

PAST PERFECT

by Rabbi Berel Wein

Both of the holidays of Pesach and Succot are weeklong festivals. In the Land of Israel they are seven days in length while in the Diaspora they are eight days in length. In Israel, the first day and seventh days of Pesach are full holidays, while in the Diaspora the first, second, seventh and eighth days of Pesach are full holidays. For Succot, in Israel, the first day is a full holiday and in the Diaspora, the first two days are full holidays. The balance of the days of these holidays is called Chol Hamoed - the intermediate, less holy days of the holiday. This extremely sophisticated concept of days that are holidays but not completely so, is a unique Jewish creation. Unlike the actual full holy days of the holidays, these intermediate days do not carry with them the entire gamut of restrictions on work. In fact, any work that is necessary for comfort and/or to prevent monetary loss is permissible. However, the intermediate days are not to be treated as ordinary workdays. Unnecessary work, work that is easily postponed till after the holidays, lawsuits and other contentious matters, etc. are all not to be pursued during Chol Hamoed. Therefore, in Israel and in many parts of the Diaspora, Chol Hamoed is a vacation and leisure time. Stores and offices are closed and entire families participate in touring, visiting friends and relatives and attending concerts and other forms of entertainment. On Chol Hamoed, holiday clothing and finery is worn and festive meals are served. It is a joyous and sweet time of the year for all concerned, especially for the children who are free of school and their routines for the week.

Chol Hamoed is a practical example of the Jewish ability to transform the everyday into the special and the mundane into holy. We can all understand the concept of Sabbath and holidays and the fact that work is somehow inconsistent with the spirit and message of those days. But Chol Hamoed affords us an opportunity to work and not work, celebrate and yet not divorce ourselves from the occurrences and tasks of everyday life. There is a ritual and rhythm to Chol Hamoed that governs this remarkable time. It is a time for family and friends, for study and reading, for relaxation and refreshment. But it is not summer vacation or midwinter break. It has holiness, ritual, and halacha attached to it. That it is what gives Chol Hamoed its special resonance and feeling in the Jewish world.

Part of the custom of Chol Hamoed is to pay one's respects to the great rabbis and scholars of Israel. In Israel, and in the Diaspora as well, the great rabbis, the Chassidic leaders, and the heads of the yeshivot all hold open house and court during Chol Hamoed. There are Jews who travel from all corners of the world to visit their spiritual leaders and pay their homage to the Torah and its scholars. In Jerusalem, there is a special "Blessing by the Kohanim" (priests descended from the family of

Aaron) ceremony conducted at the plaza of the Western Wall. Hundreds of priests gather there to bless the tens of thousands of Jews who gather at the Wall to receive their heavenly blessing on Chol Hamoed.

During Chol Hamoed of Succot, there are parties held every night to celebrate the "drawing of the water" service that took place in the Temple in Jerusalem. The Talmud describes how in Temple times this ceremony was celebrated with song, dance, torches and bonfires, jugglers and performers. The "drawing of the water" from the spring of Gichon south of Jerusalem and its libation on the altar of the Temple symbolically marked the beginning of the rainy season in Israel and the prayers for a bountiful rainfall during the winter months. Though the Temple and its altar are not now present, the celebrations of Chol Hamoed Succot have survived and prospered. Throughout Jerusalem's many neighborhoods, the parties and celebrations take place. The Talmud stated that 'sleep did not find our eyes' at these festive Chol Hamoed nights. That still is pretty much the case for the young today during these Chol Hamoed celebrations.

Shabbat Shalom and Moadim L'Simcha. Berel Wein

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