



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

## PESACH > Shabbat Chol Hamoed

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Pesach

**Seasonal Ingredients**



# Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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## ABSTRACT

When you have nothing to talk about, talk about the weather.

On one hand the weather is completely arbitrary and out of our control – which is why it’s so common to hear, “Hey, it’s so nice out today.” On the other hand, weather is integral to the structure of the universe and a reflection of its movements.

And what about Judaism – is it like the weather or not? Is Judaism seasonal or is it unchanging? Does Judaism, the Torah – or God for that matter – go through cycles of change or are they all constant, rigid, and fixed?

Today is both Shabbat and Passover. Passover is in the spring, when it is beautiful outside, not too cold, not too hot, not too rainy. Shabbat is all year round. Indeed, Shabbat is the opportune time for rain.

Passover is a time of travel, from Egypt to the Promised Land, from exile to redemption. For travel, we require beautiful weather. Shabbat is a time to return home. When at home, it is cozy when it rains.

What happens when Shabbat and Passover intersect? What does that teach us? Are we seasonal or beyond?

As this sermon shows, the convergence of Shabbat and Passover contains one of Judaism’s greatest secrets – making timelessness become both timely and timeless.

## SEASONAL INGREDIENTS: ARE JEWS WELL SEASONED?

### 1. Four Seasons (Humor)

The four seasons may be listed in the dictionary as spring, summer, autumn and winter, but really they are very subjective.

If you ask a chef to name the four seasons, he'd say: salt, pepper, garlic, and paprika.

If you ask a baseball fan to name the four seasons, he'd say: preseason, *the* season, postseason, and off-season.

If you ask a Minnesotan to name the four seasons, he'd say: almost winter, winter, after winter, and roadwork.

If you ask an accountant, he'll name only one season – the tax season. Period.

If you ask a well-seasoned traveler, he'll give you the nearest location of a Four Seasons Hotel.

And finally, if you ask a rabbi to name the four seasons, he'd say: I know about the Four Questions, the Four Matriarchs, and the Four Cups of Wine. But the four seasons – what mitzvah is that?!

### 2. The Weather

When you have nothing to talk about, talk about the weather. Right?

On one hand the weather is completely arbitrary and out of our control – which is why it's so common to hear the surprise in, "Hey, it's so nice out today." On the other hand, weather is integral to the structure of the universe and a reflection of its movements.

The four seasons – spring, summer, autumn, and winter – echo the cycles of the year. Let me rephrase that – the four seasons are the cycles of the year as dictated by the solar movements.

The seasons aren't only about weather, surely. There are places in the world where the weather doesn't change much, but the inhabitants there also experience seasonal shifts. But, generally speaking, spring is when the birds begin to chirp and the flowers begin to bloom; summer is when the sun shines bright and hot; autumn is when the leaves begin to change and the rains begin to fall; and winter is when it's coldest and (in most places) it snows.

Additionally, there is a very active movement today in the food industry to use seasonal ingredients. For different crops ripen in different seasons. Winter squash is optimal in winter; grains begin to ripen in spring; berries come of age in summer; and apples and figs are best in autumn.

### 3. Seasonal Jews

Jews, too, are seasonal. Some Jews ripen whenever the major holidays come around – Passover, Shavuot, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Chanukah. Other Jews ripen when a good argument begins to brew. And there are those Jews for whom Shabbat is their seasonal ingredient – once a week they are tranquil and at their spiritual peak.

Today, here we are in synagogue. And it is Shabbat in the middle of Passover week. Passover is a time for questions and nowhere in the Torah does it say that one may not ask questions on Shabbat. So, here is my question:

Is Judaism seasonal or is it unchanging? Does Judaism, the Torah – or God for that matter – go through cycles of change? Or are they all constant, rigid, and fixed?

It seems as if everything changes. Seasons change for sure – winter is not summer; autumn is not spring. We change – the way we act when we are twenty is very different from the way we act when we are forty, and forty is very different from sixty. Our jobs change, and so does our status in life – we go from singlehood, to marriage, to parenting, to grand-parenting, to retirement. Everything has its time and season.

Did not that wisest of men, King Solomon, himself say: *Everything has an appointed season, and there is a time for every matter under the heaven.*<sup>1</sup>

Does this hold true for Judaism as well? Is our relationship with God seasonal? Are our own souls more ripe in certain seasons and less in others? Does our Judaism, like a seasonal vegetable, go through cycles of unripened prematurity and peak flavor? Or is Judaism, like God Himself, unwavering, unchanging, and eternally constant? But then again – is God Himself unwavering, unchanging, and eternally constant?

#### 4. Pilgrimage Festivals

The answer to everything Jewish – and everything at all for that matter – can be found within the sacred pages of the Torah. And the resolution to our specific seasonal dilemma lies in the very Torah passage we read today.

Selected from *Parshat Ki Tissa*, this passage speaks about (among other things) the *Sholosh Regolim*, the three foundational pilgrimage festivals, and about Shabbat.

In Temple times, thrice a year, on the holidays of Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot, Jews throughout Israel would trek to the Temple in Jerusalem, in order to participate in these three central pilgrimage festivals.

The festival of Passover celebrates the exodus from Egypt and the establishment of the Jewish nation. Shavuot, the Festival of Weeks, celebrates the giving of the Torah, the blueprint of the word, at Mount Sinai. And Sukkot, the Festival of Huts, celebrates the joy and unity of the Jewish people.

In three verses, our Torah reading sums it up. The first verse talks about Passover:

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<sup>1</sup> Kohelet 3:1.

*The Festival of Matzot you shall keep. Seven days you shall eat matzah which I have commanded you, at the appointed meeting time of the month of spring, for in the month of spring you went out of Egypt.*<sup>2</sup>

And four verses later, we are told about Shabbat:

*Six days you may work, and on the seventh day you shall rest; from plowing and harvesting you shall rest.*<sup>3</sup>

And the next verse tells of Shavuot and Sukkot:

*And you shall make for yourself a Festival of Weeks, the first of the wheat harvest, and the festival of the ingathering, at the turn of the year.*<sup>4</sup>

If you noticed – and certainly every Jew notices everything – each of the holidays and even Shabbat are mentioned in a seasonal context. Passover is referred to as being in the “month of spring.” Shabbat is mentioned in the seasonal context of (not) plowing or harvesting. Shavuot is called “the first of the wheat harvest.” And Sukkot is “the festival of the ingathering, at the turn of the year.”

Hence, these three holidays are named in Hebrew for their seasons: Passover is called *Chag Ha’Aviv*, “the Spring Festival.” Shavuot is called *Chag Ha’Katzir*, “the Harvest Festival.” And Sukkot is called *Chag Ha’Asif*, “the In-gathering Festival.”<sup>5</sup>

But what does this mean? Has the Torah gone all natural on us? Has the Torah joined the organic, whole foods, Prius-driving movement?

Or, as the Torah came first, maybe the Torah initiated it? Why does our reading put the holidays and Shabbat in a seasonal, harvesting context?

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<sup>2</sup>Exodus 34:18.

<sup>3</sup>Exodus 34:21.

<sup>4</sup>Exodus 34:22.

<sup>5</sup>See also Exodus 23:15.

## 5. Lunar vs. Solar

According to the Torah the weather and the seasons aren't arbitrary at all. Indeed, Jewish law<sup>6</sup> dictates that the three major festivals *must* be in their correct season. Passover *must* be in the spring when the grains begin to ripen; Shavuot *must* be in the summer when the grains are harvested; and Sukkot *must* be in the fall when the other crops are ingathered and collected.

The Jewish calendar, however, is a lunar calendar. Holidays are designated by the day in the lunar month (for example, Passover is always on the fifteenth of the month of Nissan when there is a full moon). But the seasons follow the solar cycles.

Now, there is an 11.5 day discrepancy between the lunar year (which is around 354 days) and the solar year (which is 365 days). Therefore, in order to match up the lunar and solar calendars – to ensure that the holidays remain in their Torah-designated seasons – every few years (7 times in 10 years to be precise) we have a leap year, in which an extra month of Adar is added to the Jewish year, so as to assure that the holidays coincide with the correct season.

(This year was actually one of these leap years. If it weren't, because of the 11.5 day disparity of the lunar and solar movements, the holidays would continue to change seasons.)

This demonstrates the importance that seasons have on the Jewish experience.

But then let's not forget Shabbat. The same Torah reading that mentions the holidays' connection to the seasons and harvesting also states: *Six days you may work, and on the seventh day you shall rest; from plowing and harvesting you shall rest.*

The holidays are all about the ripening, harvesting, and gathering of grains and other crops, and yet Shabbat is a day when we must rest *from* plowing and harvesting.

Why are the holidays so seasonally oriented, while Shabbat is not?

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<sup>6</sup>See Sanhedrin 11a; Rambam, Hilchot Kidush Hachodesh 4:1-2.

## 6. Perfect Weather

We may shed light on this contrast by introducing two commentaries from the great, 11th century Torah commentator, Rashi.

When the Torah first says, *Today you are going out, in the month of spring*,<sup>7</sup> Rashi (quoting the Mechilta) explains the practical significance of the Exodus taking place in the spring:

Spring is the most beautiful time of year, when it is not too hot like in summer, not too cold like in winter, and not rainy like in autumn. God was taking the Jews out of Egypt on a long and laborious journey to Mount Sinai and then on to the Promised Land.<sup>8</sup> The loving-kindness of God was such that He set us on this journey in the most opportune time for travel, in the spring, when the weather is most beautiful.

Thus Passover is in the spring, when it is neither boiling hot, nor freezing cold, nor rainy.

Contrast this with Rashi's commentary a little later on, where he explains this passage – *"I [God] will give your rains in their time; the Land will yield its produce, and the tree of the field will give forth its fruit"*<sup>9</sup> – by answering the obvious question: What does in their time mean? When is the best time for rain? Says Rashi: At a time when people do not usually go out, for example, on Shabbat Eve.<sup>10</sup>

Shabbat Eve is a time to return to your very essence, a time to come home, a time to rest from the six days of chaos, and to coalesce into your natural, soulful self.

When you are inside yourself, it is the opportune time for God to rain down His heavenly blessings upon the outside world.

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<sup>7</sup> Exodus 13:4.

<sup>8</sup> This teaching is based on Psalm 68:7, "He takes the prisoners out at the most opportune time" – spring is the nicest weather and the most opportune time for travel.

<sup>9</sup> Leviticus 26:4.

<sup>10</sup> Based on Taanit 23a.



Passover is a time for journeying. Shabbat is a time for returning home. The Jew must travel, but once a week the Jew must return home, to the soul of the world.

In short then – Passover is a time for perfect weather, without rain or heat or cold; Shabbat is a time that transcends weather.

## 7. No Grain, No Gain

The cycles of seasonal life can be broken down into three main stages, corresponding to the three major holidays. In life there is a time to begin sprouting, there is a time for ripening, a time to harvest, and a time to gather in.<sup>11</sup>

Today, farming is not really part of our daily lives. But grain, bread and wine can be metaphors for the word of God – that is, the Torah itself<sup>12</sup> – and so this is relevant to every one of us.

Now we are in the time of Passover, spring, when we begin our spiritual and religious journey which will encompass the rest of the year. Now is when our first grains – such as barley – ripen. This is why now, in the spring, we have the best weather, for in the earliest stages of travel, like a newborn child, we must be provided with the most opportune environment, not too hot, not too cold, not too rainy.

Then on Shavuot, in around seven weeks, with the giving of the Torah we begin to harvest other grains – such as wheat.

And, finally, on Sukkot we harvest all of the other crops. Sukkot is the beginning of the physical year, and we start by actually gathering in all the produce that we have been cultivating since Passover and Shavuot.

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<sup>11</sup> See Likkutei Sichot vol. 29, pp. 232-234.

<sup>12</sup> See Sanhedrin 42a, and Tosafot, Rav Tevuot there; Mishlei 9:5; Chagigah 14a; Sotah 15a; et al.

But a force that is even greater than the seasons must power this seasonal work of ours. This transcendent force is Shabbat, when we do not travel but allow the heavenly blessings – the rains from above – to pour down over our fields so that we can fulfill our mission in this world.

## 8. Timeless Timeliness

It is the Jew's mission and purpose on this earth to make every season eternal, and to take eternity and make it seasonal. It is our calling to make the timely timeless, and the timeless timely.

This is achieved by the parallel and complementary roles of Shabbat and the holidays.

Shabbat is timeless. Shabbat does not move with the seasons. Shabbat demands that we rest from the work of the field. The reason we do not cook on Shabbat is because Shabbat transcends all cycles, seasons and principles of physical existence. It is a day of total physical rest because we are aware of the unchanging eternity of God's Essence.

The holidays are timely – they must be in certain seasons.

Passover is a time to journey, to leave Egypt and head toward the Promised Land. Passover is the time to leave slavery and journey on to freedom. For this, we must have opportune weather. The climate must be favorable for travelling and God, in His infinite kindness, assures that it is so.

Shabbat is not a time for traveling. On Shabbat, the concept of slavery does not exist. On Shabbat we are all free. On Shabbat we are one with our souls, and our souls are never enslaved.

Today, on Shabbat of Passover, the double-barreled power of the Jew is on full display. On one hand we are seasonal creatures, journeying through life and transforming every weather, every cycle, every season into the most beautiful climate possible. At the same time we are way beyond the cycles of existence, we are connected to the Creator of all cycles, seasons, temperatures and temperaments, and this is demonstrated by Shabbat.

The Jew and Judaism are eternal, and that eternity is made seasonal. The Jew and Judaism are also seasonal, and that seasonality is made eternal.

Indeed, this concept of integrating the timely and the timeless is unique to Judaism. Other schools of thought focus on either using every moment to the fullest, or reaching into the timeless and ignoring the fleeting moments of life. Judaism insists that we join both together – that we infuse the temporary moment with the eternity of timelessness.

## 9. A Moment in Time (Inspirational Example)

How does this happen exactly?

Many mitzvot are time sensitive. They are bound by a specific day – like Shabbat and holidays, or by a specific time of day – like morning, afternoon or evening prayers. Even other mitzvot that are not time-bound still are performed at a given moment.

So while these mitzvot are performed at a particular time, and some cannot be performed at another time, each mitzvah releases an eternal energy that changes existence forever.<sup>13</sup>

A short story that captures this message took place with a Rabbi colleague of mine:

He recently missed an important flight to attend his only brother's wedding. He had come just minutes after the gate was closed. Kicking himself, he sat down at the terminal, waiting to see if he can get another flight. The situation was bleak, because the next flight would arrive after the wedding.

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<sup>13</sup> See Tanya chapter 25: The union achieved by a mitzvah “is eternal in the upper spheres.”

He picked himself up and went to the nearest exit to go back home. Just as he was about to leave the airport he sees a young disheveled man with a cup in his hand. Disgusted as he was, he ignored the man and was already out the door, when he reconsidered. He reentered and dropped a few coins in the man's cup, and muttered to him "may God bless you."

The homeless man suddenly came to life, and asked him if he was a Rabbi. When he nodded, the fellow said to him: I am Jewish and have nowhere to celebrate Passover.

"Sure, you can come join us for the Seder," said the Rabbi giving the man the address of his home. Just to be safe, the Rabbi asked him for his name and where he came from. Shock would be an understatement as to what happened next.

The fellow's name was the same family name as the Rabbi's. And after a few inquiries, the Rabbi realized that this lost and disheveled Jew was his second cousin!

This year Passover the fellow will be coming home in more ways than one and spending the holiday with his lost cousins...

This, my friends, is the power of a moment; the ability for a short fleeting second to become eternal. Had the Rabbi arrived to the airport but a few minutes earlier, he would have made his flight, but never connected with his cousin. Had he continued walking and not turned back, this homecoming would never have taken place.

By seizing the moment, he was able to change a life forever.

Every moment of our lives we have the opportunity to either let the moment slip away or to transform it into eternity.

Life is not measured by the number of breaths we take but by the moments that take our breath away.

History is fraught with many moments – split seconds – which changed the world forever.

## 10. In Conclusion: Weather Or Not, Here We Come!

It is the job of the Jew to bring the perfection of heaven into the imperfection of earth. We Jews, in general, don't get too excited by heaven or too nervous about hell. We have been to both: we come from heaven and we have been subjugated to the worst hells – from Egypt, to Babylon, to Rome, to Nazi Germany.

What we do get excited about, what gets our souls pumping, is the gift God has bestowed upon us to take the darkest times and infuse them with the timeless light that lives within us. To turn any hell into heaven, to turn any matter into spirit, to turn slavery into freedom.

Shabbat, the timeless tranquility of existence, is at the core of every Jew. And it is our mission and purpose to season all of the seasons with this transcendental ingredient.

By becoming free and beginning to ripen on Passover; by harvesting on Shavuot; by gathering in and collecting on Sukkot, we, you and I, bridge the unchanging timelessness of heaven with the changing seasons of earth.

Thus, when you ask a Jew what the four seasons are, the Jew responds:

The four seasons are a means for changing the world.

This, my friends, is the most seasonal and eternal ingredient of all!

Shabbat Shalom and Happy Passover!