction of the Mishkan, as it states (Shemos 35:22), "ואביו" – the men came on to the women for donations." To commemorate the great dedication of the women towards the Mishkan, Rosh Chodesh Nissan, the day the Mishkan was assembled, was designated as a Yom Tov for women, and by extension, all Roshei Chodesh were so designated.
3. Prisha (417:1, cited in Pri Megadim, Mishbetzos Zahav 417:1) explains that when Moshiah comes, the elderly, righteous women will revert

to their youth like we find by Yocheved, and this is symbolized by the moon which renews every month. Thus, they were given Rosh Chodesh as a holiday to remind them of this wondrous gift which will happen in the future.

4. Darkei Moshe (417:1 citing Ohr Zarua) explains that just like the moon renews monthly and everyone looks forward to this occasion, so too a woman renews herself monthly to her husband. To commemorate this happy occasion, women celebrate Rosh Chodesh as their holiday.
5. Turei Even (Megillah 22b) and Levush (417:1) offer a new explanation, that there is a prohibition against work on the day when one brings a korban. Therefore, when the special korban for Mussaf of Rosh Chodesh is brought on behalf of Klal Yisroel, the entire day is prohibited in work for both men and women. Although this no longer applies after the Beis Hamikdash was destroyed, the custom remained for women.

PARAMETERS OF THE PROHIBITION

The wording of the Shulchan Aruch (417:1) indicates that this custom was not accepted nationwide and only those women who have such a custom must abstain from work. However, the Biur Halacha (ad loc. d.h. v'hanoshim) writes that even those women who do not have a custom to abstain entirely from work should abstain from some type of work in order to signify that Rosh Chodesh is different from other days. A woman who has the custom to abstain from work on Rosh Chodesh or accepts upon herself this custom may not stop following this special custom without consulting a halachic authority (Biur Halacha ibid.).²

SINGLE WOMEN

In many communities, only married women are stringent to avoid work on Rosh Chodesh (Halichos Shlomo, Rosh Chodesh, Dvar Halacha 1:33).³ However, others note that the reasons mentioned above apply to both married and single women (see ibid. in the name of Orchos Chaim), and therefore even single women should be stringent unless they have a custom otherwise (Shiurei Halacha ch. 6 fn. 11).

UNDER BAS MITZVAH

There is a discussion in the Poskim if there is a concept of chinuch on mitzvos which are prohibited based on a minhag, such as the prohibition against work on Rosh Chodesh. Some Poskim rule stringently and note that even girls under Bas Mitzvah should refrain from work on Rosh Chodesh (Halichos Beisa 16:8). However, in case of necessity, one may be lenient with regards to them using a washing machine since there are many Poskim who are lenient in this regard; see below, Laundry (Shiurei Halacha ibid.).

TYPE OF WORK

The Rama (ibid.) notes that the custom in certain locations was that women refrained only from certain actions, but he fails to mention which actions are prohibited.⁴ Other Poskim record various customs, as detailed below. As a general rule, Ya'avetz (Mor U'Ketzia) notes that women only abstain from strenuous work while non-strenuous work is permitted, but see Biur Halacha (d.h. minhag) who is unsure whether one may follow this lenient approach. Another general rule is that any activity which is permissible on Chol Hamoed, is similarly permissible on Rosh Chodesh (Shiurei Halacha ch. 6 fn. 5).

LAUNDRY

Nesivei Am (siman 417) records that the custom in Yerushalayim is that women do not wash laundry on Rosh Chodesh. Many Poskim note that this custom is accepted in many communities across the globe. The advent of modern-day, time-saving conveniences such as the washing machine present new questions. Contemporary Poskim discuss whether or not using a washing machine on Rosh Chodesh is prohibited, due to the fact that such a machine greatly reduces the stress involved in this household chore. This

question appears to be subject to the above dispute, namely, whether or not non-strenuous work was prohibited. Some Poskim follow the lenient opinion and permit washing clothes with a washing machine because doing so does not involve strenuous work.⁵ However, other Poskim rule that using a washing machine is prohibited.⁶ Therefore, unless a woman knows that her custom is to allow washing clothes, she should not be lenient with a washing machine (Shiurei Halacha 6:3).⁷

RELEVANT HALACHOS

- May a woman prepare the laundry in the washing machine and ask a man to press the button to activate the machine? Some Poskim are of the opinion that doing so is not in the spirit of the law (Chut Shani ibid.), but others rule that this practice is allowed (Harav Chaim Kanievsky, cited in Halichos Chaim Vol. 2 query 183; Shiurei Halacha 6:3). However, scrubbing clothes with a pre-wash detergent is considered laundering by hand and prohibited (Shiurei Halacha ibid.).
- Washing a single article of clothing by hand is permitted (Halichos Shlomo Rosh Chodesh, Dvar Halacha 1:34).
- Children's clothes may be washed in a washing machine as needed (Chut Shani Shabbos Vol. 4, pg. 318).
- Clothing needed for Rosh Chodesh may be washed as normal (Aishel Avrohom M'Butchatch tinyana siman 417). Some note that this should be done only if a man is unavailable to help (Shevet Hakahasi Vol. 1, 135:5), but other Poskim are lenient in case of necessity (Shiurei Halacha 6:4).
- It is permitted to put wet clothes in the dryer (Shiurei Halacha 6:3).

SEWING

The Tashbatz (Vol. 3 siman 244, cited in Sha'arei Tshuva 417:3) writes that only spinning is prohibited because this was their specialty in the Mishkan; sewing, however, is permitted. However, the Da'as Torah (417:1) notes that the common custom is to prohibit even sewing. Contemporary Poskim write that the accepted custom is to avoid sewing (Chut Shani, Shabbos Vol. 4, pg. 318; Shevet Halevi 6:50) and others include knitting in the prohibition (Halichos Bas Yisroel ibid., Shiurei Halacha 5:6).

IRONING

Some Poskim prohibit ironing (Halichos Bas Yisroel ibid.), but others rule leniently, and this appears to be the common custom (see Halichos Shlomo ibid. Dvar Halacha 1:35, Aishel Avrohom M'Butchatch ibid.; Shiurei Halacha 6:3).

BAKING

Common custom is to allow baking and the like (Nesivei Am ibid.). As mentioned previously, even women who do not have an accepted custom to refrain from work on Rosh Chodesh should accept upon themselves to refrain from one of the aforementioned types of work. Doing so will transform Rosh Chodesh into a special, unique day.

WORK FOR A LIVELIHOOD

Aruch Hashulchan (417:10) notes that the custom in his time was that women who worked for their livelihood washing clothes or performing one of the other prohibited actions did so even on Rosh Chodesh. He explains that the custom of abstaining from work was apparently not accepted in situations where it would decrease one's livelihood. Other Poskim, however, are stringent (Chut Shani ibid.). One may certainly be lenient to avoid financial loss (ibid.).

NIGHT

Some Poskim are of the opinion that there is no need to abstain from work on the night of Rosh Chodesh (Mor U'Ketzia siman 417), but others are unsure if one may be lenient (Biur Halacha d.h. minhag). Some Poskim note that the accepted custom is to be stringent from sunset onward (Halichos Shlomo, Rosh Chodesh 1:22, Chut Shani ibid.).

TWO DAYS OF ROSH CHODESH

Rosh Chodesh often falls on two days – the last day of the previous month and the first of the new month. All agree that one must abstain from work on the second day of Rosh Chodesh because it is the first day of the new month (Mishnah Berurah 417:4). However, there is a discussion in the Poskim whether or not the prohibition also applies to the first day of Rosh Chodesh, because it is the last day of the previous month – not actually the first day of the month. There are different customs on this matter, and one should follow their own custom. Some Poskim note that the accepted custom is to be stringent on both days (Chut Shani ibid.; see Pri Megadim, Mishbetzos Zahav 417:1). However, on the first night of Rosh Chodesh one may be lenient in extenuating circumstances since there are two reasons to be lenient: a) some Poskim are always lenient at night, and b) some Poskim are lenient on the first day of Rosh Chodesh (Shiurei Halacha 6:5).

Let us conclude with the words of the Ben Ish Chai (Year 2, Vayikra #2): “How careful must a woman be to safeguard the holiness of Rosh Chodesh. This is one of the few mitzvos that women are enjoined to perform more than men.” This mitzvah for women to abstain from work should be viewed as a zchus and a sign of respect for women – not C”V as a burden. If we are careful to safeguard this ancient custom, restoring Rosh Chodesh to its glorious status, we can hope and pray that Klal Yisrael will return to its glory with the coming of Moshiach, speedily in our times.

1 Rosh (Megillah 3:4) brings this proof as well and there is a slight implication in his words that the custom referred to in Shmuel of not doing work on Rosh Chodesh applies to men and women alike. In fact, Chida (Kisei Rachamim, Mesesech Sofrim, 10:5, Tosfos) cites Rosh as above, that the custom applies to men as well. Ritva (Megillah 22b) writes this clearly, that the original custom (“minhag haRishonim”) applied to men and women alike, but he notes that this is no longer our custom, and our custom is that only women avoid work. (See, also, Tosfos, Shabbos 24a d.h. oh dilma, and Chagigah 18a d.h. Rosh Chodesh, first answer, which also implies that the custom applies to both men and women.) It should be noted that Chida writes that this is the simple reading of the Gemara (Megillah 22b) which notes that Rosh Chodesh has four Aliyos because it is a day which isn't affected by a longer davening in shul since there is no “loss of work.” Now, if the rationale for this is because the women refrain from work – as understood by Rashi and Tosfos – how does that explain why there's no loss of work for the men? This clearly implies that the custom of not doing work – at least in earlier times – applied to both men and women. Turei Even (Megillah 22b) also understood that the prohibition implied in the Gemara applies to both men and women, but he explains it differently; see below, #5.

An alternative explanation is found in Mordechai (Megillah #806) who explains the pasuk in Shmuel which alludes to a prohibition against work on Rosh Chodesh as applying to “hard work”, such as plowing and planting, which, he says, is forbidden for men as well.

2 When determining if a woman has the custom to abstain from work on Rosh Chodesh, it appears that the common custom is for a woman to follow her mother's custom – not her mother-in-law (Shiurei Halacha ch. 6 fn. 3). Although Igros Moshe rules that a woman should follow the customs of her husband – not her mother, perhaps that's only regarding halachos which are also relevant to the husband, such as Neiros Shabbos and Hilchos Niddah, both of which are his obligation just like hers and directly impact the husband, but regarding working on Rosh Chodesh which is solely relevant to the wife, she should follow her mother's custom (ibid.).

3 The reason for this is unclear, but some suggest that perhaps only the married women were able to stand up against their husbands and refuse to contribute jewelry to the Eigel Hazahav – and for this they were rewarded that Rosh Chodesh is celebrated as a Yom Tov, but the single woman were not strong enough to protest against their fathers and therefore they did not merit this reward (Teshuvos Hisorerus Teshuvah 1:1).

4 Mishnah Berurah (417:4) and Aruch Hashulchan (417:10) write that this only applies if such a minhag is known and documented, but otherwise they must be stringent on all activities. However, the accepted custom is to be stringent only on some activities – not everything (Shiurei Halacha 6:2).

5 Halichos Shlomo (Rosh Chodesh, Dvar Halacha 1:34), Chazon Ovadia (Chanukah pg. 246), Yalkut Yosef (Shabbos Vol. 5 page 248), Ohr L'Tzion (Vol. 3, 1:1).

6 Halichos Bas Yisroel (16:2:4), Chut Shani (Shabbos Vol. 4, pg. 318).

7 This is for two reasons: 1) It is fairly easy to be stringent on this because of the simple solution mentioned below that she can ask her husband to press the button on the machine, and 2) if they aren't careful about washing clothing, the entire halacha will likely be forgotten because many women no longer sew or knit (Shiurei Halacha ch. 6 fn. 8).

This article is an excerpt from Rabbi Niehaus's upcoming sefer, Ayin Halevana, the laws and customs of Rosh Chodesh and Kiddush Levana. For more information, contact roschodesh613@gmail.com.



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