

What I Learn About Life From The Book Of Ecclesiastes

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Abstract: So now I believe we all understand why our rabbis chose the reading of Kohelet during the festival of Sukkot. This book and this festival complement each other. Both Sukkot and Kohelet fully speak to the duality of life. On the one hand, life must be approached with a sense of sober realism. There is no denying that life can be unfair, uncertain, and all too brief. On the other hand, there is also no denying that life is rich with love, with beauty, with joy, with laughter, and with purpose.

Tonight begins the 5th day of the festival of Sukkot, the Jewish festival of thanksgiving. During this festival, we study the book of Ecclesiastes (known in Hebrew as Kohelet). What's the connection between Kohelet and Sukkot? Why did our rabbis want us to read this book on this festival? What's the message?

The principal symbol of Sukkot is the sukkah, the harvest booth. The sukkah is a fragile and deliberately impermanent structure. So is life. With the leaves falling, and winter coming, Sukkot gets us thinking about the autumn and the winter of our lives.

In addition to the brevity and the unpredictability of life, the book of Kohelet, written in the 3rd century BCE, offers two further insights into the human condition. First, Kohelet observes that the world we live in is not always friendly to human happiness. God does not always reward the virtue of the righteous or punish the evil of the wicked. Let's take a look at Ecclesiastes chapter 9, verses 1-3: "For the same fate is in store for all: for the righteous, and for the wicked; for the good and pure, and for the impure; for him who sacrifices, and for who does not; for him who is pleasing, and for him who is displeasing; and for him who swears, and for him who shuns oaths. That is the sad thing about all that goes on under the sun: that the same fate is in store for all."

So way back in the 3rd century BCE, Kohelet was already saying that human beings have no other choice than to accept we live in a world, "where bad things happen to good people."

Kohelet's second observation is that human life and destiny is not within our power to control. The most famous statement of Kohelet's determinism was actually made into a hit song by the Byrds in the Sixties. It's called "Turn, turn, turn."

Let's look at Kohelet chapter 3, verses 1-8: "A season is set for everything, a time for every experience under heaven. A time for being born and a time for dying; a time for planting and a time for uprooting the planted; a time for slaying and a time for healing; a time for tearing down and a time for building up; a time for weeping and a time for laughing; a time for throwing stones and a time for gathering stones; a time for embracing and a time for shunning embraces; a time for seeking and a time for losing; a time for keeping and a time for discarding; a time for ripping and a time for sewing; a time for silence and a time for speaking; a time for loving and a time for hating; a time for war and a time for peace."

So way back in the 3rd century BCE, Kohelet was already teaching that human beings have no other choice than to accept that our fate is determined by forces that are far more powerful than we are.

Faced with these twin realities of the world in which we live, Kohelet understands why some people conclude that life is *hevel hevalim*, "Life is utter futility. All is futile." And he understands why some people cope with the futility of life by devoting themselves to getting rich. But Kohelet reminds us that the most important things in life – love and friendship – money can never buy. So, too, the festival of Sukkot reminds us that true shelter is to be found in the amassing of loving relationships and belonging to a caring community, a community like Temple Sinai.

Kohelet teaches us to enjoy the natural wonders of the world, and the festival of Sukkot kicks us outside to enjoy the beauty of nature, the crisp fall air, the crunch of leaves underfoot. Kohelet teaches us to count our blessings every day, and the festival of Sukkot reminds us that one of life's greatest joys is to share our blessings with those less fortunate than ourselves, to show generosity and compassion for the poor, the hungry, and the homeless, not just at Thanksgiving time, but all the time.

So now, I believe we all understand why our rabbis choose the reading of Kohelet during the festival of Sukkot. This book and this festival complement each other. Both Sukkot and Kohelet fully speak to the duality of life. On the one hand, life must be approached with a sense of sober realism. There is no denying that life can be unfair, uncertain, and all too brief. On the other hand, there is also no denying that life is rich with love, with beauty, with joy, with laughter, and with purpose.

Knowing this duality, our rabbis wanted us to take heart in God's guidance, nature's goodness, and each other's love. Our rabbis wanted to impress upon us that the task of life is to choose life, to make the most of life, to live life fully and wisely every single day.