

Shabbat Chol HaMoed Pesach 5783
Aviv in its Season, Greening Our Corner of the World
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One of the names for Pesach is חג האביב—*Chag HaAviv*. *Aviv* is the Hebrew word for the Spring season, so it seems fitting to call Pesach the Holiday of Spring. But that would not be entirely correct. *Aviv* has another, ancient meaning, which probably was the inspiration for *Chag Aviv*. *Aviv* refers to the wheat kernel at the top of the stalk, the just ripened bud ready for picking. That ripe kernel is called *Aviv*, and Pesach must fall no earlier and no later than when the wheat in the field shows its *Aviv* tops.

This narrowly defined time hearkens back to the harvest festival roots of our holiday as well as to the Exodus, on the precise night when we went forth from Egypt, fresh, ready, not yet afraid or worn by the journey. We intercalate the Hebrew calendar in order to make sure that date of the first Seder always falls when the *Aviv* is just ripened and ready. In fact the entire Hebrew calendar and its quirks revolve around that one night matching the *Aviv* in the field. We can calculate that date years out and count on celebrating the *Aviv* in the season called *Aviv* year after year after year. This assumption is bred into our DNA. Of course this is based on the agricultural season in Israel, not Wisconsin or Buenos Aires. When it snows here on Pesach, it feels wrong to us. It would also feel wrong if it were hot as August at Pesach.

We have always measured our lives and time against the markers of moon, rain, and sun. The patterns of the natural world around us give a fundamental sense of stability and predictability to our lives on earth.

In a famous midrash connected to Hanukkah, Adam the first man sees that the days are getting shorter. It's Winter, but he doesn't know about that. "Woe is me," he says, "perhaps the world is becoming dark around me because I have sinned, and I will soon return to chaos and disorder, sentenced to death from Heaven." And so he spent eight days fasting and praying. And then he saw that the days were beginning to lengthen, and he realized, "this is the order of the world." And he went and celebrated for eight days.

Like Adam, we are seeing changes to the seasons of our planet, this time truly a consequence of human behavior, and we are afraid. In California, there are days when the smoke from fires is so thick that the sun cannot break through. More droughts and more intense storms, extreme fluctuations in weather, melting ice caps and changing sea lines threaten life on our planet as we know it and that is frightening.

You do not need me to tell you that it will take more than messing with the Jewish calendar to keep Chag HaAviv–Pesach—at the right season and keep the wheat and other crops on which we depend budding as they should. Climate change undermines millenia-old assumptions about our seasons and our weather.

Our ancient sages could not have imagined what we are now facing, and yet they taught, “When God created the first human beings, God led them around the Garden of Eden and said: “Look at My works! See how beautiful they are—how excellent! For your sake I created them all. See to it that you do not spoil and destroy My world, for if you do, there will be no one else to repair it (Midrash Kohelet Rabbah 1 on Kohelet 7:13). Adam and Eve are metaphorical characters in a mythical garden. WE are the people that the story is about. And we are the ones so habituated to destructive habits that most of the time we don’t pause to consider the impact of our behavior on our planet. There are two things we ought to be doing about this: praying with our hearts and praying with our actions. Regarding the first, we would not be the first Jews to pray about the weather. In ancient times we had a mode of prayer for when the weather goes wrong. Our people developed prayers and practices to arouse God’s attention. These were public rituals. They would “remove the Ark to the city square and place burnt ashes upon [it], and on the head of the community leader (the Nasi), and on the head of his deputy, and each and every person would [come out and] place ashes on their heads. And they would [pray, invoking prophetic words from] Jonah and Joel (Mishna Taanit 2:1). We learn from this that a communal problem calls for a communal response. We must come together, stand together, and care together. Rabbi Chiyya bar Abba was known to say, “We cried out in private and we were not answered. We will therefore make our disgrace known in public” (Bavli Taanit 16a). We must publicly acknowledge the climate crisis and confront it together, especially in our time, because we understand that we are the ones who can reverse it. Moreover, the fear of destabilization and death creates a need in us to feel we’re doing something and to witness and be witnessed in doing so. Our tradition emphatically does not permit us to rely on a miracle (cf. Bavli Ta’anit 20b), especially when it comes to ecological destruction.

How, then, do we pray with integrity? We hold the paradox that what Science tells us is true, even when we are not immediately suffering. According to Rashi, Noah doesn’t believe a Flood is coming, but he obeys the prediction and enters the Ark with his family and the animals nonetheless. We summon the courage to see what has been lost already, to mourn it and to try to do better. It should be obvious: We pray with integrity when we match our prayers with actions. Maimonides taught, “Righteous people...do not waste in this world even a mustard seed. They become sorrowful with every wasteful and destructive act that they see, and if they can, they use all their strength to

save everything possible from destruction..." (Sefer HaChinuch on Mitzvah 529 of the Torah).

In two weeks we are going to celebrate Earth Day by taking a major step in caring for our planet more responsibly. We will be "greening" our Shabbat kiddush. No more disposables: we have real plates and silverware washed and ready to go. Some of you are among the volunteers who have already stepped up to learn how we will serve and clean up a green kiddush—and I hope that many more of you also will lend a hand. In fact it will take all of us to make this initiative work. It's been long in coming, since before I came to Beth Israel Center. In two weeks, those who have led this effort will address us all with instructions and excitement before those of us in the sanctuary head out to the social hall. We are matching our actions to our learning and our intentions because we understand that we have a sacred responsibility to co-create a thriving world.

We are not alone in this effort. We have connected with other faith organizations and Jewish organizations in particular, both locally and nationally. Together, we are supporting one another in the work people of faith understand as a sacred responsibility we must, at long last, heed. We affirm our faith in a Creator Who, through us, constantly renews creation—המחדש בכל יום תמיד מעשה בראשית.

Greening our kiddush will not save the planet, but that, plus our solar panels and the new ways in which we are managing our outdoor green spaces will do some good. We are not bound to save the world, but we are bound to redeem our part of it, and that will help.

May our gratitude on this Chag HaAviv lift our spirits and give us inspiration and fortitude to do our part.

Shabbat shalom.