

## Introduction to Tractate Mo'ed Qatan

*Mo'ed Qatan* addresses conduct on the intermediate days (lying between the two high holy days) of festivals, that is, during Passover and Tabernacles. Scripture provides the prohibitions of labor for the opening and closing days of the specified festivals (Exo. 12:16, Lev. 23: 7–8, Num. 28:18, 25; 29:12–35).

- I. Labor on the intermediate days of the festival
  - A. In the fields
  - B. Miscellanies
  - C. Cases of emergency and loss
- II. Commerce
- III. Burial of the dead, mourning on the intermediate days of a festival

The law of *Mo'ed Qatan* deals with actions that are permitted or prohibited on the intermediate days of Passover and of the festival of Tabernacles, with special reference to farming and commerce and also to special problems involving the burial of the dead on those days. The first two sections are concerned with labor and commerce. For these activities, there are two governing principles. The first is that one may carry out an act of labor that prevents substantial loss, but only if the act is not onerous. The second is that work that ought to have been done prior to the festival may not be postponed and done on the intermediate days.

The intermediate days may not be treated as ordinary work days, even though they are not observed as festival days are (with the complete cessation of all labor except for cooking). On the intervening days of the festival the field may be watered, but not through vigorous labor. Since many other acts of labor in the fields are, it is assumed, forbidden, that provision makes the point that the householder may do such labor as is required to preserve what he has, in this case, the care of existing crops, but he is not to work to improve his crops.

The third section of *Mo'ed Qatan* is concerned with the connection between rites of mourning and the rules governing conduct on the intermediate days of the festival. What has death to do with the intermediate days of the festival? To understand this apparent discontinuity one needs to know that the principal mode of thought of the Mishnah is that of “comparison and contrast.” Something is like something else and therefore follows its rule; or it is unlike the other and therefore follows the opposite of the rule governing the something else. In the case of death and mourning during the intermediate days of the festival, it is important to see that the sadness and mourning occasioned by death is the opposite of the joy and celebration occasioned by the festival. Yet experience shows that extremes of emotion—grieving and rejoicing—often come together in the normal cycle of life and the passage of time. Each takes its place on a continuum with the other, whether from the perspective of the passage of time or the passage of life in nature and whether from the perspective of the sacred or the standpoint of uncleanness. The natural rhythm of the year brings Passover and Tabernacles, respectively the celebrations of the first full moon after the vernal and autumnal equinoxes. The natural rhythm of life brings its moments of intense emotion, too. But death and the festival also form moments of a single

continuum, one of uncleanness yielding to its polar opposite, sanctification, and sanctification yielding to uncleanness. Death serves as a principal source of uncleanness, while the festival serves as the occasion for sanctification beginning with the removal of cultic uncleanness and the entry into a state of cultic cleanness. These opposites also take their place on a single continuum of being. And, as a matter of fact, death takes place as often on festivals and on Sabbaths as it does on secular days.