



CREATING THE RIGHT BALANCE

When my husband and I made *aliyah* from the United States, we knew we were giving up the second day of Yom Tov. We didn't realize that in return we'd be gaining *Chol HaMoed*.

What makes *Chol HaMoed* different here? First of all, the atmosphere. In *Chutz LaAretz*, the society around is oblivious or indifferent to the ongoing holiday. This means that aside from time spent davening or at the occasional gathering (or in places with a large Jewish presence), *Chol HaMoed* can feel isolating and constricted.

In Israel though, *Chol HaMoed* is a national holiday. Schools are closed and – as anyone who's ever been told to wait for assistance until after the *chagim* can attest – business does *not* proceed as usual. The public square takes on a festive air, electric bus signs wish you *moadim leSimcha*, and festivals and fairs abound. The experience here is communal and expansive.

The second difference has to do with time. Pesach this year begins with Yom Tov on Sunday. Outside of Israel, there's a second-day Yom Tov on Monday, followed by four days of *Chol HaMoed* and another two days of Yom Tov, for an even ratio of 4:4. Israel has five straight days of *Chol HaMoed* and a final Shabbat Yom Tov, for a 5:2 ratio. When Yom Tov and *Chol HaMoed* are evenly split, *Chol HaMoed* becomes little more than a bridge from Yom Tov to Yom Tov. A higher proportion of *Chol HaMoed* shifts the balance of the holiday, so its own identity can be emphasized.

Even in Israel though, trying to get a grasp on the identity of *Chol HaMoed* can be a challenge. The very name itself, *Chol HaMoed*, reflects this slippery nature. Roughly translating as “the regular days of the holiday,” it's a sort

of oxymoron. (The term *Shabbat Chol HaMoed* is even more confusing, since Shabbat cannot be *chol*.) Furthermore, the *halachot* of *Chol HaMoed* don't fit neatly into the categories of “regular day” or “holiday” either.

On the one hand, the *mitzvah* of *simchat Yom Tov*, rejoicing on Yom Tov, applies on *Chol HaMoed*, and charges us to split our time between celebratory feasting and devotional study (Pesachim 68b). To this end, many acts of *melacha* are prohibited on *Chol HaMoed* (Yerushalmi Moed Katan 2:3).

On the other hand, the prohibition of performing *melacha* on *Chol HaMoed* is less sweeping than on Yom Tov, and was given over to our Sages to define. For example, we can perform *melacha* if otherwise we would stand to suffer a loss or we have a public need to fill, and someone without professional expertise in a given *melacha* can perform it for the purpose of the holiday (Mishna Berura 530:1).

This fine-tuned prohibition keeps us from burdensome labor while making allowances for essential work, and thus fosters continued *simcha* and Torah study over the intermediate days of the holiday. At the same time, these allowances also lead to a much wider range of possibilities for how to fill each day than on Yom Tov. As a result, we don't always experience *Chol HaMoed* as sacred.

In Pirkei Avot (3:11), Rabbi Elazar HaModa'i counts one who “despises the holidays” among those who have no portion in the world to come. Rabbeinu Yona explains that the Mishnah refers to someone who performs prohibited labor on the days of *Chol HaMoed*, out of conviction that they aren't all that holy. In other words, if we are not careful, the *chol* aspect of *Chol HaMoed* can become too dominant, in any locale.

What can we do to make the most of *Chol HaMoed*?

Here too, the essential elements are time and atmosphere.

We can make an effort to spend more time than usual studying Torah, and to allow additional time for *tefillot*, paying special attention to the longing for the *Beit HaMikdash* in *Musaf* and to raising our voices in song for *Hallel*.

To build a festive atmosphere, we can wear clothes that are a little nicer than usual, and try to add something special – besides *matzah* – to our meals. We can keep the rules of *melacha* in mind, and not do anything more for work or school than is truly necessary, in a way that promotes *simcha*. And we can reach out warmly to each other, creating a sense of peace and joy around us, no matter where we are.

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