

How do we know that the month starts with the sighting of the new moon, when the Torah does not expressly command us how to set our months?

This is a question near and dear to the heart of every observant Karaite. It is true that there is no explicit commandment to set our months according to the sighting of the new moon. But both Rabbanites and Karaites agree that this was the historical practice. And throughout history, it was the observant Karaites who maintained the ancient practice of *sighting* the new moon. In contrast, Rabbanite Jews have for centuries used a calendar that fixes the months by *mathematical calculation*. In many months, the Rabbinic calendar differs from the actual new moon – sometimes by up to three days.

Let's take a step back to make sure we understand why this matters. Among other reasons, this is important so that we are observing our holidays on the proper dates. When the date set by the Rabbinic calendar differs from the new moon date, persons following the Rabbinic calendar end up fasting on the wrong date for Yom Kippur or eating *hameitz* at a time when we are supposed to consume only *matzah*.

Karaites generally advance three reasons as to how we know that the new moon signals the beginning of the month. The first two reasons are linguistic and third reason is historical.

First, the word *chodesh* – which modern Hebrew speakers would translate as “new” – also had the meaning of moon in biblical times, as is evident in many places throughout the Torah. For example, the word *chodesh* is used in parallel with the word “*yerach*”, which is another biblical word for moon. (See 1 Kings 6:1, 1 Kings 8:2.) Thus, when we are commanded to do something on the “first day of the *chodesh*” (see Leviticus 23:24), we are actually being commanded to do something on the first day of the moon, and by extension the first day of the month.

Second, the word *chodesh* – which is indeed related to the word “new” – suggests that something is renewing itself every month. Ancient Israel was a society that relied on physical signs – such as the setting and rising of the sun, the crescent moon and the full moon. The only sign that renews itself on a monthly basis is the moon. And the moon literally looks new on the first day of the month, because this is the day that the moon reappears after being invisible to the human eye for between one and three days.

Third, traditional Karaites maintain that the observation of the new moon was practiced in ancient Israel, even before the giving of the Torah. In this respect, God was not commanding anything new to the Israelites; but rather, the Torah maintained the existing practice of using the new moon to determine the beginning of the months. For this reason, the Torah does not expressly command that our months are dependent on the moon.

This example is quite similar to the *shechita* example, in which we do not have an explicit commandment and we must piece together what to do based on the scriptural, linguistic, and cultural evidence available to us.