

Sukkot & the Delight of Qohelet

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Some of you have known me for a long time. Those who have, do not know me for getting up here and speaking my own words. I have long been glad to leave the teaching to the teachers, and the great thoughts to the great thinkers.

Today I do little more than what I've always done, for what I have to say is not the fruit of some great scholarly toil, but is, as I hope, a common-sense look at the reading of Qohelet on Sukkot.

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Sukkot is a special time of year for me. It was the first time I came to this strange place with a strange name: Beit Hallel. I didn't know it at the time, but this strange festival was going to change my life—and what a wonderful strangeness it was! Strange new ideas, strange customs, certainly more than a few strange people, and delicious food estranged from the potluck table; all these new and exciting things appeared before me in a kaleidoscope of oddity, yet one curious thing outstranged the rest: the reading of Ecclesiastes, or Qohelet.

Imagine a newcomer to Messianic Torah observance arrives at your congregation and the first thing he hears in the sukkah is:

So I hated life, for the work which had been done under the sun was grievous to me...

—Ecclesiastes 2:17a

I have seen all the deeds that are done under the sun, and indeed, all is vapor and striving after the wind.

—Ecclesiastes 1:14 (BLB)

Vanity of vanities—all is vanity!

—Ecclesiastes 1:2

Can you just picture me there in the sukkah, with a forkful of food, staring agape at the reader after hearing **that**? I might have asked, “Didn’t you say we’re supposed to be rejoicing?”

I have since learned just how perfect Qohelet is for Sukkot. I’ve learned it does not remove our joy, but deepens it; it puts our joy in its proper place.

Some may claim physical goods have no place in the physical life of a truly spiritual believer. Others may try to convince you that enjoyment in this life is unjust, unless it can be equally shared among all in the group. Others yet will tell you earthly goods are all we have and nothing more. Neither Sukkot nor Qohelet put such boundaries on our joy, indeed the festival’s commandment is to rejoice! And Qohelet, as I hope to show, rather than obstructing this commandment and being a burden to it, lays its very foundation. I will talk about the reading of Qohelet, how by its own merit it deserves its own public occasion; and also how, despite appearances, the reading of Qohelet is perfectly suited for Sukkot.

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THE TRADITION

To give a bit of background, Qohelet is part of the Ketuvim—that’s the K in Tanakh, what many call the Old Testament. The name “Tanakh” is formed by an acronym of **T**orah, **N**evi’im, and **K**etuvim; **TNK**. The Ketuvim also includes Ruth, Song of Songs, Lamentations, and Esther, all these with Qohelet being known as the Five Megillot or Five Scrolls. The practice of reading Qohelet on Sukkot is traditional, not a commandment. The Schechter Institute, a rabbinic website, propounds how the tradition came about. They offer:

The simple reason seems to have been a desire to read all five scrolls of the Bible in public.

This theory is supported by a passage in the medieval Tractate of Soferim. The manuscripts of Soferim discuss the public reading of four scrolls without Kohelet, but five medieval halakhic works who quote Soferim add Kohelet as the fifth scroll.

In other words, Kohelet was added to the list in Soferim when Jews began to read Kohelet in public on Sukkot.

—The Schechter Institute, *Why and When Do We Read The Book of Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) In Public?*, November 10, 2006.

And the source, the Tractate itself reads:

In the case of Ruth, the Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes (inserted by GRA and H.), Lamentations, and Esther, it is necessary to say the benediction, ‘Concerning the reading of the Megillah (Scrolls),’ although it is included in the Hagiographa (Writings).*

—Tractate Soferim 14:3

Essentially, the inclusion of “Ecclesiastes” in later manuscripts of this rabbinic document is evidence of Qohelet’s eventual inclusion in the festival readings.

Qohelet is traditionally attributed to King Solomon, though I hear there is some question on that point. The word “Qohelet” means “one who speaks to a gathering,” a preacher, if you will—and that is how the author refers to himself. Qohelet would have been written in the harvest of the Preacher’s life, when many valuable lessons had ripened. He records a lifetime’s worth of wisdom.

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QOHELET'S PUBLIC READING

Now, while I don't need to tell you that a public reading of any Scripture is always in itself worthwhile, if nothing else than for the edification of character and hearing good speech, there are yet more reasons within, which support giving Qohelet a public reading.

But first allow me a brief aside to examine the qualities of good traditions. Applying my thoughts to the virtues of good traditions, it seemed good to me that a tradition may be worthy if:

- *It does not contradict Scripture.*
- *It does not give the appearance of waywardness or evil.*
- *It truthfully instructs man.*
- *It faithfully honors God.*
- *It is generally appropriate for the time, place, and occasion in which it occurs.*
- *And if exemplified by a figure of due authority, all the more reason to take the tradition seriously.*

I won't say this is the final word on qualifying good traditions, but on these terms, reading Qohelet during Sukkot is a prime example of a worthy tradition. As the inimitable Mr. Hegg tells us in *Qohelet & the Time of Our Rejoicing*, "The wisdom of the Sages is displayed yet again."

Qohelet truthfully instructs man to take due consideration of his life. Without accounting for the realities of this life and the age to come, the normal use of reason degenerates into a life of disorder. For example, it's absurd to chase life's goods to such an extreme that you never have time to enjoy them.

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 vanity and it is a grievous task.

—Ecclesiastes 4:8

You only have a limited time here on this earth. You can only leave your wealth to those who come after you. You can't take it with you. That's why it's important to rejoice of what you have while you have it, and while you have life enough to enjoy it.

I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice and to do good in one's lifetime.

—Ecclesiastes 3:12

Furthermore, as for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, He has also empowered him to eat from them and to receive his reward and rejoice in his labor; this is a gift of God.

—Ecclesiastes 5:19

Indeed, if a man should live many years, let him rejoice in them all...

—Ecclesiastes 11:8a

The end of Qohelet paints a picture of dust returning to the earth, and the spirit returning to God.

Remember Him before the silver cord is broken and the golden bowl is crushed, the pitcher by the well is shattered and the wheel at the cistern is crushed; then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it.

—Ecclesiastes 12:6-7

This age will pass away, and everything in it (Luke 21:33, 2 Peter 3:10), but there's coming a new age where things will not pass away.

For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality.

—1 Corinthians 15:53

Thus it remains for us to enjoy the good things God has given us in our short lives, but to also fear God and obey Him.

For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil.

—Ecclesiastes 12:4

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.

—Ecclesiastes 11:9

The message of Qohelet is clear: The application of reason in view of eternity puts earthly goods in proper context, giving rise to godly living and well-ordered joy. This isn't just a worthy lesson, this is *the* worthy lesson.

*Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep
His commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.*

—Ecclesiastes 12:3 (WEB)

This for every human being is happiness, as the founding fathers meant it, and perfection, as Yeshua meant it (Matt. 5:48). In short, maturity, as God intends it.

If unworthy is such a lesson, then no lesson is worthy. How precious is this great gem of wisdom! How awesome is its gleam, sparkling afresh on each new viewing, forever unmurksome and unsmudged! An occasion to honor such wisdom is beyond price.

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Q O H E L E T A T S U K K O T

While Qohelet is itself a worthwhile read, together with Sukkot, it gains new resonance. Alone they sing, but together—a symphony! These two themes play in perfect harmony.

Consider first the practices of Sukkot. Each of us is to rejoice of the feast. That's the law. It's illegal not to enjoy yourself. We gather together and fellowship in temporary dwellings, like the multitude in the wilderness out from Egypt. That sounds like what we read in Qohelet, where it emphasizes our life, living in these temporary bodies, these *tabernacles* as Peter and Paul put it (2 Peter 1:14, 2 Cor. 5:1), living and awaiting our more permanent residence, the promised age when mortality will put on immortality, when the deeds of *this* life, pay out in heavenly treasures in the next.

In Sukkot and Qohelet, we're to rejoice in humble, mortal pleasures, pleasures which are real, here and now, but which in the scope of eternity, only reflect God's own character and goodness. To illustrate, Isaiah tells us that in the coming age:

*No longer will you have the sun for light by day,
Nor for brightness will the moon give you light;
But you will have the LORD for an everlasting light,
And your God for your glory.
Your sun will no longer set,
Nor will your moon wane;
For you will have the LORD for an everlasting light,
And the days of your mourning will be over.*

—Isaiah 60:19-20

If you are a human being, with veins of blood instead of wires, with a heart instead of merely a blood pump, then it's likely you've been struck by the beauty of the sunset. How sad it must be to hear the sun will no longer set, that you will never again see those rich, soul-soothing hues; the brilliant yellows, the sweet blues, the royal violets, the fiery reds gleaming on the distant snow peaks, glimmering on the sway of evergreens—but think a moment: If beauty were a cool trickling stream in the heat of day, how much *more* satisfying it must be to drink from the mountain spring from which it flows. If the sunset, a mere *reflection* of God's beauty is enough to inspire us to the great heights of music and poetry we've hitherto soared, just think of it. The heart strains to grasp the enormity of God's being.

It is said the next life must be boring. Really? Who do you think created fun? This is the lesson of Sukkot and Qohelet. Everything which *is*, comes from God, including our earthly joys, whether we acknowledge Him as we should, or not; whether we give due consideration to our lives, or not.

Thus on Sukkot, we fellowship with friends and family, fellow images of God, but in eternity, we will fellowship all of us together with the true substance of Being, God Himself. These joys being good, let's therefore not reject them, as if they were somehow unfit for a believer in the Messiah, but let's keep them in reasonable proportion.

It's a curious thing to be so limited and temporal such as we are, yet also able to apprehend eternity. This also is a gift from God. Qohelet says, "He has put eternity into man's heart." (Ecc. 3:11 ESV) Thus it is given to mankind to dwell on eternity, that it might guide their steps.

Nihilism will tell you the only thing that matters is earthly pleasure. Socialism will tell you earthly pleasures cannot morally be enjoyed unless enjoyed equally by all. Asceticism will tell you physical joys are sinful. Reckoning with eternity lets us recover from these irrationalities; it lets us bring our hearts and lives into order. This is the theme of both Sukkot and Qohelet: To be divinely well-ordered, we must take an eternity-wide view of life.

And finally, Yeshua sukkah'd with us, literally in booths (John 7) and figuratively, in a temporary body, always with an eye toward the joy of eternity.

...Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross...

—Hebrews 12:2

*Therefore I will allot Him a portion with the great, and He will divide the spoil with the strong;
Because He poured out Himself unto death,
And was numbered with the transgressors;
Even though He bore the sin of many,
And interceded for the transgressors.*

—Isaiah 53:12

*And to Him was given dominion, Glory and a kingdom,
That all the peoples, nations and men of every language
Might serve Him.*

*His dominion is an everlasting dominion
Which will not pass away;
And His kingdom is one
Which will not be destroyed.*

—Daniel 7:14

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CONCLUSION

I am not at this time much familiar with the Sages or their works. My experience with them is confined to my study here today. However, I join Mr. Hegg in appreciating their wisdom regarding this institution. What I came to learn since those days of strangeness, dwelling with new friends in the sukkah, was a depth of gratitude I can scarcely plumb without being reduced to silence and a miserable pile of unworthiness. I could never hope to earn all these blessings, nor repay them to Whom they are due. All that I have now is to do good, love mercy, and walk humbly with my God. Sukkot forever shifted the course of my life. I shall rejoice.