

Kohelet – Drash for Chol HaMo-eid Sukkot, Sukkot 5785 (2024)

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Rachel asked me to say a few words of introduction to our reading of Kohelet today. I thought I would start with the question that came to my mind when I started to consider this juxtaposition: why read Kohelet in the middle of Sukkot? I recognize this is hardly a new or unplowed topic, but apparent the fatalism and pessimism of the reading has always been hard for me to fathom. How to make sense of this?

In a couple of weeks, I will be recognizing my father's second *yahrzeit*. I think in some ways he had a lot in common with the Solomon who preaches to us in Kohelet. My Dad reached a certain point where his accomplishments gave him immense satisfaction, including the belief that others would benefit or use what he had created; he had experienced immense happiness with and then endured – but not been crushed by -- the disability and death of two wives and a child, as well as numerous friends; he had acquired enough *gelt* and *gravitas* to enable him to do what he liked. At the age of 80+, the questions in his head grew too loud to ignore: “So now what? What is the meaning of my life, any life – and is this all there is under the sun? Is living all just vanity?”

His response to these non-rhetorical questions was to devote a good portion of the last two decades of his life to learning, to writing and reading poetry about love and nature, and to enhancing his own and others' Jewish identity. At the Friday night services that he and friends started in their retirement community, he would routinely deliver a drash based on the week's torah portion. Dad was a great devotee of the late and great British [Rabbi Jonathan Sacks](#): Dad's talks were often more excerpts from, rather than reflections on, the writings of Rabbi Sacks. In honor of my Dad's memory, I am going to follow his example. I will now answer the question I initially posed by reading a brief drash offered by Rabbi Sacks on the very question of why we read Kohelet on Sukkot.

As I mentioned, many before me have ruminated on this question over the years. To paraphrase one: “The culmination of the season of atonement is the setting aside of days specifically for the harvest holiday of Sukkot. The rabbis called Sukkot “*zman simchateinu*,” the season of our joy. We are commanded to welcome visitors, spend time with family and friends, savor the good life outdoors under the stars, in a booth under the shelter of God's presence.”ⁱ The intentionally flimsy structure of the sukkah mirrors the Mishkan that we carried with us during 40 years in the desert (says Rabbi Sacks); in it, we focus on the basics, on what is truly meaningful in life, recognizing that while the sukkah is our home (for the duration of the holiday), no home is permanent, all is transient.

Read Kohelet reminds us -- among other things – of the essential fragility of all life on earth.ⁱⁱ

In his brief drash entitled “Radical Joy”ⁱⁱⁱ, Rabbi Sacks expands on this:

The meaning of Kohelet, the *megillah* that we read during Succot, hinges on one word: *hevel*. It occurs 38 times, more than half of all its occurrences in Tanach. No other book announces its theme more emphatically by using one word five times in a single sentence, the second sentence in the book: "*Hevel of hevels*", says Kohelet, "*hevel of hevels, all is hevel*" (Kohelet 1:2). What does the word mean? It's been translated as 'pointless', 'meaningless', 'futile', 'empty', 'vapour', 'smoke', 'insubstantial', 'absurd', 'vanity', but the primary meaning is 'breath'.

The Hebrew words for 'soul', among them *nefesh*, *ru'ach* and *neshamah*, all have to do with the act of breathing. *Hevel* specifically means 'a shallow breath'. What obsesses Kohelet is that all that separates life from death is a shallow breath. He's obsessed by the fragility and brevity of life as contrasted with the seeming eternity of the universe. The world endures forever, but we are, as we say in *unetaneh tokef*, on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, "like a broken shard, like grass dried up, like a faded flower, a fleeting shadow, a passing cloud, a breath of wind, whirling dust, a dream that slips away, dust we are and to dust we return".

Kohelet is a sustained meditation on mortality, one of the most profound in all literature. He is traumatized by the unbearable lightness of being. The fact that life is lived toward death, that our days are numbered. That like Moshe, for each of us there will be a Jordan we will not cross, a fulfillment we will not live to see. We don't and can't know how long we will live, but life will always seem too short. We now sense the drama of Succot seen through the eyes of Kohelet. For 10 days, beginning on Rosh Hashanah and reaching a climax on Yom Kippur, we've prayed *zachreinu l'chaim*, "Remember us for life, King who desires life, and write us in the book of life for Your sake, God of life."

Now, having survived the trial, comes the deepest question of all. What actually is life? What is this gift that we've been granted? What gives life meaning, purpose, substance? What will redeem us from the shadow of death? Kohelet's answer is, in a word, joy, *simcha*. What redeems life and etches it with the charisma of grace is joy in your work: "sweet is the sleep of the labouring man" (Kohelet 5:11); joy in your marriage: "see life with the woman you love" (Kohelet 9:9); and joy in the simple pleasures of life: "take joy in each day". *Simcha*, joy, doesn't involve, as does happiness, a judgment about life as a whole. Joy lives in the moment. It asks no questions about tomorrow; it celebrates the power of now.

The Talmud says that Hillel lived by the principle, "*baruch Hashem yom yom*", "blessed be God day by day" (Beitza 16a). That's what joy does, it blesses God day by day. It celebrates the mere fact of being here, now, existing, when we might not have done. Inhaling to the full this day, this hour, this eternity in a moment, that was not before and will not be again. Joy embraces the contingency of life. It knows that yesterday is gone

and tomorrow is unknown. It doesn't ask what was or will be. It makes no calculations. It's a state of radical thankfulness for the gift of being. Even in an age too fraught for happiness, there can still be joy.

What saved Kohelet [from being overwhelmed by the 'seeming futility' of it all] was his belated realisation that joy redeems life from the shadow of death. Joy doesn't ask how long it will last, [rather] it discovers epiphany in the here and now. Yes, life is sometimes unfair and the world unjust, but the very brevity of life makes each moment precious.

Joy says stop thinking of tomorrow. Celebrate, sing, join the dance, [be grateful] however undignified it makes you look. Joy bathes life with light, and liberates the soul from the prison of the self.

How appropriate for this celebration of Sukkot.

Chag Sameach.

Citations

ⁱ "How to Read Ecclesiastes, the Book we Read on Sukkot and an Inspiration for Many Classic Novels" by Beth Kissileff (Tablet; 2017); <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/how-to-read-ecclesiastes-the-book-we-read-on-sukkot-and-an-inspiration-for-many-classic-novels> (downloaded 10/1/2024)

ⁱⁱ "The Lessons of Kohelet: A shiur to launch the Koren Sacks Succot Machzor" (2016), by Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks; <https://rabbisacks.org/videos/lessons-of-kohelet/> (transcript downloaded 10/1/2024).

ⁱⁱⁱ "Kohelet: Radical Joy" (2019), by Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks; <https://rabbisacks.org/archive/kohelet-radical-joy/> (transcript downloaded 10/13/2024).