

Let's Establish the New Moon and Full Moon as Holidays of Earth Preservation

by Ron H. Feldman

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The seventh day, the seventh year, and the seven times seventh year are sacred in the Bible: Sabbaths, sabbaticals, Jubilees. These are important because they mark periods of rest and restoration both personally and societally.

The moonless night sky at Zion National Park. "Let there be luminaries in the expanse of the sky to separate the day from the night; they shall serve as signs and for meeting times and for days and years." Credit: Creative Commons/ Joe Parks

Various forms of these rhythms, especially the seven-day week, were adapted by both Christianity and Islam and spread by them around the world.

But from an environmental perspective I don't like these temporal sevens because they are all unnatural rhythms which, when acted upon by humans, impose our will on the natural world. Rather, I suggest we establish the new moon and full moon as "holidays of earth preservation." Twice a month, in sync with the moon and the biosphere that responds to the rhythm of the lunation, we should rest from our exploitation of the natural world, allowing the entire biosphere a respite from human domination.

The Unnatural Timing of the Biblical Sevens: Sabbath, Sabbatical, Jubilee

Today the Gregorian calendar, including the seven-day week, is so intrinsic and essential to the global economy that few ever reflect on how it is a human created contrivance that imposes these cycles on the natural world (note, for instance, weekly patterns of human work and associated

pollution). The Bible explains that these temporal patterns of seven are divinely revealed, and attributes them to divine commandment—thereby acknowledging that these patterns of sacred time cannot be derived from patterns observable in the “created world,” the rabbinic term for what we today call the “natural world.”

As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel writes, “the Sabbath is entirely independent of the month and unrelated to the moon. Its date is not determined by any event in nature, such as the new moon, but by the act of creation. Thus the essence of the Sabbath is completely detached from the world of space.” Heschel goes on to write that the rules related to the cessation of work on the Sabbath mean that “we abstain primarily from any activity that aims at remaking or reshaping the things of space. Man’s royal privilege to conquer nature is suspended on the seventh day... The seventh day is the armistice in man’s cruel struggle for existence.”

While many religious environmentalists valorize the Sabbath along the lines of Heschel, they fail to realize that these rules of rest could be applied to any day; it is simply a commandment by God to the Israelites that they be observed on the day called “the Sabbath.” Indeed, many of these rules are also applied to other holidays when the Bible commands refraining from work. The natural world knows nothing of the seventh-day Sabbath, sabbatical, or Jubilee. This is the intrinsic problem in mobilizing “the sevens” for environmental purposes: Whether it is the rules of the Sabbath, or the biblical declarations related to Sabbatical and Jubilee—the timing of these actions are all *human impositions* on the “more-than-human world” (to use David Abram’s phrase). They are not driven by consideration of the world’s other creatures, but by rhythms ostensibly established by God that are enforced by humans.

Celebrating the New and Full Moon as Holidays of Earth Preservation

While the Biblical sevens may be part of the problem, the Bible also provides us with a solution. While my proposal may seem radical—and it is, in the true sense of the term: going back to the roots—elements of this exist in the biblical tradition if we just “turn it over,” as the rabbinic tradition of interpretation suggests.

What I propose is to distinguish and separate these two aspects of the Sabbath: the temporal rhythm from the customs of observation, especially refraining from “work” that transforms the natural world.

Let’s apply Sabbath-like observances to the new and full moon days. Let’s de-emphasize the sevens and re-emphasize the holidays that derive from natural rhythms. Genesis 1:14 declares that the heavenly lights were created not only to mark day and night, but rhythms of time—that is, of moments marked by the observable configuration of the sun, moon and stars (including planets):

God said, “Let there be luminaries in the expanse of the sky to separate the day from the night; they shall serve as signs and for meeting times and for days and years.”

The sun marked the day, the moon marked the month, and the stars marked the year. In Genesis, the term “signs” is understood to be the configuration of the heavenly lights that mark seasonal change, and the “meeting times” is the configuration of the luminaries marking specific holidays. Our ancient ancestors were sky watchers, and they synchronized their holidays to the changing seasons—that is, they were in sync with the temporal rhythms of the natural world. Which is to say, Genesis relates that God commands us to not only observe the sevens, but also to sync up with

the heavens; and this latter aspect is true of most human civilizations, who responded to the rhythms of day, lunar month, and year.

During the time of the First Temple and earlier, the children of Israel probably observed the new and full moon days as holidays, as was the case for many other peoples in the Ancient Near East. The New Moon survives even today as a “minor” Jewish holiday (plus the annual holidays of Rosh Hashanah (New Year) and Hanukkah (Dedication) also fall on the new moon); the Bible commands its observance by the sounding of horns along with other holidays (see Numbers 10:10). There is also evidence that the “Sabbath” was observed on the full moon, not every seventh day. While many clergy of the Abrahamic religions who are subject to the hegemony of the Second Temple theology and practice of the seventh-day Sabbath will disagree, many biblical scholars contend that the Sabbath was initially a full-moon observance that became a seventh-day observance sometime during the Babylonian Exile or Second Temple period. Remnants of this remain in the many Jewish holidays that fall on the full moon—Pesach (Passover), Sukkot (Booths), Purim (Lots), Tu B'Shvat (new year for trees), Tu B'Av (day of matchmaking and love)—as well as the rabbinic interpretation that the “Sabbath” referred to by Leviticus 23:11-16, which commands beginning the count of seven weeks until Shavuot (the Feast of Weeks) “on the day after the Sabbath,” is the full moon day of the Passover sacrifice, not a weekly Sabbath. The First Temple period prophet Amos rails against those who can't wait for the end of New Moon and Sabbath, on both of which commerce was prohibited, to continue their exploitation of the poor:

Hear this, you who trample the needy and do away with the poor of the land, saying, “When will the New Moon be over that we may sell grain, and the Sabbath be ended that we may market wheat?”—skimping the measure, boosting the price and cheating with dishonest scales, buying the poor with silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, selling even the sweepings with the wheat. (Amos 8:4-6)



The new and full moon can be not only days of rest, but days of tikkun, a time to repair our relationship with the more-than-human-world. Credit: Wikimedia Commons/Weird Tales

If our goal is to live more harmoniously with the natural world, we should consider time as well as

space; temporal rhythms as well as physical. While the biblical and religious mind marked off “sacred” times and places, today we set aside “nature reserves.” Along these lines, I suggest we mark the new and full moon as “nature reserves” of time. The basic practices should be like those practiced for the weekly Sabbath and many annual festivals, about which God commands refraining from work (see Leviticus 23, for example). For us this means refraining from the transformation of nature. Attune yourself to what’s going on in the natural world, notice the changing seasons, notice the impact humans are having. Perhaps we even go a step farther and say: not only are these days of rest, they are also days of *tikkun* (repair) when we heal our relationships with the more-than-human world by organizing efforts at repairing the damage we humans have done to the rest of the biosphere, to which we owe recompense. Kind of like a bimonthly earth day.

New moon and full moon are moments of time observable in nature: tides are noticeably higher or lower on these days, and it is well known that many sea and land creatures respond to the differences of lunar light. Of great virtue is the fact that the moon, and its influence, is observable by people around the world, regardless of knowledge of or adherence to the artificial rhythms of seven. This is a pattern we can use in resistance to the Gregorian calendar of commerce, or as we describe and experience it today, our 24/7 culture. In doing so we may surprisingly fulfill the vision of the prophet Isaiah, who wrote:

“And new moon after new moon, and Sabbath after Sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship Me—said the Lord” (Isaiah 66:23).

Let the New Moon and Full Moon be our holidays from business and work, as in the time of Amos; let them be established as “holidays of earth preservation.” May they disrupt our 24/7 cultural patterns leading to the destruction of the human and more-than-human realms. Heaven knows, with global warming our grandchildren—seven or seventy generations from now—will certainly notice the effect of those high tide days, as the rising seas overflow and destroy our coastal infrastructure. Indeed, some might interpret this as “blowback,” as nature’s way of making us notice that there are some things we cannot (yet) harness to our whims. In the far distant future, humans may have forgotten the rhythms of seven, but they will still be living with the rhythm of the new and full moon, even when many of today’s cities may be underwater.

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