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Chol Hamoed Sukkot  
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One of the most frightening things I can imagine -- and some of you have experienced -- is an earthquake. All around is chaos; foundations falter, any sense of being grounded is lost. To find safety, we might run inside our homes, or perhaps outside. But both sides are dangerous. The one place of possible protection is a doorway. There we are covered on all sides. Cradled in the *in between* in that doorway we find some sense of safety.

Today we are in *chol hamoed* Sukkot, a time I think of as a doorway in our calendar. It is, in its essence, an *in between* time. The intermediary days, as they are known in English. A time that is neither fully *chol*, ordinary, nor fully *moed*, festival-like. We are paused for four or five days *in between*. But this *in between* in the doorway does not only suggest the protection during an earthquake, for the doorway is a complex metaphor.

While that doorway can be a place of safety--and we will get there, it can also have an unsettling feeling. Standing *in between* raises questions. *Chol hamoed*. How much should we be making today like a festival, how much not? Can we work? What special prayers do we say? Should we be having classes?

And these questions only touch the surface of what standing in that doorway, being in *chol hamoed*, is all about.

All year, we pass easily from *chol* to *kodesh*. Six days of the week into Shabbat, and havdalah into the six days of the week again. Over and over. We're hardly aware of the doorway, for we pass through it, from *chol* to *kodesh*, so quickly. During *chol hamoed*, we don't run through the doorway. We pause in it, and see that our distinctions of calling this *chol* and this *moed* don't always work. *Chol hamoed* is sorta *chol*, sorta *moed*. And, for me, once I see this fuzziness about our understanding

of time, it raises questions about all distinctions that we, as Jews, make. Do these distinctions make sense? Kosher, not kosher; *tamei, tahor*; even good and evil, ethical, immoral. We use these categories to make sense of our world. Is our universe truthfully understood by our descriptions?

*Chol hamoed* has become, for me, a time of questioning and doubting the truthfulness of our Judaism, the way we make sense of our world.

Fortunately, being in the doorway of *chol hamoed* does not leave me in such an existential angst. It can be the safe place during an earthquake. For while paused in that doorway, there is a symbol of safety, the mezzuzah, reminding me, God is there in the *in-between*. During *chol hamoed Sukkot*, despite my doubts, I continue to celebrate Sukkot, to dwell in the *sukkah*, to shake the lulav and to know that Simhat Torah will come. I can struggle with my contradictions and know that I'll come out ok. This is what I believe *chol hamoed* is about. This is what we can use this time for.

The cycle of the calendar brings *chol hamoed* around to us twice in the year, during Sukkot and Pesach. In our lives, though, times that feel like *chol hamoed* don't always come in such set intervals, but, we can be sure of it, do come again and again.

And it is the doorway which, I believe, best captures the sense of *chol hamoed*. As I will soon explore in greater depth, we experience the doorway in three distinct ways.

The first way is when we pass through the doorway easily without pause. Our distinctions, our categories, make sense.

The second is when we pause in the doorway and see that our categories don't really make so much sense. And the *in-betweenness* becomes unsettling, even scary.

The third, is while still paused in the doorway, we see that the *in-between*, the struggle and doubts, doesn't have to be frightening, for we see the mezzuzah affixed to that doorway. In the end, we find greater meaning in the complexities of the *in between*.

## ORDER

We Jews construct doorways to order our universe. But there are other ways of viewing the world. According to Raimundo Panikkar, a Roman Catholic priest who is also a Hindu, our way of viewing life, common to--as he calls it--the Abrahamic traditions, is to look at the manifold mysteries of life and to make distinctions. We create doorways.

But, Panikkar continues, there is another way to view life, one that does not know from doorways. He calls this the *Indic mentality*. It is common to many eastern religions. The holy is not the most different or the most Other; it is the most basic; all is in process, and all is one. There are no distinctions.

We could find parts of Judaism that reflect an Indic mentality, but our thrust is in the world of distinctions. The Mishnah's table of contents suggests this message. There are six divisions called, *s'darim*, "orders." A large part of its contents deals with categorizing our world, things are either *chol* or *kodesh*.

My first years of rabbinic school were about discovering this order. In fact, the very reason I decided to go to rabbinic school had to do with my moving from an *Indic* to an *Abrahamic mentality*.

Growing up with both of my parents Jewish yet attending a Unitarian Universalist church, I was uncomfortable with particularism. I saw only one world community.

Somehow this complete blurring of distinctions didn't sit well with me. I remember one day in eighth grade. My teacher asked each of us to stand up in class to state our religion. In that instant, I knew I couldn't say "Unitarian" and I didn't know what it meant to say "Jewish." That frightening moment of standing before my peers sparked my interest in Jewish learning and becoming part of the Jewish community. *By the way, she was later fired for this.*

Even through college as I deepened my connections to Judaism, I retained my

universalist outlook as primary. I was interested in religion, and I wanted to be a professor, able to find the commonalities among religions, removing doorways to expose the continuum among them. But my head and heart didn't seem in line. Without the doorways, I didn't know where I was.

In the meantime, I was enjoying more and more experiences of being connected to Jewish community. Working at the Religious Action Center; being part of a relationship with a Jewish woman for the first time in my life, with Rachel who would become my wife, living together in Amsterdam and feeling a connection to Jews there and in the many countries we visited; all these experiences called me to change my perspective on life. For my *kishkes* were feeling something different from what my head had been intellectualizing. Finally, I consciously changed my ideal of working toward one world community, to a world of many communities. I chose to live completely within the Jewish community and at the boundary, fully as a Jew, to work with others toward universal goals. I entered the world of distinctions, of boundaries and felt, finally at home. I was to be a rabbi, not a professor.

And so, my first years at HUC were about learning the names, the labels to separate life into its distinctions. It was exciting to find this established order. I relished anything I could learn; I adopted many traditional practices simply for the sake of doing them.

I loved finding out about and telling others the myths and even the primitive bases for some of our customs, such as the rain dance of Hoshana Rabbah, taking the willow branches and beating them to simulate the sound of rain while making seven circuits around the synagogue.

Often without questioning the contemporary value of what I absorbed, I immersed myself in the learning and found that I could repeat my new-found information in my first rabbinic jobs, confident with the surety of the rabbinic system backing me up. The doorways neatly divided and ordered my world.

And then, I paused in the doorway.

## CHAOS

I started seeing that I had been ignoring the things that didn't fall neatly into distinct categories. During the summer after my second year, I participated in a spirituality group where we met with professors and others in the community from whom we wanted to learn. Meeting with each one separately, we learned something about what made them tick. How did they order their universe? I learned from their struggles, from the things that troubled them and didn't fit into their orders.

The next year, some of us, faculty, students and administration, would gather on Tuesday mornings and struggle with the question, *Lama ani oseh ma sh'ani oseh*. Why do I do what I do? By asking "why", I started questioning how much all these distinctions gave real order. I became acutely aware of the limitations of my ability to explain things that reflected reality. As the realization hit me that five years of rabbinic school were actually going to end, I wondered how I could go out there as a rabbi and offer a world-view that contained such problems. My struggles and questions wearied me. Sometimes this was paralyzing; I couldn't finish my work. I felt lost in the *in-between*, stuck in the feeling of liminality.

The word "liminal" perfectly describes what the *in-betweenness* is all about. It comes from the Latin word *liminus*, threshold. It is the point of transformation, when something becomes something else and in that *in-between* moment defies definition. Liminality is out of our control.

The rabbinic authors of our early sources were troubled with liminality. I became aware of this last Spring as I studied tractate *Moed Katan* of the Mishnah, the earliest place where the laws of *chol hamoed* appear in rabbinic literature. In fact, it was here that this sermon began. For, in addition to telling us about work on *chol hamoed*, the topics turn to parts of life that share the sense of liminality, of being *in-between*.

This is, for instance, where we learn most of the Mishnaic customs on death

and mourning. When we mourn, our lives are turned upside down even as they -- in Mishnaic times -- would turn their beds upside down as a symbol of mourning. When we mourn we are aware of our mortality and hang somewhere between life and death. We stand in the doorway. The authors of the Mishnah reveal their uneasiness with all this liminality. They desperately tried to gain control by getting us out of the doorway. They limit mourning and hasten burial.

In many other areas of law, the rabbis also try to maintain control by creating new categories to order the *in-between*. There is, for example, a category called the *carmelit* that pertains to spaces that are not quite public and not quite private. Midrashically, it is taught that in the story of Creation, on the second day, the reason God did not say "this is good" is because water was separated from water, two like-objects. For the rabbis, only differences should be separate. Heaven and earth, linen and wool. A whole tractate, *Cilayim*, deals with keeping such things separate.

New categories, complicated laws, and midrashic word games only cover up the system problems superficially. Still, the rabbis' discomfort and desperateness come through.

*Chol hamoed* is not only an *in-between* time period; it represents and opens the door to all things *in-between*. And it is scary. It tells us that the way we have structured our universe doesn't always work. The more we try to control the more we realize how little we're really in control.

## **BALANCE**

*Chol hamoed* is not meant to leave us in the despair it might suggest. For on the doorway, the doorway that first suggested order and then chaos, on that doorway is the mezzuzah. The very place of liminality, that could destroy our system of categorizing our world, is a place where we affirm God's presence.

Affirming God at the border is not unusual. Biblically, it is *dafka* at the city

gate where justice is decided. Rabbinically, we say the bedtime *shema* as we allow ourselves to drift into sleep, *modeh ani* as we awake; we say *havdalah* between *kodesh l'chol*. Elijah, heralding the hope for redemption, appears in these transitions, into the *brit*, into a new week, into the messianic hopes of *pesach*.

But this *in between* is not only a place where we cover our fears with ritual. Positively, it is in the *in-between* where we meet God in relationship, in covenant. It is where we ought to be. The place of truth. The word for truth in Hebrew *EMET* is written with three letters, *aleph*, *mem*, *tav*; it is not only the letters of the extremes, the *aleph and tav* but it is grounded in the middle, in the *mem* for *metziut*, reality.

I hesitate to share where I am now in my time at HUC. It sounds too neat to say that I have come to a clean resolution. But in a sense, in the way that these cycles repeat in life -- and I know will continue to repeat -- of creating order, seeing the order disintegrate and then finding a balance *in-between*, I do feel that beginning of this year has brought a sense of being ok in my struggle. I can work with the limitations of our world-view and still find there meaning and truth.

And this is what we can do during *chol hamoed*. We can struggle with our biggest doubts, our feelings of liminality, while staying in the sukkah, shaking the lulav, waiting for Simhat Torah. I have suggested that this idea is inherent in the rabbinic literature on *chol hamoed*, but almost as a *nechemta*, it is also something our tradition tells us directly.

Of all the books we could read during *chol hamoed* Sukkot, the rabbis choose for us to read *Kohelet*. Why? Its author wrestles with the meaning of existence and human futility. He struggles with life's biggest questions; he too questions the ability of the rabbinic system to explain existence.

The rabbis want us to struggle this week, to feel all the unsettledness of being *in-between*, uncertain, yet to know that despite the refrain: "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity," *Kohelet* himself, in the end, tells us: "Fear God and keep God's commandments; for this is the whole person." Through *Kohelet*, our tradition assures

us that we can struggle during *chol hamoed* and find meaning in the *in between*.

May we take this time of *chol hamoed* to give voice to our questions, our doubts, our *in-between* feelings, but let us do so with one hand on the mezzuzah affixed to the doorway.