

Qohelet and Sukkot

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The wisdom of the Sages is displayed yet again in the tradition of reading Qohelet (Ecclesiastes) during the Festival of Sukkot. But it is not readily apparent why Qohelet was chosen for a festival that has rejoicing as its main theme! Many who read Qohelet are left with the impression that the words of Shlomo (Solomon) are depressing rather than uplifting, and do not fit the theme of joy. Yet a closer reading of the book reveals just the opposite. In fact, the theme of the book is *joy*, but the surprise is where this joy is actually found.

Sukkot reminds us of the goal to which we are heading: dwelling together in the presence of HaShem. Like the humble and transitory huts we built when we left Egypt, the sukkah we build at this festival reminds us that our freedom to worship HaShem is our wealth, and that even if we live in temporary structures our joy can be complete. For seven days the Almighty asks us to put away the comforts of our normal dwellings; to gather together in a humble sukkah; and to eat, drink, and enjoy the company of family and friends. He does this to remind us of the real nature of joy. Apart from such reminders, we might be persuaded that our material possessions, our position in life, along with a host of other good things are more important than our relationships with God, family, and friends.

This is why reading Qohelet is so appropriate at Sukkot. Shlomo had come to the realization that he had the power, wealth, and ability to seek out every avenue of pleasure upon this earth. And it appears that he went searching. In the end, what he found was that true joy could not be found in the pleasures of food or wine, nor in the luxurious surroundings available only to the wealthy. All of the wonderful aspects of life that his position and wealth could afford still left him searching for a deeper joy and satisfaction. What he discovered was that this joy is found in one's acceptance of God's blessings in the simple pleasures of family and friends, but that these could not be "stored up" for the future but could only be enjoyed in the fleeting moment. God's blessings are like a beautiful sunset or breathtaking mountain scene early in the morning—images of beauty that cannot be perfectly captured even in the best photo. The moment of grandeur must be embraced with a blessing to HaShem, and then only savored in memory.

But the hug of a child, a kiss, a loving pat, and even the conversations about life and experience shared within the context of family and community are ever as grand as the sunset or mountain scene. Yet these moments are likewise fleeting and must be enjoyed as they come, embracing the event and blessing HaShem for it.

It is this fleeting nature of the best things in life that became central in Shlomo's mind as he wrote Qohelet. And to communicate this idea he chose the word הֶבֶל (*hevel*). This word always describes a "vapor" or a "breath" elsewhere in the Tanach. Note, for instance, Isaiah 57:13:

*"When you cry out let your collection of idols deliver you. But the wind will carry all of them up,
And a breath will take them away.
But he who takes refuge in Me shall inherit the land,
And shall possess My holy mountain."*

Another example is Proverbs 21:6:

*“The getting of treasures by a lying tongue
is a fleeting vapor, the pursuit of death.”*

Unfortunately, the English translations of Qohelet have chosen words like “vanity” or “worthless” and even “meaningless” to translate הֶבֶל. But Shlomo is not telling us that things are worthless or meaningless. He is simply saying that they are transitory, fleeting, temporary. And that to expect deep and lasting joy from things that are temporary is foolish, and will always end in disappointment.

But the reason Shlomo’s words are so important for us to read and understand is because those things that are temporary or fleeting often appear to us as though they are not, or at least we pretend that they are not, and we spend all or most of our time trying to collect these fleeting things so we can be happy. By reading these inspired words we are called again to the realization that a great many things in life are of a fleeting nature, and that we must recognize and appreciate those things that bring the greatest joy and are more permanent.

So central is the word הֶבֶל in Qohelet that Shlomo uses it for “bookends” of the entire book. Note how the text opens:

*“Vapor of vapors,” says the Preacher,
“Thinnest of vapors! All is a vapor.” (1:2)*

Then see how the book closes:

*“Vapor of vapors,” says the Preacher,
“all is a vapor!” (12:8)*

Sandwiched between these obvious bookends are the thoughts of Shlomo, thoughts that speak to every generation. In fact, our generation is in particular need of this message. Our lives run at a pace never before experienced in the scope of human history, with information bombarding us in an almost unimaginable barrage of media. And our schedules have become so full that we savor even a moment of time in which we can enjoy a rare minute of silent reflection. But it is our relationships within family and community that suffer the most in such a fast paced society. We fail to take the time to simply sit, eat, and enjoy the greatest gift of all—friendship.

God knows we need Sukkot! Seven days to rejoice before Him. But notice well that this rejoicing is coupled with dwelling in the sukkah. Our joy is not first and foremost in the beauty of the Temple, or even in the wonderful ceremonies carried out by the Cohenim (priests). These are wonderful and very important, but the rejoicing of Sukkot is done in the Sukkah because it is there we gather with our families and friends, and in a kind of “forced blessing” we come back to the ground zero of our joy—the important people God has put into our lives.

Yet even these, according to Shlomo, are in one sense fleeting. The years we have together are relatively few, and the cycle of life moves on whether we recognize it or not. Our children will grow into adults and will be blessed to form their own homes with their own children. The special moments of their childhood are fleeting.

Indeed, every time we recite the Kaddish we are reminded that the cycle of life turns for each of us. Our days are numbered, and our time in life is brief. This too is one of Shlomo's themes. But rather than seeing this as morbid, he turns this fact into an exhortation to seize the moment.

These moments of joy that give real meaning to our lives cannot be bottled up for the future, nor can they be replayed over and over again for our pleasure. Always we must return to the toil and labor of life which, though good, is often burdensome. Thus we seize the moment, offer a *b'rachah* (blessing) to HaShem, and return to our work refreshed by God's abundant kindness.

Here is the message of Qohelet, and this is why it is so relevant for Sukkot. Stop! Sit! Enjoy the simple pleasures of life, and discover the meaning God intends for our lives. Then offer to God the thanksgiving He deserves. And everyone can do this, because it requires only the humblest of huts, a sukkah.

The Things That Trap Us

It is instructive for us to consider those categories that Shlomo teaches are traps—those things that appear to be a source of lasting joy but are not. We can trace his thoughts by looking for what he labels “vapor” or “vapor of vapors” (a Hebrew way of saying “thinnest of vapors”).

The Money Trap

Shlomo was the wealthiest man of his time. Whatever he wanted, he could buy. His storehouse was literally without end. Shlomo no doubt experienced the shear love of gold and monetary ability. Stockpiling it must have become a driving force for him at one point in his life. Some think that through their love of money and the power it brings, they will find meaning and joy in life. Shlomo (most likely tongue in cheek) even says that “money is the answer to everything” (10:19).

Consider 4:8 and 5:10:

There was a certain man without a dependent, having neither a son nor a brother, yet there was no end to all his labor. Indeed, his eyes were not satisfied with riches and he never asked, “And for whom am I laboring and depriving myself of pleasure?” This too is a vapor and it is a grievous task.

He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves abundance with its income. This too is a vapor.

Usually those who are the lower rung of the economic ladder are the ones who fall into this trap. They think that if they had money the woes that so disparage their lives would vanish. So their happiness is set upon the illusive dream of being rich, or at least rich enough for the necessities and a few extras.

But take a word of wisdom from the richest man of the Ancient Near East: money is not the path to meaning in our lives nor to joy. While it is important and necessary, and one who has money has many advantages, it too is a vapor. One's entire life's savings can vanish in a day.

In fact, the money trap is also set for those who think the future can be secured by it. Note 6:1-2:

There is an evil which I have seen under the sun and it is prevalent among men—a man to whom God has given riches and wealth and honor so that his soul lacks nothing of all that he desires; yet God has not empowered him to eat from them, for a foreigner enjoys them. This is a vapor and a severe affliction.

In the uncertainty of world events (and this was as much true in ancient times as it is now), money may offer little or no advantage.

Some would foolishly believe that possessions gained through money bring lasting joy, but Shlomo tells us differently (6:7-9):

All a man's labor is for his mouth and yet the appetite is not satisfied. For what advantage does the wise man have over the fool? What advantage does the poor man have, knowing how to walk before the living? What the eyes see is better than what the soul desires. This too is a vapor and a striving after wind.

The point is clear: while money is important and necessary, it cannot bring genuine meaning and joy to life. And anyone who thinks it can is holding on to a vapor.

The Power Trap

A second trap Shlomo warns us about is the power trap. This is the trap of trying to secure family prestige (name) or advantage to overcome the contingencies of life. This trap presents itself in a number of ways. The first is by trying to have such a family “name” that everyone connected will automatically receive meaning and joy in life (6:3-6)

If a man fathers a hundred children and lives many years, however many they be, but his soul is not satisfied with good things and he does not even have a proper burial, then I say, “Better the miscarriage than he, for it comes in futility and goes into obscurity; and its name is covered in obscurity. “It never sees the sun and it never knows anything; it is better off than he. “Even if the other man lives a thousand years twice and does not enjoy good things—do not all go to one place?”

Throughout the history of mankind the attempt to procure a family dynasty, whether in royal lineage or in societal power, has been evident. Some have succeeded in making their extended family a name to be reckoned with throughout many generations. Yet Shlomo wisely reminds us that death comes to everyone and that the success of the next generation can never be guaranteed.

This gives way to a second trap: securing the future for our children in order to guarantee their joy:

Thus I hated all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun, for I must leave it to the man who will come after me. And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the fruit of my labor for which I have labored by acting wisely under the sun. This too is a vapor. (2:18-19, cp. 4:13-16)

We have all known people who have poured their lives into making a future for their kids. Trying to prepare our kids for the future and doing all in our power to help them succeed in the future is good! But thinking we can guarantee the future for them is a trap, and a passing vapor. All of our labors and plans can be brought to nothing in a moment. We cannot find lasting meaning and joy in life by feeling we have secured the future for our children.

This leads to a third trap: the trap of fear. Some parents are so fearful for their children’s future that they are unable to enjoy them as children. Intent on every aspect of their child’s preparation for adulthood, they allow the innocence of childhood to be pushed aside for what they think will guaran-

tee their future. But this is an illusion.

Shlomo does not teach us that we should neglect planning for the future, nor our children's future. But what he does teach us is that we cannot find meaning and joy in life by trying to secure the future for our children. We must do all we can to prepare them for the future, but ultimately their lives are in the hands of God.

The Occupation Trap

It is not uncommon to find people who think their meaning in life will be found in their occupation.

For what does a man get in all his labor and in his striving with which he labors under the sun? Because all his days his task is painful and grievous; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is a vapor. (2:22-23)

Some people are “workaholics.” They seek to find their purpose in life by always working. In fact, almost all their conversations relate to their work or occupation. Unfortunately, if they ever become unable to perform their tasks it is as though they have lost their identity. This is why Qohelet refers to work itself as a vapor. We must face the reality that our occupation does not define who we are.

Rather we must know that our work or occupation is merely a means to an end, not the end in itself. Working simply provides the necessary means to sustain ourselves so that we can accomplish the ultimate task—sanctifying and honoring the Name of God upon the earth. If our work or occupation is a means to that end and not an end in itself, then not only will we do better at our work, but in doing our work we will have the higher goal in mind. God will be honored, and when God is honored, we are also blessed.

There is another trap in the whole realm of our occupations, and this is the pride that can come from doing the best job possible. Of course, doing the best job possible is good and what each one should strive for. Yet taken to an extreme, doing a good job can grow into pride and arrogance:

I have seen that every labor and every skill which is done is the result of rivalry between a man and his neighbor. This too is a vapor and striving after wind. (4:4)

Competition and striving for quality are good things. It is often in the context of healthy competition that greater work is done. But if one tries to find his or her meaning and joy in life simply by being the best at something, this is a vapor that will vanish and Qohelet warns us not to place our hopes there.

The Health Trap

Some people think they have found meaning in life by doing everything in their power to be healthy and protecting themselves from disease. Still in our day there are those who believe they have found the “fountain of youth” and are selling their ideas and products to those who want to stay young forever. Shlomo notes that both the wise and unwise die, and that there seems to be little proof

that the wise man lives longer than the fool:

The wise man's eyes are in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. And yet I know that one fate befalls them both. Then I said to myself, "As is the fate of the fool, it will also befall me. Why then have I been extremely wise?" So I said to myself, "This too is a vapor" (2:14-15)

We have all known people who seem to eat poorly and disregard all manner of healthy options but who nonetheless live longer than most. Conversely, we have seen those who carefully choose the wise course and die young.

Shlomo is not telling us we should disregard wisdom in matters of health! On the contrary, we should do all in our power to maintain our health by wise and Godly choices. But Shlomo's real point in this is that one's future health cannot be guaranteed. While it may be true that the majority of the time those who eat healthy live longer, it is not always the case, and this seems incongruent to what should be, which is Shlomo's point.

Indeed, death is the great equalizer:

I said to myself concerning the sons of men, "God has surely tested them in order for them to see that they are but beasts." For the fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same. As one dies so dies the other; indeed, they all have the same breath and there is no advantage for man over beast, for all is vanity. (3:18-19)

In comparing man and beast Shlomo is not denying the eternal nature of man's soul, nor is he negating the supremacy of man over beast since man was created in God's image. What he is emphasizing, however, is that death comes both to man and beast, and in this mortality the two share a common element.

Indeed, his point is simply that life is passing and no one can halt it:

Rejoice, young man, during your childhood, and let your heart be pleasant during the days of young manhood. And follow the impulses of your heart and the desires of your eyes. Yet know that God will bring you to judgment for all these things. So, remove grief and anger from your heart and put away pain from your body, because childhood and the prime of life are fleeting. (11:9-10)

This being the case, one who expects to find purpose and meaning in life by thinking he has guaranteed the future through wise choices is deluded. Tomorrow is guaranteed for no one.

The Pleasure Trap

Perhaps there is nothing more that characterizes modern America than the desire for personal pleasure. With the affluence of our society has come many voices promising every imaginable comfort.

Some try to find this in exhilarating experiences, whether in testing one's own strength and fortitude or attempting a dare-devil feat. Still others seek personal pleasure in all manner of intoxications. Shlomo had been there:

I said to myself, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure. So enjoy yourself." And behold, it too was futility. (2:1)

I explored with my mind how to stimulate my body with wine while my mind was guiding me wisely, and how to take hold of folly, until I could see what good there is for the sons of men to do under heaven the few years of their lives. (2:3)

He also indulged in things that would bring a man pleasure and found them all to be a vapor, a striving after the wind:

I enlarged my works: I built houses for myself, I planted vineyards for myself; I made gardens and parks for myself and I planted in them all kinds of fruit trees; I made ponds of water for myself from which to irrigate a forest of growing trees, . . . Also, I collected for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I provided for myself male and female singers and the pleasures of men—many concubines. (2:4-6, 8)

Sometimes in the pursuit of pleasures a person acts the part of a fool who, rather than face reality, jokes his way through life. Instead of stopping to contemplate life as it is, people use entertainment as a mask to cover the pain of reality. Granted, entertainment, especially comedy can be a great relief, but it can also cloud the truth that needs to be faced.

*For as the crackling of thorn bushes under a pot,
So is the laughter of the fool; And this too is futility. (7:6)*

Pretending that everything is okay when in fact it is not is the laughter of a fool. Qohelet equates it to the crackling of thorn bushes in the fire: a lot of noise but not very much heat. Surely a superficial view of life in general cannot be the foundation for true meaning and joy.

The Religion Trap

It might surprise us to realize that Qohelet also considers religion to be a possible trap. Like most of the other things he lists, religion can be very good, even a necessity.

But it can also be a trap. Too often true religion (humbly serving God by loving Him and doing His commandments) is masked by religious ceremony and trappings. And sometimes people come to the conclusion that true meaning is to be found in these ceremonies and religious activities:

Guard your steps as you go to the house of God and draw near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools; for they do not know they are doing evil. Do not be hasty in word or impulsive in thought to bring up a matter in the presence of God. For God is in heaven and you are on the earth; therefore let your words be few. For the dream comes through much effort and the voice of a fool through many words. When you make a vow to God, do not be late in paying it; for He takes no delight in fools. Pay what you vow! It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. Do not let your speech cause you to sin and do not say in the presence of the messenger of God that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry on account of your voice and destroy the work of your hands? For in many dreams and in many words there is emptiness. Rather, fear God. (5:1-7)

Shlomo realized that trying to “play religion” was dangerous. Going through the motions as a means of trying to find meaning in life could arouse God’s anger rather than His blessing. What is more, he understood that often in the realm of man’s religion there is an emptiness. The dreams and visions of man do not open the throne room of God.

What is more, people often make their involvement in religious activities an end in itself rather than a means to an end. True religion is a response to God, not a means of “getting Him on your side.” When religious activity becomes an end in itself, it has become an idol. Our goal ought to be God Himself. Worship must be directed to Him. If the act of worship becomes the end of worship, it has ceased to be worship.

Shlomo observed another thing in this whole realm of religion: there is an apparent disconnect between reward for righteousness and punishment for unrighteousness. The righteous seem to suffer more than the unrighteous.

I have seen everything during my lifetime of vapor; there is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his wickedness. Do not be excessively righteous and do not be overly wise. Why should you ruin yourself? Do not be excessively wicked and do not be a fool. Why should you die before your time? It is good that you grasp one thing and also not let go of the other; for the one who fears God comes forth with both of them. (7:15-18)

In fact, engaging in true service to God and man is often very difficult and may bring personal sorrow even though it is true religion (cf. James 1:27). Serving God in truth means entering a battle where pain and injury can be inflicted. Yet even in the most diligent service for God, the doing can become the focus rather than God’s victory. “Ministry” can become one’s focus, and even one’s god. And when this happens, God’s blessing is removed and disappointment is inevitable.

It is an amazing thing, that what begins as a desire to worship the One true God can so easily become idolatry. But it is the subtle deception of our own wayward hearts that allows this to happen. We become so enthralled with our religion that we forget God and His definition of religion. And in this deception we think we have found a source for meaning and joy in life. This too is a vapor.

Where, Then, is Meaning & Joy to be Found?

I have listed six categories that often are thought to be the source of meaning and joy in life: Money, Prestige, Occupation, Health, Pleasure, and Religion. Each of these categories contain good, God-given things, and each (to one extent or another) are necessary in life. Yet Qohelet has also shown that each of these can be transitory and fleeting, like the wonderful fragrance of a flower that lasts for only a moment. So while these things may be good, they are not the source of true meaning and joy in life.

So what is Qohelet’s answer? Where does one find meaning and joy? His answer is at first shocking but then profound:

There is nothing better for a man than to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good. This also I have seen that it is from the hand of God. (2:24)

Here is what I have seen to be good and fitting: to eat, to drink and enjoy oneself in all one’s labor in which he toils under the sun during the few years of his life which God has given him; for this is his reward. (5:8)

So I commended pleasure, for there is nothing good for a man under the sun except to eat and to drink and to be merry, and this will stand by him in his toils throughout the days of his life which God has given him under the sun. (8:15)

Go then, eat your bread in happiness and drink your wine with a cheerful heart; for God has already approved your works. (9:7)

Enjoy life with the woman whom you love all the days of your fleeting life which He has given to you under the sun; for this is your reward in life and in your toil in which you have labored under the sun. (9:9)

The common denominator of each of these texts is the simple pleasure of eating and drinking. But it is clear that what Qohelet means by this is the time spent with family and friends around a common table. It is not the profound and expansive accomplishments of mankind that bring meaning and joy, but the unpretentious, everyday routine of eating together.

Sitting with family and friends to eat after a day's labor; laughing and enjoying the friendship around the table; finding a moment of cheer together; enjoying the companionship of one's spouse—these are the small yet profound moments in which we recognize an even greater truth: we were created for relationship and it is in relationship with others and God that we find true meaning and joy.

Now it becomes clear why Qohelet is read at Sukkot. Surrounded by friends and family in the sukkah, the most important aspects of life on this earth are lovingly forced upon us as we rejoice before the Lord in the simple act of eating, drinking, and enjoying the friendship of one another.

So seize the moment and say the blessings! And let this message be firmly planted in our hearts. For the brief time we have upon this earth is punctuated throughout with genuine symphonies of happiness. But the melody comes in the hug of a child, the kiss of a spouse, and the conversations at the table. And the musicians are all those who enter our lives and bring the possibility of true communion.

After all, in this Festival we are rehearsing for when we will sit in the sukkah with Yeshua Himself, and there, around the table, if we have learned to recognize what true happiness is, we will engage in the unending joy of communion with Him.

But how do we do this consistently? How do we take on a lifestyle that honestly considers relationship to be more valuable than anything else? How does this kind of thinking become the pattern for our decisions and actions?

The answer is given very clearly in the epilogue of Qohelet:

The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person.

Built into the Torah is a lifestyle that puts family and friends first. That's because loving God is coupled with loving one's neighbor. The closest neighbor each of us has is family. And the family relationship becomes the foundation for extending oneself to those in the larger family of community.

Consider the *mo'edim* (yearly biblical festivals). Each one requires an assembly together, and all with the exception of Yom Kippur include meals of one sort or another. Here we get a glimpse of the King's prescription for meaning and happiness: the joy of table fellowship in the context of loving God.

What is more, when we derive our earthly pleasures from these God-sent moments, all of the other categories can be viewed from a proper perspective. Money is not looked to as the fountain of meaning, but as a means for gathering family and friends. Personal prestige gives way to family and community traditions that mark the moments of true joy. One's occupation is not the end but a means of providing the necessary infrastructure for family and community. Health is viewed as the important ingredient to assure the inclusion of all. One does not seek one's own pleasure, but finds pleasure in companionship with others. And religion takes on its intended role as the building up of one

another becomes the natural outcome of shared thoughts and worship.

God, in His infinite wisdom, chose the simple things in life to confound the wise. He took the common events of life and imbued them with lasting meaning and joy.

A vapor, in and of itself, is not bad. It can, in fact, be very good and even wonderful. But it is short and impossible to store up. This is the message of Qohelet.

So learn the lesson at Sukkot as you read Qohelet, and carry it throughout the year. Do not overlook the importance of a meal together, or the time your children or grandchildren want to sit on your lap. Do not rush through the conversation with your spouse, or think that a walk together is just for your physical health. Never take a scene of beauty for granted, or the wonder of God's creation as common. Each of these are the moments in life given to grant us meaning and joy. Seize them! Bless God for them! And return to your labors with renewed thanksgiving for life itself. Chag Semeiach! May you have a joyous Sukkot!

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Sukkot, 5762