

SHEMINI ATZERET
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Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks in his Mahzor for the holiday of Sukkot writes, “Of all the festivals, Sukkot is surely the one that speaks most powerfully to our time.” Kohelet, Ecclesiastes, the scroll that we read on the Shabbat of Hol HaMoed, could almost have been written in the 21st century. He writes, “Here is the ultimate success, the man who has it all – the houses, the cars, the clothes, the adoring women, the envy of all men – who has pursued everything this world can offer from pleasure to possessions to power to wisdom, and yet who, surveying the totality of his life, can only say, in effect, ‘Meaningless, meaningless, everything is meaningless.’”

In the midst of a holiday of joy, we read the scroll of Ecclesiastes with its rather cynical message. Sometimes that is what happens in life. Less than two weeks ago, thousands gathered in Las Vegas to enjoy an outdoor concert and to have a good time. For reasons we are still trying to fathom, a lone gunman opened fire on the crowd and 58 people were killed, many more were injured, and thousands have had their lives changed forever. Sometimes, we simply cannot understand what occurs in our world and we search for meaning. Ecclesiastes’ response is not adequate. Life is not meaningless. We saw the goodness in life in the reactions of the first responders. We saw it in the bravery, courage, and kindness of individuals who reached out to strangers and saved their lives. We saw it, and continue to see it, in those who continue to help the survivors. There must be much more than a “meaningless” purpose to living in this world.

My colleague, and our neighbor here in Highland Park, at Congregation Solel, Rabbi Evan Moffic, has just published a book which appeared only a few weeks ago entitled *The Happiness Prayer – Ancient Jewish Wisdom for the Best Way to Live Today*. Rabbi Moffic uses the passage in the liturgy found in our Siddur in the early morning period of study which he entitles *The Happiness Prayer* to add a sense of meaning to the lives of individuals and communities. What he calls the *Happiness Prayer* is a passage from the Talmud based on the Tractate of Shabbat 127a: “These are the deeds which yield immediate fruit and continue to yield fruit in time to come: honoring parents; doing deeds of loving kindness; attending the house of study punctually, morning and evening; providing hospitality; visiting the sick; helping the needy bride; attending the dead; probing the meaning of prayer; making peace between one person and another, and between man and wife. And the study of Torah is the most basic of them all.”

He suggests that “the Hebrew word for happiness – *Simcha* – demands intention. It comes from an intentional pursuit of joy amid community... Happiness is not a destination. It is the path itself.” For Rabbi Moffic, this prayer or passage of Talmudic study works “because of the truths and practices it reveals. It works because you bring its teachings into your life. It is not a typical prayer in that you just say it. It is an active prayer because you live it. The magic is not in the words. It is in the way you use the words to change yourself.” Throughout the course of the book Rabbi Moffic takes each of these specific actions and describes their meaning and their utility in making life more meaningful for individuals, communities, and society at-large.

In the midst of his book he deals with the seeming paradox concerning the reading of Kohelet on Hol HoMoed Sukkot. “On the surface,” he writes, “Ecclesiastes and Sukkot seem to go together

like oil and water. Sukkot is all about joy. Ecclesiastes tends to despair. Sukkot happens in the fall, as the leaves are changing and beauty surrounds us. Ecclesiastes emphasizes how mundane seasons are. Put simply, Sukkot seems joyful; Ecclesiastes is rather depressing.” However, according to Rabbi Moffic, the book and the holiday actually do complement each other, in that, Sukkot is the response to the lessons of Ecclesiastes. “Ecclesiastes tells us what happiness is not.” As suggested by Rabbi Sacks, it is all about a person searching for meaning, for contentment, for happiness, who seems not to be able to find it. No matter what he has he always wants more. He is unable to make sense of the world. Sukkot, according to Rabbi Moffic, shows us what is happiness. It is felt in the gratitude for what we have and what we give.

The author of Ecclesiastes, according to our tradition, King Solomon, searched for meaning, for happiness, for something that would make sense out of life. Only towards the end, whether it is an addendum to the book or not, does he find it. He discovers that happiness depends on faith. The path he settles on is: “Fear G-d and follow His commandments.” As Rabbi Moffic suggests this passage, “simply asks us to live for something larger than ourselves and follow the basic practices that arise from such a perspective.”

In the Tractate of Shabbat, we are told: Rav Yehudah, son of Rav Shmuel bar Shilat, said in Rav’s name: The Sages wished to hide the Book of Kohelet, because its words are contradictory. And, why did they not hide it? Because it begins with words of Torah and it ends with words of Torah. It begins with words of Torah as it is written, *What profit has man of all his labor that he labors under the sun?* And the school of Rav Yannai states that under the sun he has none, but he has a profit before the sun. It ends with words of Torah as it is written *Lets us hear the conclusion of the matter, fear G-d and keep His commandments, for this is the whole of man.*

We have just come through the High Holy Day period. We recognized the fragility of the human experience and the challenges of human life. Sukkot reminds us what makes a life worth living. As Rabbi Sacks states: “What matters is not how long we live, but how intensely we feel that life is a gift we repay by giving to others. Joy, the overwhelming theme of the festival, is what we feel when we know that it is a privilege simply to be alive, inhaling the intoxicating beauty of this moment amidst the profusion of nature, the teeming diversity of life and the sense of communion with those and many others with whom we share a history and a hope.”

While Sukkot teaches us about insecurity as we sit in a temporary hut, it reminds us of the concept of faith in our own handiwork, and most important, in G-d. Today, we will pray for rain. We have seen rain come down these last few weeks in the Southern and Southeastern United States, the Caribbean, and in the monsoon regions of the world. It can be devastating, it can be destructive, and yet we know it is life giving. Without it the world cannot survive. We ask for rain, appropriate rain, recognizing that is not up to us how and where it falls. We recognize once more as we see the pictures of Houston and Puerto Rico, among other places, how little control we have. As Rabbi Moffic states: “The temporary nature of the Sukkah reminds us that we are temporal inhabitants, here on Earth. Our permanence rests in G-d and one another. Happiness is never something we find alone. It comes from sharing what G-d has given us.” He writes, “On Sukkot, we focus on the essentials of life. Those essentials are the people with whom we share life, and the G-d who gave it to us. We discover G-d not through

buying more things, but through giving, studying, and loving. That is the path to ultimate happiness.”

Do we concentrate on the demented mind of the shooter and become despondent when we realize that it could occur in any place at any time or do we concentrate on the bravery and courage of those who reacted instantaneously, without fear for their own lives, in order to help others? Do we concentrate on the meaninglessness, the *hevel*, that Kohelet portrays some 40 times in his book? Or, do we allow faith and *Simcha*, happiness, which he mentions 17 times in the book, to move us forward and to recognize that as Moffic states: “Happiness is found through faith in G-d and one another?”

In the book of *Eleh Hein Moadai*, on the holidays, Rabbi Eliyahu Schlessenger writes, that pulling together all the strands of the holiday of Sukkot as a whole teaches us important lessons. In the reading of Kohelet, we learn that we can live meaningless lives, if we wish to do so. It is read deliberately on Sukkot because it is the time of the harvest, and should recognize that without the blessings from G-d we will never have the harvest we desire. We use the four species during the holiday to remind us that all of us are attached to one another. We cannot perform the mitzvah of lulav and etrog without all four species being in the right place as we hold them together. We live in the Sukkah for seven days to remind us that it makes no sense to be envious of others and what they possess. Instead we should concentrate on the gifts with which we are presented, and recognize that we can quickly lose them without warning, just as the Sukkah as a frail habitation can fall with the vagaries of nature. All of this should arouse within us a sense of gratitude for all the gifts we possess which will lead to contentment and happiness. As Pirkei Avot teaches us: “Who is rich? One who is happy with his portion.”

Perhaps that is also the reason that we recite Yizkor today. At the conclusion of the Sukkot festival, on the holiday of Shemini Atzeret, even though we don't sit in the Sukkah on this day, we are reminded that life is temporal and fragile. We should recognize that our days are limited and we must, therefore, make our days meaningful. By remembering those who went before us and learning from their lives we can be influenced by the lessons by which they lived and make the most of our time here on earth.

This is a challenging time for our country, our society, and our world. We must ensure that we do not give up hope in a brighter future as Kohelet seems to do. Instead, we take instruction from the holiday of Sukkot and remind ourselves that as Sacks concludes his essay, “a Sukkah, broken, can be rebuilt tomorrow. Security is not something we can achieve physically, but it is something we can acquire mentally, psychologically, spiritually. All we need is the courage and willingness to sit under the shadow of G-d's sheltering wings.” In this insecure time, on this holiday which stresses insecurity, when in a few moments we will recite the Yizkor prayers and recognize our human limits, let us have faith in one another, in G-d, and in ourselves and let us share our gifts with others.

We can, indeed, create a world where the Sukkah of Shalom, of wholesomeness, peace, and security will be spread over us and over the entire world.