

Chol Hamoed

Tension and Balance

A Message From the Rosh Hayeshiva, Rabbi Lamm

I have always been intrigued by the phenomenon of *Chol Hamoed*. For here, in both the name for and substance of the intermediate days between *Yom Tov Rishon* and *Yom Tov Acharon* of Pesach and Sukkot, we find a reflection of our own lives and *Weltanschauung*.

Consider the very term: *Chol* = profane, secular; and *Moed* = festival, sacred. And the halakhot of these days continue the same theme; part *Yom Tov*, part weekday. Most forms of *melachah* are prohibited, yet those involved in the preparation of food are permitted. Also, those which are forbidden are sometimes tolerated in certain cases of dire need. And even then we must dress in a manner befitting a holy day.

Indeed, it seems that what the Talmud (*Pes.* 68b and *Betzah* 15b) says about *Yom Tov* itself applies even more aptly to *Chol Hamoed*: "Half for you, half for G-d," i.e., the study of Torah. It is a mixture of both the human and the divine, a hybrid of the holy and the profane.

I remember reading, in the name of the great Gerer Rebbe, the *Chiddushei HaRim*, that the ability to embrace both, to comprehend the *Chol* and the *moed* simultaneously, is an *avodah kasha* — a most difficult task — and that is why Onkelos, in translating the verse "And Moses spoke (*va-yedabber*) the festivals of the Lord to the Children of Israel," used the word *ve'alifnun*, "and he taught them." Why was it necessary for Moses to teach the festivals instead of enumerating them? Because of the inherent challenge of combining both the sacred and the secular. It is not unusual to aspire to complete devotion to either one of the two — all sacred or all profane — but the Almighty asks more of us. There are indeed times when we must concentrate all our energies and talents and interests in one direction, but the major part of life must be an application of *Chol Hamoed*, of the two in consonance and synergistic cooperation with each other.

Moses, who was *Ish haElokim*, one who combined both the manly and the G-dly, was ideally suited to teach the lesson of *Chol Hamoed* to his people. *Adon haneviim* and *melekh*, military leader and *kohen gadol* — he was the right one not only to relay the commandment to observe the *moedim*, but also to act as a role model in teaching Israel their meaning.

We of Yeshiva University hold that ideal aloft; indeed, our very name is apposite to "Chol Hamoed," as is our mission of Torah Umadda. Those who aspire to this ideal and who labor to realize it in their lives and their careers, can testify to the fact that it is unquestionably an *avodah kashah*, a difficult, wearying challenge. The task is not only physically trying — the dual program was not meant for the lazy and the weak — but it is only

intellectually demanding. A cartoon I saw not too long ago shows a little boy returning home from school with a frown on his face and, when his mother asks him what went wrong, replies, "We learned how to think today. It hurt!" Trying, demanding, challenging, wearying, sometimes hurting — but it is worth the prize!

I know that we are under sustained criticism from a number of sources, all of whom tell us that it can't be done, that Torah and Madda, Yeshiva and University, cannot coexist without compromising each other. But an awareness of history arms us against arguments that have long been buried for want of proof, only to be disinterred and revived. Take note: it was always thus! At the very cradle of our institution, long before any of us was born, this new experiment in Jewish education was declared doomed. The Yiddish press sanctimoniously opined that a "real" yeshiva was incompatible with a college. The secular Anglo-Jewish press smugly ridiculed the idea of Torah students excelling in the liberal arts and sciences.

Since those days, when Yeshiva was moving from the Lower East Side to Washington Heights (then considered the gentrified suburbs), we have educated, reared, and trained many generations of Torah Umadda personalities. And Yeshiva alumni, imbued with the ultimate and proven compatibility of *Chol* and *Moed*, have risen in the ranks of American Jewish leadership and were *marbitz Torah be'rabbim* both here and in Israel, all — without being strangers in the world of Madda and without suffering any insult to their spiritual integrity.

In a word, we have made *Chol Hamoed* come alive in the very texture of our lives. As long as the emphasis is on Torah — the *Yom Tov* before and the *Yom Tov* after — and as long as the integration of all our values takes place in the larger context of *kedushah*, *Chol Hamoed* remains the choice period to emulate for the bulk of our lives.

Yes, *Chol* and *Moed* sometimes clash, there is often tension between them; that is an existential as well as a halackhic fact. But more memorable than the tension is the sense of balance, and more enduring that the conflict is the resulting spiritual enrichment. It is the balance and the enrichment which happily accompany us through life.

As we welcome Pesach, bear in mind that as *talmidim* of Yeshiva University we face the daunting *avodah kashah* of embracing in each of our personalities the distinctive dynamism of *Chol Hamoed* — that which can sanctify our *Chol* and strengthen our *Moed*. And difficult as it may sometimes be, remember what we learned in *Avot* — *le'fum tzaara agra*, the reward is commensurate with the pain!

Moedim le'simcha to all of you!