



Chicago Rabbinical Council

מועצת הרבנים דשיקגו

Divrei Torah

SUKKOS, SHEMINI ATZERES & SIMCHAS TORAH 5787



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Megillat Kohelet and the Meaning of Happiness

Rav Yona Reiss
Av Beth Din



One of the liturgical highlights of Sukkot is the reading of *Megillat Kohelet*. Normally this *Megillah*, commonly attributed to Shlomo Hamelech (*Kohelet Rabbah* 1:1; cf. *Bava Basra* 15a), is read on the *Shabbos Chol Hamoed* of Sukkot, but on a year such as this one when there is no *Shabbos Chol Hamoed* it is read on the *Shabbos* of Shemini Atzeret (*Rema* OC 663:2 citing the *Maharil*).

The small Geonic tractate *Masechet Sofrim* 14:1 states that all five *Megillot* should be read with a blessing, including *Megillat Kohelet* (see *Rema* OC 490:9 who writes that the custom is not to recite a blessing on *Kohelet*, *Shir Hashirim* or *Rut*; however, the *Mishna Berura* s.k. 19 indicates that there is a basis for reciting a blessing when reading these *Megillot* from a ritual parchment). Nonetheless, there is no specification in *Masechet Sofrim* that *Megillat Kohelet* should be read specifically during Sukkot.

The commentators therefore query why the practice developed specifically to read the *Megillah of Kohelet* during the festival of Sukkot. This question becomes particularly pointed when bearing in mind that *Kohelet* comes across as a rather somber exhortation about how everything in this world is הבל הבליים (1:2) – futile and pointless, which would seem to contrast with the jubilation in the air during Sukkot which is זמן שמחתנו – the festival of our rejoicing.

Several answers are offered to this question, including:

(a) Since one of the verses in *Kohelet* states תן חלק לשבעה וגם לשמונה – “give a portion to seven, and even to eight” (*Kohelet* 11:2) – which, according to one opinion in the *Midrash* (*Kohelet Rabbah*, *ad locum*) is a reference to the seven days of Sukkot and Shemini Atzeret, it was deemed appropriate to read these words and the accompanying *Megillah* during this time period (*Darchei Moshe* OC 490:1), particularly since one interpretation of this reference is that the Sukkot holiday is the final time to bring – without violating the transgression of delaying vows – any sacrifices or other offerings that one vowed prior to the three *regalim* of Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot (*Avudraham* – *Tefillos HaPesach*, s.v. *nahagu*) and *Kohelet* also addresses the importance of fulfilling vows in a timely fashion (5:3-4).

(b) Shlomo Hamelech would recite the words of *Kohelet* during the *Hakhel* ceremony (hence the similarity in lettering) that would take place once every seven years during the festival of Sukkot, at which time he would administer rebuke to the people, reflected in the many admonitions contained in *Kohelet* (*Elijah Rabbah* 663:5).

(c) Precisely since Sukkot is a time of זמן שמחתנו – the festival of rejoicing – there is a concern that people might get carried away and overindulge, and therefore the recitation of *Kohelet* serves as a corrective reminder for people not to become too intoxicated with the material pleasures of this world. Thus, we read *Kohelet* since Shlomo Hamelech exclaims (2:2) ולשמחה מה

עושה – “what does joy accomplish” (see *Magen Avrohom* 490:8).

(d) It is imperative during this time of שמחה that we place the concept of שמחה in the proper perspective, and therefore reciting *Megillat Kohelet* is particularly appropriate because Shlomo Hamelech constantly reinforces the message throughout the *Megillah* (see, e.g., 3:13, 2:10, 9:9) that we should be happy with our lot since everything that we have is a gift from Hashem (*Levush* 663:2).



Based on these classical sources, we can add another level of explanation. The *Gemora (Shabbos 30b)* notes that *Chazal* considered removing *Kohelet* from the canon of *Tanach* because it had verses that seemingly contradict each other. However, the Rabbis determined that *Kohelet* should be preserved as part of *Tanach* because it both begins and ends with words of Torah, and that the contradictory verses can be reconciled accordingly. The beginning of the *Megillah (1:3)* states מה יתרון לאדם בכל עמלו שיעמול תחת השמש – “what profit has man in all of his toil that he toils under the sun” – but the clear implication is that the Torah which was created שמש קודם – prior to the sun, is replete with gain, meaning and purpose. So too, despite the many

descriptions by Shlomo Hamelech about how הבל הכל הבל (e.g., 1:2; 1:14, 2:1, 2:11, 2:17, 12:8) – that all is futility, the *Megillah* concludes in its penultimate verse (12:13) that סוף דבר הכל נשמע את האלקים ירא – the purpose of existence is to fear Hashem and perform His *mitzvot*.

Amongst the sets of verses that required reconciliation included the previously mentioned verse (2:2) עושה מה זו עושה suggesting that happiness is futile, in contrast with the more upbeat verse ושבתתי – “and I praised joy” (8:15), in which Shlomo Hamelech appears to be heaping praise upon the enterprise of happiness. The resolution, according to the *Gemora (Shabbos 30b)*, is that the latter verse refers to מצוה של שמחה, the joy of performing a *mitzvah* (such as helping accompany a *kallah* to her wedding, as Rashi writes), while the former verse refers to מצוה שאינה של שמחה, namely an empty type of happiness that does not accompany a *mitzvah*.

In this sense it is important for us to read *Kohelet* on Sukkot not only because it spells out the vagaries of an uninhibited pursuit of happiness for its own sake, but perhaps more importantly, because it spells out the nature of true happiness that defines our זמן שמחתנו – namely, the happiness and joy of serving Hashem (see Rav Yaakov Neiman *zt”l* citing his rebbe, Rav Moshe Rosenstein *zt”l*, *Darchei Musar* p. 284, and Rav Chaim Kanievsky *zt”l*, *Taama Dikra – Kohelet*, last paragraph).

Along these lines, The Torah (*Devorim 12:12*) teaches us that on Sukkot there is a requirement of ושמחתם לפני ה' אלקיכם שבעת ימים – “you shall rejoice before Hashem your Lord for seven days.” Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik noted (*Shiurim L'zecher Aba Mori* 2:194) that this verse explicitly

teaches us that the nature of happiness in the Torah tradition is to be 'לפני ה' – in the presence of Hashem. *Kohelet* reminds us that true happiness – namely שמחה של מצוה – is to bask in Hashem's presence. Particularly in the aftermath of Yom Kippur in which we receive forgiveness for our sins upon performing *teshuva*, we are in this quintessential state of rejoicing in Hashem's presence, no longer obstructed by the barriers of our previous transgressions, and elevated by the many *mitzvot* of the Sukkot holiday.

This also explains why at the culmination of the celebration of the Sukkot holiday we celebrate שמחת תורה – the ultimate joy of rejoicing in the Torah that brings us close to Hashem.



In fact, the *Gemora* (*ibid.*) adds that the שכונה – the Divine presence – does not reside upon a person who is lethargic or lugubrious, but only upon a person who is in the happy state of mind of being engaged in a *mitzvah*. Any other type of happiness is illusional because it does not bring the person closer to Hashem.

Interestingly, there is a debate amongst the Rabbis in the *Midrash* (*Shir Hashirim Rabbah* 1:10) as to when Shlomo Hamelech composed his various *seforim* of *Kohelet*, *Shir Hashirim* and *Mishlei*, respectively. However, the conclusion of the *Midrash* is that all opinions agree that Shlomo Hamelech composed *Kohelet* last.

Some understand this timeline of authorship to mean that only after Shlomo Hamelech suffered through the vicissitudes of life, including the loss at least temporarily of his kingdom at the hands of *Ashmedai*

the archdemon (see *Gittin* 68a-68b), he had the life experience to express the sentiment of how הכל הבל – “everything is vanity.”

However, it is also possible to explain that as Shlomo Hamelech, the wisest man, proceeded through life, he gained greater perspective, so that he was better equipped to articulate a well-balanced view of the world that would spell out the nature of true happiness. In this sense, *Kohelet* serves not as the grumbings of old age but as a life-affirming prescription of genuine happiness grounded in fear of Hashem and performance of *mitzvot*, consistent with the theme of Sukkot as זמן שמחתנו, our time of utmost joy.

Thus, we can discern a common thread in all the explanations of why *Kohelet* is read during Sukkot: during this joyous season, we are more attuned to the concept of joy and therefore able to understand it better in terms of all its nuances and permutations. This is why Shlomo Hamelech would choose this occasion (at least once every seven years) to articulate the meaning of true happiness to the entire population of Israel. Sukkot was also the time to make good on the actualization of true happiness by honoring *mitzvah* commitments that had been made earlier in the year, bringing us closer to Hashem. Similarly, it was a time to recognize that true happiness comes from spurning illusory forms of material pleasures and embracing the happiness that comes from constantly clinging to Hashem through Torah and *mitzvot*.

May this Sukkot season bring us all to a true and permanent state of happiness in our portion and enable us to experience and actualize our closeness to Hashem through our constant awareness of His presence and our joy in the performance of *mitzvot*, every day of our lives.

הג שמח! ■

Living the Dream

Rabbi Daniel Fox

Rabbi, Darchei Noam of Glenbrook



One of the first questions that a person is asked at the end of his days is, “צפית לישועה,” did you look towards the redemption?” (*Gemara Shabbos 31a*). We daven multiple times daily for redemption, begging Hashem to bring the *geula*. But what does it look like? When we think of *geula*, what does that mean? For what do we yearn?

The Vilna Gaon (in his commentary on *Shir Hashirim 1:4*) notes that there were four main steps or milestones during the redemption from Egypt. Firstly, Hashem took us out of the land of Egypt itself. During that time, we brought the *korban Pesach* and sang songs of thanks. Secondly, we continued to Har Sinai where we received the Torah. Thirdly, we built the *mishkan* that we carried with us through all our travels in the desert. And lastly, we entered and settled the land of Eretz Yisrael. Each of these experiences was essential and indispensable.

Each of these steps, explains the Vilna Gaon, is commemorated by one of our *yamim tovim*. On Pesach, we recount leaving Egypt. And just as they ate together and celebrated on that momentous night, we too conduct a Pesach *seder*. Seven weeks later, we remember *kabbalas haTorah* on Shavuot. We stay up learning all night to show our enthusiasm and excitement to learn the newly received word of G-d. And on Sukkot, we sit in our own mini-tabernacles. We pray that, “הרחמן הוא יקים,” “let us see the rebuilding of our fallen sukkah, a reference to the successor of the *mishkan*, the *Beis*

Hamikdash.

But which holiday commemorates entering Eretz Yisrael? When do we remember and experience that watershed accomplishment?

The Vilna Gaon’s *chidush* is that this is the Yom Tov of Shemini Atzeres. The fourth and final stage of our *geula* was, “ביאת הארץ,” arriving in the Land, which is the completion of everything.” Shemini Atzeres is the culmination of all that came before. We left Egypt, received the Torah, and built the *mishkan* all with the purpose and goal of bringing them with us to Eretz Yisrael. There, נשלם הכל, all was complete.

It’s noteworthy, however, that Shemini Atzeres is fundamentally different from the other three *yamim tovim*. Each of the others has a unique and specific *mitzvah* or theme. On Pesach there are many *mitzvos*, including eating matzah and maror, drinking wine, and more. On Shavuot we commit ourselves fully to Torah study. On Sukkot, we sit in our sukkah, as well as take and wave the *dalet minim*. But what do we do on Shemini Atzeres? There is no special *mitzvah*, and there seems to be nothing unique. What should we be doing?

Perhaps that is exactly the point. When we *daven* for redemption, we are not praying just for miracles and moments. We long not merely to experience the miracles and wonders of the *geula* itself, but to live elevated lives for many years after. We yearn to raise our children, to study Torah, to engage in *chesed*, to experience *simcha* and *nachas*, to do all that we already do, but in a

time of *shalom* and unity.

On Yom Tov we pray, “והשב כהנים” לעבודתם וליום לשירם ולזמרם והשב ישראל לנביהם, please Hashem, return the *Kohanim* to their service, and the *Leviim* to their songs, and return the Israelites to their homes.” Many wonder, what does it mean to pray for the Israelites to return to their homes? I understand asking Hashem for the *Kohanim* and *Leviim* to return to their posts in the *Beis Hamikdash*. But what is the nature of our request that וישוב ישראל לנביהם?

The רמב”ם (in *Melachim* 2:4) writes that the scholars and prophets desire the times of *Moshiach* so that, “שהיו פנויים בתורה”, וחכמתה ולא יהיה להם נוגש ומבטל, that they’ll be free to study Torah and its wisdom, and

there will be no oppressor or distraction.” Our greatest desire is to have more days like *Shemini Atzeres*. Days where we can sit peacefully and quietly, learning and *davening*, bringing the Torah and *mishkan* with us into our homes, and into Eretz Yisrael.

Shemini Atzeres, in a way, is the greatest of all the *yamim tovim*. It’s our destination and the fulfillment of our dreams. Pesach, Shavuot, Sukkot, and the whole year leads to this day and this moment. שאלו נשלם הכל, as there and then everything is complete.

May we merit to experience the fulfillment of our dreams, וישוב ישראל לנביהם, to return home, to Eretz Yisrael, where we can live and learn in peace. ■

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The Etrog of Sin and Victory

Rabbi Leonard A. Matanky

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Five days after Yom Kippur, we take an etrog in hand.

It is a beautiful fruit, fragrant, distinctive, and described by the Torah as a פֶּרִי עֵץ הָדָר, the fruit of a magnificent tree. But according to one tradition in *Chazal*, the etrog has a far more complicated history.

While the Torah never identifies the forbidden fruit eaten by Adam and Chava in Gan Eden, our Sages offered several possibilities: wheat, grapes, a fig, and even a nut. (An apple, incidentally, is not among them.) But Rabbi Abba of Akko suggested that the fruit was an etrog (*Bereishit Rabbah* 15:7).

And that creates a fascinating question.

Why would the Torah take the fruit associated with the first sin in human history and place it at the center of one of our most joyous mitzvot? Why, just five days after Yom Kippur, would we stand before G-d holding the very fruit through which human failure entered the world?

Rabbi Ephraim Zalman Margolies of Brody, in the introduction to his responsa collection *Beit Efraim*, develops a remarkable answer. But to understand it, we need to begin not with the etrog, but with an unusual word in the Torah's description of Sukkot:

וּלְקַחְתֶּם לָכֶם בַּיּוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן - "You shall take for yourselves on the first day" (*Vayikra* 23:40).

The problem, of course, is that Sukkot begins on the fifteenth day of *Tishrei*. It is not the first day of the month, nor is it the first day of the year. So why does the Torah call it בַּיּוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן, "the first day"?

The *Midrash*, cited by the *Tur*, offers a famous answer: Sukkot is עֲוֹנוֹת לְקַשְׁבוֹן, "the first day for the accounting of sins" (*Tur, Orach Chaim* 581). Why the "first day"? Because, explains the *Tur*, during the four days between Yom Kippur and Sukkot, the Jewish people are occupied with preparing for the mitzvot of the holiday. They are building their sukkot and acquiring their lulavim and etrogim. And because they are so busy with mitzvot, they do not sin.

But is that true? Are we really meant to believe that no Jew sins during those four days? That in the rush of construction, shopping, preparation, family, and yom tov arrangements, no one becomes angry, impatient, inconsiderate, or careless?

Perhaps the *Tur* is describing something deeper.

The *Gemara* distinguishes between two forms of *teshuvah*. There is תְּשׁוּבָה מִיִּרְאָה, repentance motivated by fear, and תְּשׁוּבָה מֵאַהֲבָה, repentance motivated by love. *Teshuvah* motivated by fear can transform intentional sins into unintentional ones. The sin is forgiven, but some trace of it remains. *Teshuvah* motivated by love accomplishes something far more radical: it transforms the sin itself into a merit (*Yoma* 86b).

That is an extraordinary claim. *Teshuvah* does not merely erase what we did. It can change the meaning of what we did.

Rabbi Margolies connects this idea to the familiar teaching in *Pirkei Avot*:

דַּע לִפְנֵי מִי אַתָּה עֹתִיד לֵתֵן דִּין וְחֻשְׁבוֹן - "Know before Whom you are destined to give judgment and accounting" (*Pirkei Avot* 3:1).

The order in that *Mishna* seems backward. Ordinarily, one first examines the accounts and only afterward reaches a judgment. Yet the *Mishnah* places דין before הַשְׁבִּיחַ, judgment before accounting.

Citing the *Shnot Eliyahu*, Rabbi Margolies explains that these are two different reckonings. דין is the judgment for the sin itself. הַשְׁבִּיחַ is the accounting for everything the sin cost us: the time that was wasted, the opportunities that were lost, and the good that might have been accomplished instead.

Teshuvah motivated by fear may remove the punishment. It can clear the דין. But what happens to the wasted time? What happens to the years, energy, and potential that appear to have been lost?

That requires *teshuvah* motivated by love.

When a person's failures become the source of greater sensitivity, deeper commitment, and a more passionate relationship with G-d, the past is no longer simply lost time. The sin has become part of the process through which the person grew. It has been transformed into something that now produces *mitzvot*.

The *Aseret Yemei Teshuvah* are primarily days of fear. They are ימי הדין, days of judgment. We stand before G-d, examine our failures, confess them, and plead for forgiveness.

But after Yom Kippur, something changes. We do not spend the next four days continuing to recite *Al Chet*. Instead,

we begin to build. We measure boards, hang decorations, search for a beautiful *etrog*, and prepare to fulfill G-d's commandments with joy.

The *teshuvah* of Sukkot is not expressed primarily through confession. It is expressed through enthusiasm. It is the *teshuvah* of a Jew who does not merely fear losing a relationship with God, but who loves that relationship and cannot wait to serve Him again.

That may be what the *Tur* means when he says that during these days the Jewish people "do not sin." It does not necessarily mean that they achieve four days of perfect behavior. It means that even their earlier sins are no longer counted in the same way. Through the joy and love with which they now pursue *mitzvot*, the old account is being transformed.

Seen this way, ראשון לַהַשְׁבִּיחַ עֲזוּנֹת means almost the opposite of what we first assumed. Sukkot is not simply the day on which a new list of sins begins. It is the day on which we complete the accounting of the old ones and discover that, through *teshuvah* motivated by love, even they can become part of our merits.

And now we can return to the *etrog*.

If the *etrog* was indeed the fruit eaten by Adam and Chava, then it represents not just one sin, but the first sin, הָעֵץ הָרָאשׁוֹן. And perhaps that is why the Torah places the words so carefully:

וּלְקַחְתֶּם לָכֶם בַּיּוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן פְּרִי עֵץ הָדָר - "You shall take for yourselves, on the first day, the



fruit of a magnificent tree.”

The word פרי עץ הָרָאשׁוֹן stands beside פְּרֵי הָהָר. The fruit of the first sin is taken on the day that is first for the accounting of sins.

But even more, when the Torah lists the four species, it places the *etrog* first, even before the *lulav*, which is striking, because the *lulav* is ordinarily treated as the central species. We refer to the *mitzvah* as “taking the *lulav*,” and the blessing itself concludes על נטילת לולב.

Yet in the verse, the *etrog* comes first.

Perhaps, suggested Rabbi Margolies in the name of his grandfather, the Lev Aryeh, the *etrog* comes first because this *mitzvah* is not only about celebrating innocence. It is about what happens after innocence has been lost. It is about the possibility that the very object associated with human failure can be reclaimed, sanctified, and lifted before G-d.

In *Al HaTeshuva*, Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik describes two ways in which a person might respond to a difficult past. One is to try to erase it, to cut away the failed or embarrassing parts of life and attempt to become an entirely different person. But

when a person severs part of the past, the Rav explains, he also severs part of himself.

The alternative is not erasure, but elevation. A person carries the past forward, not because the sin was acceptable, but because the memory of failure can become the source of humility, strength, compassion, and growth.

That is precisely what happens to the *etrog*.

The Torah does not ask us to pretend that the first sin of eating the forbidden fruit in Eden never happened. Instead, it takes that fruit, places it first among the four species, and puts it into our hands on the festival of joy.

We hold it together with the *lulav*, *hadassim*, and *aravot*. We recite a blessing over it and raise it before G-d. The fruit through which humanity once fell becomes an object through which we now fulfill His will.

And that is the answer to the question with which we began. We take the *etrog* on Sukkot not despite its association with the first sin, but because of it. It is the perfect symbol of *teshuvah m'ahavah* - *teshuvah*



motivated by love. The *etrog* reminds us that the greatest victory of *teshuvah* is not simply that the past disappears. It is that the past itself can be redeemed, and that what once drew us away from G-d can become part of what brings us back.

Five days after Yom Kippur, we take the

etrog in hand. We do not hide its history, and we do not celebrate its sin. We celebrate what has become of it.

The fruit of failure has become the fruit of a *mitzvah*. The symbol of humanity's first defeat has become the symbol of its victory. ■

ספר כנפי יונה חלק ב

SEFER KANFEI YONA
Vol. II

HaRav Yona Reiss

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Rosh Yeshiva, RIETS

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