

Message for Sukkot

Several of our festivals have megillot attached to them and at Sukkot we read Kohelet. On the surface this seems like an odd match up since Sukkot is known as HaZman Simchatenu - the season of our rejoicing, and Kohelet's tone may be accurately gauged from its oft-appearing line that "it's all pointless". But there is more to this than meets the eye. Indeed, Judaism has a penchant for matching the sweet with the sour. After all, our tradition of smashing the glass at a wedding is said to derive from the actions of Rabbi Mar de-Rabina, who felt that the guests at his son's wedding were not appropriately mindful of the significance of the occasion and were being too cavalier in their celebrations. He grabbed an expensive goblet off the table and smashed it on the floor, giving the guests a moment's pause and causing them to settle down. This reminded them that a wedding should be marked by solemnity and awe, and not just mindless carousing. It is further said that he smashed the glass to remind the guests that even as they were celebrating the unification of two souls the stones of the Temple still lay in pieces. I'm not sure how many wedding invitations Rabbi Mar de-Rabina received after that but the practice obviously took hold! In Judaism the sweet and the sour, joy and sadness, life and death are often found together. So it is at Sukkot. R. Shemtob Gaguine (1886-1941), who was the de-facto Sefardic Chief Rabbi of England, says that according to the midrash King Shlomo wrote the Shir HaShirim in his youth and Kohelet in his old age. We therefore read the Song of Songs at Pesah in the spring which hints at the spring of his life, and Kohelet during the Feast of the Ingathering, which hints at old age when Shlomo looked back at his past and saw that all is vanity. Finally, Mordechai Zer-Kavod gives a variation of this explanation. He says that the Shir HaShirim is read on Pesah which symbolizes the spring; Ruth is read on Shavuot the holiday of first fruits since it mentions the wheat harvest; Kohelet is read on Sukkot, the holiday of ingathering, since it represents old age and death.

Indeed, death is very much a theme of Kohelet, perhaps due to the author's now advanced years. He thus speaks in 7:26 about the bitterness of death and in 8:8 of its inevitability: "Just as no one has the power to keep the wind from blowing, so no one has power over the day of death. If one is drafted the fight a war, one can't send a substitute; likewise the wicked won't escape death by their wickedness." Kohelet writes similarly in chapter 9:12, "People don't know when their time will come any more than fish taken in the fatal net or birds caught in a snare; similarly, people are snared at an unfortunate time, when suddenly it falls on them." In chapter 12 verse 1 Kohelet speaks of the days of his old age as "evil days" and, addressing young people, speaks of them as years in which "you will say," as he no doubt knew from his own experience, "they no longer give me pleasure." Indeed, the deleterious effects of old age upon his body were a particular cause of bitterness to Kohelet and it is thus that he speaks about "the sun and the light grow[ing] dim, also the moon and the stars; before the clouds return after the rain; on the day when the guards of the house are trembling, and men of courage are bent over double; when the women stop grinding grain, because there are so few; when the women at the windows can no longer see out; when the doors to the streets are kept shut; when the noise from the grain-mill fades; when a person is

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startled by the chirp of a bird, yet their singing is hard to hear; when they will be afraid to go up a hill, and terrors will stalk the way, even though the almond tree is in bloom; when the locust can only drag itself along, and the caper berry has no [aphrodisiac] effect - because the person is headed for his eternal home, and the mourners are already gathering in the marketplace - before the silver cord is snapped the bowl of gold is cracked, the pitcher is shattered at the spring, the pulley is broken at the cistern, the dust returns to earth, as it was, and the spirit returns to G-d, who gave it!"

The picture of old age which Kohelet paints here is certainly a gloomy one. As the saying goes, 'life is fatal; no one gets out of it alive.' But the process of ageing for Kohelet was in itself a depressing experience. He found himself unable to enjoy life as he had once done. It is apparent that he had lost much of his sight and hearing; and no longer received any physical satisfaction. But while all this troubled him what really embittered him was the stark realisation that all that he had worked for throughout his life had effectively been a waste of time. As he stood on the verge of the unknown he realised that nothing that he had done in his life could benefit him or be taken with him into the next. As we read, "Just as he came from his mother's womb, so he will go back naked as he came, and for his efforts he will take nothing that he can carry away in his hand. This too is a gross evil, that in every respect as he came, so will he go; thus what profit does he have after toiling to earn the wind?". So, not being able to take the fruit of his labours with him into the next world embittered Kohelet. This was made worse by the realisation that someone else coming after him, perhaps a thoroughly unworthy person would directly benefit from all *his* hard work. Thus, he wrote, "I came to hate life, because the activities done under the sun were loathsome to me, since everything is meaningless and feeding on wind. I hated all the things for which I had worked under the sun, because I saw I would have to leave them to the man who will come after me. Who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the things I worked for and which demonstrated how wise I am under the sun. This too is pointless. Thus I came to despair over all the things I had worked for under the sun."

In view of all this Kohelet considered his whole life to have been a futile exercise. He had toiled much but if in the end it was all for nothing, so how was he in any better place than someone who had toiled little? Therefore, he asked rhetorically, "what advantage has the wise over the fool?" Death was the great leveller. And since all of this was so, he concluded, there was nothing better for a man to do in his short time on earth but to enjoy his life. While it was important to work hard, he said, in order to sustain oneself through life, it was pointless toiling away like a workaholic without experiencing the fleeting moments of joy that also attended life. "Suppose a man fathers a hundred children," he wrote, "and lives many years, so that he has a long life, but he fails to enjoy himself; then, even if he were to [live indefinitely and therefore] never be buried, I say that it would be better to be born dead. For the arrival of a stillborn baby is a futile thing, and its departure is in darkness; its name is [forgotten], covered in darkness; and although it has never seen or known the sun, it is more

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content than he is, without enjoying himself, even if he were to live a thousand years twice over. Doesn't everyone go to the same place?" "So I recommend enjoyment," he continued, "a person can do nothing better under the sun than eat, drink and enjoy himself; this is what should accompany him as he does his work for as long as God gives him to live under the sun." "So go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a happy heart, for God has already accepted your deeds. Let your clothing always be white, and never fail to perfume your head. Enjoy life with the wife you have loved throughout your meaningless life that he has given you under the sun, all the days of your futility; for that is your allotted portion in life and in your labour that you work at under the sun. Whatever task comes your way to do, do it with all your strength; because in Sheol, where you will go, there is neither working nor planning, neither knowledge nor wisdom."

Kohelet's conclusion that a life without joy is futile is drawn from his deep reflection on the meaning of his life in the light of the inevitability of his death. And it is this hard gained unique end of life wisdom that Kohelet offers to his readers. Indeed, it is this conclusion that, in spite of appearances to the contrary, actually makes the book of Kohelet well suited for reading at Hazman Simchatenu, this season of our joy. It is said that before we die the whole of our life passes before our eyes. Indeed, if this is true we can imagine Kohelet on his death bed inwardly smiling at the recollection of the many joyful times in his life. Indeed, we can be sure that it was not his works on a grand scale - his grand palaces, vineyards, gardens, fruit trees, large numbers of slaves, herds of cattle, flocks of sheep, his masses of silver and gold or his good many concubines that Kohelet recollected with joy as he passed into eternity. No, all of these, he said, were "meaningless and feeding on wind". On the contrary, I'm sure it was all the joyful times in his life, particularly the human moments, that he recollected. For "I know," he wrote, "that there is nothing better... to do than to be happy and enjoy" oneself as long as you live. Indeed, "the fact that everyone can eat and drink and enjoy the good that results from all... [one's] work, is a gift of God." Isn't it these times of happiness and joy that actually makes life worth living amidst all the general drudgery? Isn't it the memory of these times that we'll want to recall; those joyous but mercurial moments that were interspersed among, to paraphrase the patriarch Yaakov, our short and difficult days on earth? Memories, perhaps, of childhood birthdays, cooking a cake with your mum, your parents' hugs when you're small, scoring your first goal or finishing a race, your first kiss, passing your driving test, graduation day, your wedding day, walks in the park, kicking through autumn leaves, being with family, enjoying a coffee and eating cake with friends, the birth of your child, watching her first steps or hearing her first words, watching her perform in the school play, family holidays and celebrations, celebrating Pesach together, eating together in the sukkah, and so much more! You might think that the outlook of Kohelet is depressing, and because of this so many believers sadly avoid it. But it offers us a realistic perspective on life and vital wisdom that can help us to make the best of these lives that we live in a world where, according to the Genesis curse, we must work by the sweat of our brows until we return to the ground from which our father Adam was once formed. Kohelet warns us not to think that life must or can be a state of continual joy or happiness - a mistake that ironically plunges many into frustration and

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depression as they pursue what is a fundamentally unobtainable goal. Believers in particular anxiously pursue happiness, thinking that it must surely be our default state in the Lord. But this is not the case! As the sages wisely tell us a life of constant happiness is not happiness and constant pleasure is not pleasure - or words to that effect! And yet we are constantly bombarded in the media, not to mention social networking, by the message that you can be happy or joyful all the time. Indeed, self-help gurus and religions, in particular born again Christianity, propagate the myth that this is possible and ostensibly offer us, usually after separating us from our cash, a means to achieve it. But, as Kohelet might have written, it's all feeding on the wind! A life of constant happiness and joy is neither possible nor desirable.

As blogger Stephen Davis has so cogently written, "People are constantly bombarded by the media and self-help gurus on how happiness should be our default state. They are told that they have the right to be happy and, if not, there is something wrong. They are not living the life they rightfully deserve. Quit that job, dump that girl and leave that town if any of them are detrimental to your happiness, little snowflake. A Google Trends search shows that more people are using Google for guidance on how to be happy. For a time I bought into this way of thinking. Constantly asking myself, "am I happy doing this?", "will this make me happy?" "how much happiness will I get from it?" "why am I not feeling as happy as I thought?" Firstly, no one has the right to anything and certainly not constant happiness. Anything of value is earned. Secondly, despite this wealth of information on how to be happy people are becoming more anxious and depressed. This way of thinking clearly isn't working. Finally, happiness is an abstract term. Having an expectation and entitlement of it can only lead to unhappiness. What is the definition of happiness? According to vocabulary.com it's: "That feeling that comes over you when you know life is good and you can't help but smile. It's the opposite of sadness. My definition: Happiness is a positive emotion. Nothing more nothing less. According to Human-Machine Interaction Network on Emotion (HUMAINE) happiness is one of 48 potential good or bad emotions you can feel. Think about that. Out of 48 potential emotions the human body is capable producing you have an desire to feel happy all the time. Constant happiness is neither possible nor desirable. Neither possible because hormonal fluctuations in your body coupled with unexpected life events (someone at work pisses you off or someone close to you dies, for example) will always bring about negative emotional feelings such as anger and grief. Neither desirable because who wants to be happy all the time? Without pain in our life and the resulting negative emotions that come with it there is no growth nor appreciation of the good times. Without an understanding of what it feels to be sad how can we not appreciate being happy? As Freud once said, "One day, in retrospect, the years of struggle will strike you as the most beautiful." Just like any emotion, happiness is temporary. A fleeting moment. What once brought that warm feeling may not always produce the same effect. Humans are complex animals that require new stimulus as we grow and evolve. Accept that life will bring anger, disappointment, frustration and sadness just like it will bring delight, joy, pleasure and, yes, happiness. It's the mindset principles we apply to these negative emotions that makes the difference. The idea of being constantly happy is a myth that runs counterintuitive to the intended result. You need a baseline contentedness

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about your life as a whole. Just don't expect to journey through this amazing thing we call life without embracing all emotions."

This is essentially the message of Kohelet too. The wisdom of Kohelet tells us that a life well lived is one in which we have experienced the full range of human emotions. In fact the reality of human experience, even as believers in God, is that happiness exists right alongside sadness; faith with doubt; the bitter with the sweet. Indeed, as Kohelet declares, it is wise not to treat difficulties and problems, or sadness and depression as imposters: "When things are going well," he says, "enjoy yourself; but when things are going badly, consider that God made the one alongside the other, so that people would learn nothing of their futures." When Kohelet says "God made the one alongside the other" he means to say that it is perfectly natural that we experience ups and downs, light and darkness, joy and sadness. Thus the wisdom of Kohelet inclines us to pursue balance in all things, including matters of faith where we are to realise, so he says, that faith cannot in and of itself deliver a state of constant happiness. So, "Do not be overly righteous, neither be overly wise— why should you disappoint yourself? Do not be overly wicked, and do not be a fool— why die before your time? It is good to grasp the one and not let go of the other. Whoever fears God will avoid all extremes."