

19 April 2014 • 19 Nisan 5774

Shir Hashirim

Shabbat ends in London at 8.55pm

## Chol Hamoed: Straddling Both Worlds

by Rabbi Garry Wayland, Assistant, Youth and Young Families Rabbi,  
Woodside Park United Synagogue

A common sight in shuls during Chol Hamoed Shabbat (morning) Service, is a mix of men wearing tefillin and those not. Until recently, each community – with Ashkenazim ruling they should be worn, and Sefardim, Chasidim and communities in Israel saying they should not – fervently guarded its custom. This visible, historic difference in custom has been hotly debated, and teaches us much about the nature of these special days.

The very name 'Chol Hamoed' seems like somewhat of a contradiction. *Chol* means secular and normal. *Moed* means festival. Hence these days are the 'ordinary days of the Festival'!

They are similar to festivals in that we do the mitzvot – sit in the sukkah and take the lulav, or eat matzah and avoid chametz. The prayers are a combination of the week-day and festival services. In addition, certain acts of work (*melacha*) are forbidden.

However, Chol Hamoed is governed by a completely different set of guidelines to Shabbat and Yom Tov in this respect. The purpose of these laws is to enhance the enjoyment and protect the spirit of the festival. These guidelines are nuanced, complex and very much take into account individual circumstances. Therefore, anything

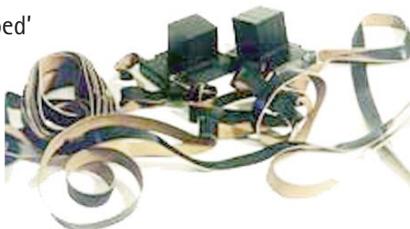
that is for immediate benefit or of little actual effort is generally permitted, whereas strenuous or unnecessary activities are often prohibited. There are also exceptions if avoiding work will result in significant financial loss.

Tefillin are described as a 'sign' ('ot') – an act of testimony to our belief in G-d as being intimately involved our lives, and our acceptance of His mission for us. We have other 'signs' as well – including Shabbat and Yom Tov. The Talmud explains that the 'sign' of the celebration of Shabbat and Yom Tov renders the 'sign' of tefillin

unnecessary on those days.

What about Chol Hamoed? The fact that it has aspects of both the holy and the ordinary has led the great authorities to debate its status – does it constitute a sufficient 'sign' of our connection with G-d? Some, such as the Rambam (Maimonides d.1204) say it does, and so tefillin are unnecessary. Others, such as the Rema (Rabbi Moshe Isserles d. 1572) say that one must still wear them.

However, all authorities, agree that Chol Hamoed is a special time, endowed with holiness and the opportunity to connect to G-d in ways not possible during the rest of the year.



# A Timeless Message

by Rabbi Yoni Birnbaum  
Hadley Wood Jewish Community

'Go and study what Lavan the Aramean attempted to do to our father Ya'akov (Jacob)...'

One of the classic questions surrounding the Haggadah concerns this short introduction to its central section. The section details the Jewish people's enslavement in Egypt and subsequent redemption. The direct relevance of Ya'akov's persecution at the hand of Lavan (Ya'akov's father in law) to the story of the Exodus seems difficult to understand.

However, the Vilna Gaon (d. 1797) sees a crucial insight in this section that sheds light on this point. His insight also serves both to illuminate a central theme of the Haggadah and to provide an inspirational message that remains relevant throughout history.

He explains that Ya'akov's experience in Lavan's house (see Bereishit chapters 27-32) served as a precedent for the difficult process that his descendants would later have to undergo in Egypt. Ya'akov arrived in Lavan's house penniless, seeking refuge from the hands of Esav his brother. Throughout Ya'akov's lengthy stay, Lavan repeatedly demonstrated his dishonesty and ambition to take advantage of Ya'akov whenever possible, as Ya'akov himself lamented when finally leaving Lavan in order to return to Canaan.

Astonishingly though, it was specifically in this extremely negative environment that Ya'akov experienced tremendous success. It was there that he built the future of the Jewish people, emerging with a large and strong family along with substantial financial assets.

In many respects, the experience of the Jewish people in Egypt several generations later mirrored that of Ya'akov in Lavan's house. They too faced the most negative and challenging of circumstances, designed by the Egyptians to

destroy both Jewish national identity and physical growth as a nation. Yet, despite this, or perhaps because of this, on both counts they flourished. They retained a distinct identity, expressed in both dress and conduct.

They also grew into a great nation numerically, as the verse (Shemot 1:12) says, '... as much as they [the Egyptians] would afflict them, so they [the Jews] would increase...'. At the actual time of the Exodus, remarkably, they even prospered in a material sense too, receiving valuable treasures from the Egyptians (Shemot 12:35-36).

As the Vilna Gaon's insight notes, the enduring lesson of the experiences of both Ya'akov and the Jewish people, on an individual and national level respectively, is the ability of seemingly negative and challenging circumstances to actually provide the means to achieve greater things than would otherwise have been possible.

This explanation neatly unites Ya'akov's experience with the Exodus and thereby explains the precise positioning of the reference to Ya'akov and Lavan in the Haggadah. The previous paragraph in the Haggadah (*Vehi'sheameda*) makes the moving statement, proven time and again throughout our history, that in every generation people rise up to destroy us, but G-d saves us from their hand.

Our passage amplifies this statement, reassuring us that, beginning with Ya'akov at the dawn of our nation, through the Egyptian exile and until today, challenging times can provide us with great potential for growth and can gift us with tremendous inner strength and resilience.



צא ולמד

# Shir HaShirim: The Greatest Love of All

by Rabbi Dr. Moshe Freedman, Northwood United Synagogue

Since time immemorial, people have turned to poetry and song to express the most powerful of human emotions. From Shakespeare's sonnets to modern day ballads, love dominates the human experience.

Yet the word 'love' has perhaps been cheapened in today's parlance. How many times are those three little words 'I love you' said in vain? They can hide true intentions which actually belie the purity of that sacred phrase. As one Chassidic master put it: "When a person says "I love chicken" he doesn't love the chicken, he loves himself. If he really loved the chicken he wouldn't slaughter it and eat it! When we love another person only for the way they make us feel, or for the way they satisfy our needs, we are not thinking about them but about ourselves.

One of the first encounters of love in the Torah subtly expresses this point. Only after Yitzchak marries Rivkah does the verse say that he loved her (Bereishit 24:67). Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev (d. 1809) explains that there are two types of love. One is based on a natural yearning and physical desire. The other is based on the spiritual greatness a couple can achieve together through growth and refinement. The former can help to drive a couple together before marriage. The latter can sustain them when confronted by the sometimes difficult, post-honeymoon realities of life.

In his book *The Art of Loving*, the social psychologist Erich Fromm encapsulates the

idea as follows: 'Immature love says: "I love you because I need you". Mature love says "I need you because I love you".'

The Song of Songs (*Shir HaShirim*) is King Solomon's description of the love between G-d and the Jewish people. Written emotively in the form of a stirring romance between lovers, its poetically elegant metaphor belies a much deeper concept. The love we experience in our lives is actually a paradigm for our relationship with G-d.



The Mishnah explains that conditional love lasts only as long as the conditions are met. Unconditional love endures regardless (Pirkei Avot 5:19, green siddur page 561). G-d's love for His people is unconditional: "Even though

I am black with sin, I am comely with virtue" (*Shir HaShirim* 1:5). The Midrash understands this to mean that even though I am black with sin *in my own eyes*, I am still comely with virtue *before my Creator*. Despite our 'infidelity', G-d will neither reject nor forsake us (Tehilim/Psalms 94:14).

We cannot hope to develop genuine love with people whom we see only as a means to satisfy needs and pleasures. So too, we cannot hope to develop a relationship with G-d unless we are prepared to be faithful to Him with a depth of love, independent of validation through our sometimes faulty perception of how the world should look. Only then will we truly be 'a rose among the thorns with eyes like doves behind our veil as beautiful as we once were in Jerusalem of old' (*Shir HaShirim* 2:2, 4:1 and 6:4).

## Harvesting our History

by Rabbi Yoni Sherizen, Director of GESHER, formerly Chaplain of Oxford University and Chief Executive of University Jewish Chaplaincy

Do you think of Pesach as a feast of freedom or a festival of harvest? Is Shavuot a celebration at Sinai or a day of offering the first fruits? As we count the Omer, it is worth taking stock of what exactly we are doing over these weeks.

Much like a good beverage, the story begins with a harvest of barley. The beginning of Pesach opens Israel's season for cutting the barley crop. The following seven weeks are carefully counted, until Shavuot, when the wheat harvest begins and the summer's first fruits ripen across the country. Reflecting this process, Pesach begins with the barley offering and a countdown to Shavuot's loaves of wheat.

Yet today our connection to the agricultural cycle and their offerings has waned. Instead, we remember the holidays for their historical element. Verses that recall, for example, G-d releasing us from the Egyptian 'house of bondage' (Shemot 13:3) resonate most easily. This is Pesach by history, not by agriculture.

So what is the historical element of Sefirat HaOmer? Most of us associate the Omer with a time of personal refinement, specifically in the realm of how we treat others. This focus on self-refinement is inspired by the Talmudic teaching that thousands of Rabbi Akiva's students died suddenly at this time of year "because they did not treat one another with respect" (Yevamot

62b). These elite students were lacking in how they treated others, despite their great learning. They were guilty of the message relayed by the prophet Hoshea (6:6) that "G-d desires mercy more than holy offerings".

However, we should also remember that the theme of self-refinement is rooted in the offerings and the agricultural element of our holiday. Two thousand years ago our ancestors would harvest the barley and refine it carefully and meticulously for the Omer service. The Sages took the theme of refinement and moved it from grain to character development.

Today we may not be growing barley in our gardens. Yet self-improvement demands the same diligent work. The Omer's message can serve as a reminder to be grateful for the food we eat and the delicate process it requires to make its way to our tables.

So however you remember the purpose of our holidays, counting the Omer is a wake-up-call to take greater care in how we treat each other and the world around us. Rabbi Akiva's students remind us that this is a lesson worth harvesting from our history.

*GESHER is a Jerusalem-based organisation devoted to bridging the gaps between Israelis and strengthening a shared Jewish identity.*

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United Synagogue Daf Hashavua

Produced by the Rabbinical Council of the United Synagogue, together with US Living & Learning

Editor: Rabbi Chaim Gross Editor in Chief: Rabbi Baruch Davis

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