



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SUKKOT 5773 • 2012

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

October 6, 2012
Shabbat Chol HaMoed

Vanity Fair Exposed



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart 5773 Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

In many congregations it is the custom to read the Book of Ecclesiastes (*Kohelet*) on Shabbat of *Chol Hamoed Sukkot*. But why? What is the connection between the message of this book and Sukkot?

On the surface the two actually appear to be completely antithetical: Sukkot is a time of great joy and celebration – the diametric opposite of the sad and depressing theme of *Kohelet*, which was the final book written by King Solomon, reflecting the resignation that comes upon a man at the end of his life, “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity...”!

We can find the answer in a surprising place: By comparing the book of *Kohelet* to another book about vanity written almost three thousand years later: The classic social satire *Vanity Fair* by William Makepeace Thackeray, published in 1847.

Vanity Fair concludes: “Ah! Vanitas Vanitatum! Which of us is happy in this world? Which of us has his desire? Or, having it, is satisfied? Come, children, let us shut up the box and the puppets, for our play is played out.”

Compare that to the closing verse in *Kohelet*: “The end of the matter, when all has been heard: Revere God and keep His commandments, for this is the entire man.”

The stark contrast of the conclusion of these two books illuminates for us the beauty and power of Judaism, underscored in Sukkot (it also demonstrates the glaring distinction between Jewish pride and Arab rage): Both books talk about the vanity of man and all his endeavors. But where *Vanity Fair* concludes with a dark ending leaving us cynical, resigned and hopeless, *Kohelet* leaves us filled with strength and hope, armed with the ultimate awareness of what is true and real.

VANITY FAIR EXPOSED

1. What is Real? (Optional Opening)

Once upon a time, there was an island where all the feelings lived: Happiness, Sadness, Knowledge, and all of the others, including Love. One day it was announced to the feelings that the island would sink, so all repaired to their boats and left.

Love wanted to persevere until the last possible moment. When the island was almost sinking, Love decided to ask for help. Richness was passing by Love in a grand boat. Love said, "Richness, can you take me with you?"

Richness answered, "No, I can't. There is a lot of gold and silver in my boat. There is no place here for you."

Love decided to ask Vanity who was also passing by in a beautiful vessel, "Vanity, please help me!"

"I can't help you Love. You are all wet and might damage my boat." Vanity answered.

Sadness was close-by so Love asked for help, "Sadness, let me go with you."

"Oh ... Love, I am so sad that I need to be by myself!"

Happiness passed by Love too, but he was so happy that she did not even hear when Love called her!

Suddenly, there was a voice, "Come Love, I will take you." It was an elder. Love felt so blessed and overjoyed that he even forgot to ask the elder his name. When they arrived at dry land, the elder went his own way.

Love, realizing how much he owed the elder, asked Knowledge, another elder, "Who helped me?"

"It was Time," Knowledge answered.

"Time?" asked Love. "But why did Time help me?"

Knowledge smiled with deep wisdom and answered, "Because, only Time is capable of understanding how great Love is."

2. Kohelet

In many congregations it is the custom to read the Book of Ecclesiastes (Kohelet) on Shabbat of *Chol Hamoed Sukkot*.¹

But why? What is the connection between the message of this book and Sukkot?

On the surface the two actually appear to be completely antithetical: Sukkot is a time of great joy and celebration – the diametric opposite of the sad and depressing theme of *Kohelet*, which was the final book written by King Solomon,² reflecting the resignation that comes upon a man at the end of his life: “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity...”!

But what kind of message is that?³ And what does this sad and depressing theme have to do with the joyous observance of Sukkot?

3. Worrywarts (Humor)

Speaking of sad and depressing ...

For months, the people of Chelm were very sad. They were beset by so many worries. They worried about finances. They worried about health. They worried about politics. Worry! Worry! Worry!

To alleviate this alarming situation, the Council of Elders called a meeting of all the townsfolk.

A motion was made and duly seconded that Shaul, the town drunk, be retained to do all the worrying for Chelm. As recompense, he was paid one ruble per week.

¹ The custom is recorded by: Avudraham; Maharil; Machzor Vitri; Pre Megadim; Darkei Moshe; Tur Orach Chaim 490; Magen Avraham Orach Chaim 490; Rama Orach Chaim 663.

² Midrash, *Shir Hashirm Rabba 1:1, Kohelet Rabba 1:1*.

³ Indeed, the sages even considered banning Kohelet because its words seemingly contradicted themselves (Shabbat 30b).

A wave of rejoicing greeted this wise solution to the problem, when the chairman of the council asked question that silenced the throng: "If the drunk is given a ruble every week," he demanded, "tell me - what will he have to worry about?"⁴

Okay, so we know what they did next - they gave him *Kohelet* to read ...

4. Five Megilot

Perhaps this "depressing" book - which is one of the five scrolls (*megilot*) - that we read throughout the year, just won't fit anyplace else.

I mean on Purim - we read the Book of Esther (*Megilat Esther*), and that's a no-brainer because it tells how that holiday came about.

On Tisha B'Av - we read the Book of Lamentations (*Eicha*), Prophet Jeremiah's dirge over the state of the Jewish people and his description of the destruction of the Temple. Again, a perfect fit for the day when we mourn what we have lost.

On Passover - we read the Song of Songs (*Shir HaShirim*), a gorgeous and romantic love story, which is a metaphor for the relationship between the Jewish people and God. Considering that on Passover we remember how He heard our cry, gathered us to His bosom and brought us out of Egyptian slavery, reciting this love song is an apt custom.

On Shavuot, when we commemorate the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai, we read the Book of Ruth (*Megilat Ruth*) which is a story of a woman who willingly chose the path of Torah and its commandments. It fits.

But *Kohelet* and Sukkot? What possible connection can they have, when they each speak of two different end of the spectrum: resignation vs. celebration, despair vs. joy?!

⁴ Adapted from Encyclopedia of Jewish Humor by Henry D. Spalding, p. 120

5. Various Reasons

Various reasons are given by commentators:

- Kohelet mentions seven and eight days, which alludes to the seven days of Sukkot followed by the eighth, Shemini Atzeret.⁵
- It mentions the theme of joy⁶ (well, once).
- King Solomon recited it at a *Hakhel* gathering during Sukkot.⁷

However these reasons seem incidental at best, and some of them only reflect the connection of one verse to Sukkot. The question remains: What does this entire book and its central theme have to do with this particular holiday?

6. Enigmatic Midrash

The answer will become clear after we analyze an enigmatic Midrash,⁸ which considers the order in which King Solomon composed his three books: the Song of Songs, the Book of Proverbs and the Book of Ecclesiastes (*Kohelet*).

The Midrash offers several opinions but all of them agree that Kohelet was composed last: “In his youth a man sings songs, in middle age he offers proverbs, and at the end of his years, he says that all is nothing” – the opening words and central theme of *Kohelet*.

But what’s that all about? What type of virtue is there in telling us that at the end of life man is resigned and says all is nothing?

Why the need to depress us with lines like:

⁵Pri Megadim, from Avudraham and Darkei Moshe.

⁶Magen Avraham.

⁷Machzor Vitri, Mateh Moshe.

⁸*Shir Hashirm Rabba 1:1. Kohelet Rabba 1:1.*

Vanity of vanities, said Kohelet;
vanity of vanities, all is vanity.
What profit has man in all his toil
that he toils under the sun?⁹

What has been is what will be,
and what has been done is what will be done,
and there is nothing new under the sun.¹⁰

For in much wisdom is much vexation,
and he who increases knowledge,
increases pain.¹¹

All go to one place;
all came from the dust,
and all return to the dust.¹²

Chapter after chapter *Kohelet* emphatically proclaims all the actions of man to be inherently “vain”, “futile”, “empty”, “meaningless”, “temporary”, “transitory”, “fleeting,” or “mere breath” (depending on translation), and emphasizes that the lives of both wise and foolish men end in death.

What benefit is there in reminding us of all this futility? Why do we need to know about King Solomon’s resignation as he aged?

7. Old Age

We can find the answer to this question in a similar grim description of old age in the *Mishnah*, which enumerates the chronology of life:

At the age of five, one is ready for Scripture; at ten, for *Mishnah*; at thirteen, for *mitzvot*; at fifteen, for *Gemara*; at eighteen, for the wedding canopy; at twenty, for earning a livelihood. At age thirty, one attains full strength; at forty, understanding; at fifty, counsel; at

⁹ Ecclesiastes 1:2-3.

¹⁰ Ecclesiastes 1:9.

¹¹ Ecclesiastes 1:18.

¹² Ecclesiastes 3:20.

sixty, seniority; at seventy, a ripe old age; at eighty, special strength. At ninety, the body is stooped; at one hundred, it is as if one has died and passed away and disappeared from the world.¹³

Did we hear that right? “As if one has died and passed away and disappeared from the world”? It’s talking about senility, isn’t it?

The Torah is very careful never to speak ill about anyone (even an animal).¹⁴ Why would the *Mishnah* find it necessary to tell us about man’s descent of man into senility?! Do we really need to be reminded of our fragility? And how is that consistent with the life stages previously specified, which speak all about man’s ascent and virtues?

Clearly, this statement about the centenarian is a positive one. And this can be deduced from the precise and unusual Hebrew words used to describe this age: *ke’ilu mes v’over u’botal min ha’olam* (“as if one has died and passed away and disappeared from the world”):

The Hebrew word *olam*, meaning “world” is derived from *helem*, meaning “concealment.” Because this physical word conceals the divine energy within.

As such, it has stranglehold on us – it seduces us into thinking that matter is all that matters ... that the material world of the here-and-now is reality.

But nothing could be farther from the truth.

By the age of one-hundred a person comes to realize that the concealment (*helem*) that hides the divine truth of existence has disappeared (*botal*). He has gone through life and seen the hollowness of the ego and the superficiality of all the material things that people worship.

At this age, the world and its material tentacles no longer have a hold on him.

¹³ Pirkei Avot 5:21.

¹⁴ Pesachim 3a.

8. King Solomon's Realization

So, too, King Solomon, in his final book, came to realize the shallowness and emptiness of existence – that all is vanity...

The only thing that matters is – as he states in the final verses of *Kohelet* – “The end of the matter, when all has been heard: Revere God and keep His commandments, for this is the entire man. For every deed God will bring to judgment – for every hidden thing, whether good or bad.”

And because of this concluding statement in *Kohelet* the sages did not ban the book – though they debated if they should. After due consideration, they declared: “[*Kohelet*] begins and ends with Torah.”¹⁵

Were it not for these crucial final words, *Kohelet* might have been banned. Because the Torah was not given to demoralize us with relating the futility and emptiness of our lives.¹⁶

The Torah declares: “Live by them”¹⁷ – meaning its commandments – “they are your life and sustenance.”¹⁸

The entire Torah was given to bring peace within the world, as it says: “Its ways are pleasant ways and all its paths are peace.”¹⁹ The Torah is a life affirming mandate – expressing the divine purpose for which we were created, and empowering us with guidance and resources to achieve our mission.

¹⁵ Shabbat 30b.

¹⁶ Perhaps this is the deeper meaning in the reason why they considered banning *Kohelet*, “because its words seemingly contradicted themselves:” The Torah was given to bring peace to the world, and not to “contradict” and negate existence, “He did not create it for a waste, He formed it to be inhabited” (*Isaiah* 45:18). Moreover, any negation of existence (as one ostensibly would read into *Kohelet*) “contradicts” the essential ethos of Torah, which was given to repair the universe, not annihilate it.

¹⁷ Leviticus 18:5; Yuma 85b.

¹⁸ *Maariv* evening service.

¹⁹ Proverbs 3:17; Rambam end of *Laws of Chanukah*.

9. Vanity Fair (Optional)

The conclusion of *Kohelet* allows us to appreciate the message of the entire book – that all of man's material efforts are vain and empty ... that all that truly matters and lasts forever is serving God, “for this is the entire man.”

After reading the final verse we understand that *Kohelet* is not about resignation. To the contrary – after witnessing the vanity and futility of material life, King Solomon came to realize and appreciate what is true and meaningful.

This point is driven home by comparing *Kohelet* to another book about vanity written a couple of thousand years later: the social satire *Vanity Fair* by William Makepeace Thackeray, published in 1847.

In stark contrast to the end of *Kohelet*, the conclusion of this dark portrayal of human nature – aptly captured in its subtitle “A Novel without a Hero” – reads like this:

“Ah! Vanitas Vanitatum! Which of us is happy in this world? Which of us has his desire? Or, having it, is satisfied? Come, children, let us shut up the box and the puppets, for our play is played out.”

Compare that to the closing verse in *Kohelet*: “Revere God and keep His commandments, for this is the entire man. For every deed God will bring to judgment – for every hidden thing, whether good or bad.”

Compare the two endings and you see the beauty and power of *Kohelet*. Both books talk about the vanity of man and all his endeavors. But where *Vanity Fair* concludes with a dark ending leaving us resigned and hopeless, *Kohelet* (*l'havdil*) leaves us filled with strength and hope, armed with the ultimate awareness of what is true and real.

This distinction captures one of the most fundamental and landmark contributions of Judaism:

How do we balance a duplicitous world with our search for truth? Do we become dejected and resigned due to the futility of it all? Or do we bury our head in the sand and make believe all is well? Do we become cynics, dismissing the emptiness of material life, or do we wage battle?

Can we be realistic and see the vanity of the world for what it is, and at the same time not become part of the problem and compromise our integrity?

Left to our own accord, we either become cynical or resigned (as Thackeray and so many others would have us believe), or we remain naïve and blind to the shallowness of existence.

Judaism introduces a revolutionary approach of embracing both perspectives, as so powerfully encapsulated in *Kohelet* – in both its central theme and its conclusion:

By recognizing the superficiality and emptiness of materialism we come to appreciate and celebrate the reality and truth of our divine purpose in life.

10. Kohelet and Sukkot

We now can understand *Kohelet's* relationship with Sukkot.

The theme of *Kohelet* is identical to the theme of Sukkot: the temporal nature of the material world.

We are commanded “You shall live in booths for a seven-day period... in order that your [ensuing] generations should know that I had the children of Israel live in booths when I took them out of the land of Egypt.”²⁰

The “booths” refer to the protective shelter of the “clouds of glory”²¹ which surrounded the Jewish people as they left Egypt and traversed the Sinai wilderness for forty years, miraculously shielding them from the dangers and discomforts of the desert.

Ever since, we remember God’s kindness, and reaffirm our trust in His providence, by “dwelling” in a sukkah – a hut of temporary construction with a roof covering of branches – to remind ourselves that that our physical homes do not define our security; our true sustenance and protection comes not from our human fortresses (no matter how mighty) but from God.

We therefore read (or think about) *Kohelet* on Sukkot, to help us appreciate the Sukkot lesson and get into a Sukkot frame of mind, for *Kohelet* is a book that tells us the essential story of Sukkot:

²⁰ Leviticus 23:42-43.

²¹ Or, a second opinion: actual booths (Sukkah 11b).

Living in a temporary shack reminds us of the futility of materialism and all its luxuries ... of the temporal nature of the material world, and focuses us on the primary purpose of our lives – “to revere God and keep His commandments, for this is the entire man.”²²

To discern what is true and eternal in our lives, we need to first recognize the vanity and emptiness of impermanent material institutions and pursuits. Sukkot behooves us to leave our powerful strongholds and palaces – which can create the illusion of self-reliance and invulnerability – and spend time doing what we regularly do at home in a makeshift shack, that is exposed to the elements. Thus we demonstrate the vulnerability and impermanence of the material, and our reliance and trust on the omnipotent divine.

And this is a cause for great celebration and joy, not resignation and despair.

[This also illuminates the glaring distinction between Jewish pride and Arab rage, which has recently popped it ugly ahead again, with the killings in Libya and elsewhere: Salomon Rushdie, who has been persecuted by the Muslim world for what they consider to be his blasphemy, says that Islamic culture has been particularly susceptible to the rise of identity politics. “You define yourself by what offends you. You define yourself by what outrages you.”

In stark contrast, Jews define themselves – not by opposing the vanity of the world, but by their divine mission. Thus, we dance while they rage. We love while they hate. We celebrate while they kill.

We shall discuss this in more detail on Simchat Torah].²³

²² This *Kohelet/Sukkot* connection is also reflected in the fact that *Kohelet* was King Solomon’s last book, written in his twilight years:

The seasons reflect the seasons of a person’s life. Spring (Passover season) corresponds with the early youthful years – the birthing and sprouting of the fields – a time filled with song and hope, love and romance (*Song of Songs*). “In his youth he sings songs.” Summer is the maturity of the harvest, reflecting middle age when man offers proverbs. We celebrate Sukkot in autumn, which is the end of the agrarian season, when the trees begin shedding their leaves, preparing for sleep in the cold winter. These are the aging years, when we reach a stage of wisdom that exposes and allows us to see the true spineless nature of vanity and the fragility of materialism – that it is all is nothing (*Kohelet*).

What *Kohelet* is in man’s years, reflecting the wisdom of age, Sukkot is in time – in the season of autumn.

²³ The Simchat Torah sermon will address the secret to Jewish pride as opposed to Arab rage.

11. Invaluable Lesson

Thus Sukkot and *Kohelet* teach us an invaluable lesson in life:

The material world is not where's it's at. Or more accurately – material existence is not airtight; it carries within profound truths that must be uncovered by us humans. Our role is to reveal the beauty that lies concealed within our deceptive universe.

With all the falsities in life, there are also majestic truths. With all the hypocrisy there can be found astonishing nobility and virtue.

So how to navigate this duplicitous universe?

The 18th century founder of the Chassidic Movement, the Baal Shem Tov, said that there is darkness that is so deep that it conceals the fact that it is dark.

War is Peace.

Deception is Truth.

Evil is Good.

It's almost thirty years since 1984, but Orwell's world is alive and kicking.

Half the cure of the disease is knowing that you have it. To free yourself from the shackles of this lying universe, you have to first recognize the falsity around you and not get caught up in it.

As humans created in the Divine Image we have been charged with the power – and the responsibility – to transcend the cloaked universe and reveal its inner spirit.

12. The Real and the False

Sukkot helps us separate the real from the false ... and in so doing, imbue the entire year with a higher sense of priority.

Perhaps, while sitting in a sukkah, a useful daily exercise would be to read *Kohelet* and, once duly inspired, to identify the deception in our lives ... to make a daily list of both our true and false experiences.

Every day life is replete with falsities. When we identify them, we are well on our way to freeing ourselves and discovering truth.

That's the true way to celebrate Sukkot.

And that's the ultimate beauty of the Sukkot challenge:

Not to escape a lying world, but to reveal its deeper truth. Amen.