

# Vanities vs. Progression: The Lessons and Joy of *Koheles* and *Sukkos*

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*Vanity of vanities, said Koheles, vanity of vanities, all is vain.*<sup>15</sup>

**Koheles 1:2**

הַבַּל הַבָּלִים אָמַר קֹהֵלֶת הַבַּל הַבָּלִים הַכֹּל הַבָּל.  
קֹהֵלֶת א:ב

A seemingly depressing commencement to a seemingly depressing book – and yet, Koheles is read on Sukkos, the most joyous of the holidays, called *שמחתנו* זמן, the time of our joy.<sup>16</sup> Not only does the opening of Koheles discuss *hevel*, vanity, nothingness, but it is the constant theme of Shlomo HaMelech's<sup>17</sup> book.

*I saw all the deeds that were done under the sun, and behold, everything is vanity and frustration.*

**Koheles 1:14**

רָאִיתִי אֶת כָּל הַמַּעֲשִׂים שֶׁנַּעֲשׂוּ תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ וְהִנֵּה הַכֹּל הַבָּל וְרֵעוּת רֵוַח.  
קֹהֵלֶת א:יד

*Then I turned [to look] at all my deeds that my hands had wrought and upon the toil that I had toiled to do, and behold everything is vanity and frustration, and there is no profit under the sun.*

**Koheles 2:11**

וּפְנִיתִי אֲנִי בְּכָל מַעֲשֵׂי שְׁעֵשׂוּ יָדַי וּבְעֵמֶל שְׁעֵמְלָתִי לַעֲשׂוֹת וְהִנֵּה הַכֹּל הַבָּל וְרֵעוּת רֵוַח וְאִין יִתְרוֹן תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ.  
קֹהֵלֶת ב:יא

*For there is a happening for the children of men, and there is a happening for the beasts – and they have one happening – like the death of this one is the death of that one, and all have one spirit, and the superiority of man over beast is naught, for all is vanity.*

**Koheles 3:19**

כִּי מִקְרָה בְּנֵי הָאָדָם וּמִקְרָה הַבְּהֵמָה וּמִקְרָה אֶחָד לָהֶם כָּמוֹת זֶה כִּן מוֹת זֶה וְרוּחַ אֶחָד לְכֹל וּמוֹתֵר הָאָדָם מִן הַבְּהֵמָה אִין כִּי הַכֹּל הַבָּל.  
קֹהֵלֶת ג:יט

<sup>15</sup> Translations of pesukim in Koheles are taken from the Judaic Press Koheles (by Rabbi A. J. Rosenberg).

<sup>16</sup> שמונה עשרה of Sukkos.

<sup>17</sup> גמ' מגילה ז. "דברי קהלת בן דוד" – "דברי קהלת א:א" – Koheles was the son of David; See also ז.

The world *hevel* appears 36 times throughout the book of Koheles.<sup>18</sup> What was Shlomo HaMelech referring to with his usage of this word? What message was Shlomo trying to impart through writing Koheles at the culmination of his life?<sup>19</sup> Why is this message about *hevel*, and this book of Koheles, particularly appropriate for Sukkos?

## Definition of *Hevel*

Upon a closer analysis of Shlomo Hamelech's description of *hevel* in the first chapter, a particular theme emerges.

*A generation goes and a generation comes, but the earth endures forever. The sun rises and the sun sets, and to its place it yearns and rises there. It goes to the south and goes around to the north; the wind goes around and around, and the wind returns to its circuits... To the place where the rivers flow, there they repeatedly go... 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.*

**Koheles 1:4-9**

דור הלך ודור בא והארץ לעולם עמדת.  
ונרח השמש ובא השמש ואל מקומו  
שואף זורח הוא שם. הולך אל דרום  
וסובב אל צפון סובב סובב הולך הרוח  
ועל סביבתיו שב הרוח... אל מקום  
שהנהלים הלכים שם הם שבים ללכת...  
מה שהיה הוא שיהיה ומה שנעשה הוא  
שיעשה ואין כל חדש תחת השמש.  
קהלת א:ד-ט

The picture that emerges from the *hevel*, vanity, described here is one of a circle. What Shlomo describes as *hevel* is a situation in which the same event occurs over and over again, whether that refers to a cycle of nature or to generations coming and going. A circle has no beginning and no end. One is never finished going around a circle, for one can go around and around forever. *Hevel*, according to Shlomo, refers to the concept of repetition without progress, of working but not moving forward.<sup>20</sup>

This understanding of *hevel*, of circling around without progressing, explains a difficult passage in the Talmud.

*Rabbi Elazar taught... Which generation is entirely vanities? This is the generation of the judges.*

**Bava Basra 15b**

רבי אלעזר אומר...איזה דור שכולו הבל הוי  
אומר זה דורו של שפוט השופטים.  
בבא בתרא טו:

Why is the generation of the judges considered to be *hevel*?

The stories of *Sefer Shoftim* follow a particular pattern, albeit each with slight variance. B'nei Yisroel live in their land, and then they sin. Their sin is sometimes punctuated with the line "בַּיָּמִים הֵהֵם אֵין מֶלֶךְ בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל אִישׁ הַיֶּשֶׁר בְּעֵינָיו יַעֲשֶׂה" "In those days, there was no king in Israel, [and so] each person did what was right in his own eyes."<sup>21</sup> This statement is an implicit

<sup>18</sup> Rabbi Yehoshua Rozenberg, retrieved from <http://www.daat.ac.il/daat/tanach/megilot/kohelet4.htm>.

<sup>19</sup> "שיר השירים רבה א:י". But see רשי ד"ה והלא כבר נאמר וידבר כו'. which implies that Koheles was written earlier in Shlomo's life.

<sup>20</sup> Heard in the name of Rabbi Eliyahu Yedid, author of "שבע נביאות".

<sup>21</sup> See שופטים י:יז, as well as several other times throughout the *sefer*.

criticism of B'nei Yisroel for not anointing a king,<sup>22</sup> which was one of the three commandments (along with destroying *Amalek* and building the *Beis Hamikdash*) they should have fulfilled once they entered *Eretz Yisroel*.<sup>23</sup> Once the Jewish people sinned, they were attacked by an enemy, at which point Hashem sent a judge to save them. Thereafter, the story repeats itself.

Given that there was a repeating pattern of sin, without B'nei Yisroel learning from their mistakes, without B'nei Yisroel deciding to anoint a king who would have protected them from sin, the generation of the *shoftim* can be described as a circle that progresses nowhere. On a symbolic level, this pattern explains why the generation of the judges is considered to be *hevel*, worthless. B'nei Yisroel in that time period did not advance, they did not fulfill any of their three commandments, and they kept slipping into the same pattern of sin. Living without development is indeed *hevel*, nothingness.<sup>24</sup>

In fact, this symbolism explains why the representation for zero, nothing, is indeed a circle. A parable is given regarding a child who learns the numbers one through nine. When his teacher shows him a zero, the child asks, what is the purpose of the zero if it has no value? The teacher explains that even though zero has no value alone, when it is attached to another number, it increases that number by tens, hundreds, and thousands. So too, even if the material possessions that a person has in this world are *hevel*, worthless by themselves, when a person uses those material possessions for spiritual pursuits they become elevated to the status of *מצוה*, tools utilized to perform an act of holiness. Hence, *הבלי הבליים*, vanities of vanities, is only true when *הכל הבלי*, all is vain, and it is just a circular zero by itself. But if it were joined to a mitzvah, it would no longer have the status of *hevel*.<sup>25</sup>

## Koheles Teaches about Progression

The true Torah lesson that can be learned from Koheles is that we should not live in a circular, repetitive lifestyle, but rather we should proceed through life in a linear progression. Chazal understood this message from many of the pesukim in Koheles, of which we will examine just two.

The pasuk quoted above (Koheles 1:4) "דֹר הֵלֵךְ וְדֹר בָּא" "a generation goes and a generation comes," is not simply bemoaning that people die and are born. Rather, Chazal understand:

*R. Abba bar Kahana said in the name of R. Ada bar Chunya, the generation that comes should be in your eyes like the generation that passed, that you shouldn't say, if Rabbi Akiva were alive now, I would learn from him... rather the generation and the wise men who are in your times are like the generation and the wise men who were before you.*

**Koheles Rabbah 1:4**

ר' אבא בר כהנא ואמרי לה בשם ר' אדא בר חוניא יהיה בעיניך דור שבא כדור שהלך שלא תאמר אילו היה ר' עקיבא קיים הייתי קורא לפניו... אלא דור שבא בימך וחכם שבימך כדור שהלך וחכמים הראשונים שהיו לפניך.  
**קהלת רבה א:ד**

<sup>22</sup> See מצודת דוד, רדק שם.

<sup>23</sup> סנהדרין כ:.

<sup>24</sup> Heard in the name of Rabbi Eliyahu Yedid, author of "שבע נביאות".

<sup>25</sup> תורה לדעת, חלק ג', מועדים, דף סב.

This lesson is learned from the pasuk in the Torah, "וּבְבֹאֲתָ... וְאֶל הַשֹּׁפֵט אֲשֶׁר יִהְיֶה בְּיָמֶיךָ הַהֵם" "and you should go ... to the judge that you have in those days."<sup>26</sup> Rashi explains: "אפילו אינו כשאר" "Even if he is not like the judges who were before him, you have to listen to him, for you have no one other than the judge who is in your days."<sup>27</sup>

At first glance, Rashi's comment may look like a *בדיעבד*, an *ex post facto* position. Since we have no one as great as the previous judges, we have no choice but to go to the judges that we have now. However, R. Chaim Shmulevitz explains that this is not the case. Rather, the judges and leaders of our generation are *לכתחילה*, *a priori*, special and perfect for our generation. Previous leaders would not be helpful in our generation, as every generation has its tailor-made rabbis for its own unique situations.<sup>28</sup>

In fact, the *Midrash*<sup>29</sup> brings a proof for this point by quoting a pasuk from Divrei HaYamim I 12:28 that states that Yehoyada (a כהן, priest, from a later generation) was a ruler of Aharon HaCohen. The *Midrash* explains that even if Aharon would have lived in Yehoyada's generation, Yehoyada would still have been his ruler, because in Yehoyada's generation, the people needed Yehoyada's rulership specifically.<sup>30</sup>

We see from this that the message of this pasuk is about progression. We cannot simply lament the generations that passed and say that we lack strong leaders like we once had. Rather, Koheles is teaching about the succession of leadership. Each generation has its own tailor-made leaders, and it is incumbent upon the generation to follow those leaders.

The same message can be seen from the penultimate verse of Koheles:

*The end of the matter, everything having been heard, [is to] fear G-d and keep His commandments, for this is the entire man.*

**Koheles 12:13**

סוף דְבַר הַכֹּל נִשְׁמַע אֶת הָאֱלֹקִים יִרָא  
וְאֶת מִצְוֹתָיו שְׁמֹר כִּי זֶה כָּל הָאָדָם.  
קֹהֵלֶת יב:יג

This pasuk encapsulates the message of Koheles, and therefore is repeated after the last verse, in order to end on this note. Everything in Koheles, all the *hevel* and cycles described, become worthwhile if, and only if, there is *יראת ה'*, fear of G-d. Fear of G-d can be seen as the "one" that must precede the "zero" of the *hevel*, and in doing so makes everything worthwhile.

<sup>26</sup> דברים יז:ט.

<sup>27</sup> רשי שם.

<sup>28</sup> See also: שיחות מוסר דף קסט. See also: ראש השנה כה: "Yiftach in his generation is like Shmuel in his generation."

<sup>29</sup> קהלת רבה א:ד.

<sup>30</sup> See also the story of חוני המעגל brought in גמ' תענית כג. When Choni awoke after 70 years, he went to the *beis medrash* and saw that the rabbis were teaching his explanations of the Torah. When he tried to tell them that he was Choni, they didn't believe him. The Maharsha asks, why did Choni not prove to the Rabbis who he was by teaching them his explanations? R. Chaim Shmulevitz answers that it was because they could only learn it from their own modern-day teachers, and previous *rabbanim* were not appropriate for them.

Perhaps this also explains why Moshe Rabbeinu could not understand the *divrei Torah* of R. Akiva (מנחות כט:). Since R. Akiva was explaining the Torah in the way most appropriate for his own generation, even Moshe, from a previous generation, could not understand it.

Rav Shlomo Wolbe<sup>31</sup> explains that fearing G-d means to listen to His words.<sup>32</sup> When the verse says "כי זה כל האדם", "for this is the entire man," this could have one of three explanations: either (1) the whole world was created for the one who listens to G-d, (2) the G-d fearing man is equal to the whole world, or (3) the whole world was worth being created in order to command listening to G-d.<sup>33</sup>

The significance of placing this verse at the end of Koheles is to highlight that this is the message of the whole book. Being G-d fearing, i.e. listening to G-d and observing His commandments, demonstrates the ultimate progression and accomplishment. After Shlomo HaMelech has explored all different aspects of the world throughout the sefer, he concludes that true growth is only attained through fearing G-d, and that this is the purpose of the whole world's creation!

## Sukkos is the Holiday of Progression

Sukkos is a clear demonstration of linear progression. Sukkos is known as *הג האסיף*,<sup>34</sup> the holiday of the gathering. Sukkos is the culmination of the harvest that began in the spring. Pesach is the *הג האביב*,<sup>35</sup> the spring holiday when fields are planted, and Shavous is the *הג הקציר*,<sup>36</sup> the holiday when the first stalks are cut. The agricultural year culminates at the time of Sukkos, which is when the produce of the field is gathered into the house in preparation for the coming winter. Sukkos shows that our agricultural work has a purpose, has a progression, in which something is formed from raw materials.

Sukkos can also be thought of as the culmination of two different groups of Jewish festivals. Sukkos is the culmination of the *Shalosh Regalim* holidays which began on Pesach. The Jews were redeemed from Egypt on Pesach, which occurred in the spring, the season of nature's renewal. The Exodus was the "birth" of the Jewish nation, as they were free to act on their own. Shavous is the holiday when the Jews accepted the Torah, when they received the meaning in their life, their mission. Yet, the culmination of an accomplishment is not when one receives a mission, but rather when one completes it. Sukkos represents the fulfillment of the mission. Sukkos commemorates when the Jews were protected in the desert with sukkahs, *"כי בטכות"* "for in sukkah-booths did I settle B'nei Yisroel when I took them out of the land of Egypt."<sup>37</sup> The sukkahs, either literal booths or the Clouds of Glory,<sup>38</sup> represent the deep connection between B'nei Yisroel and Hashem. The sukkah represents that the Jews are willing to leave their permanent dwelling to live in a temporary dwelling and rely on Hashem's protection. Thus, Sukkos is the holiday celebrating the

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<sup>31</sup> עלי שור חלק א' דף רפח.

<sup>32</sup> See שמות ט:כ, that the servants of Paroah who feared Hashem, listened to Him and brought their animals inside.

<sup>33</sup> גמ' ברכות ו'.

<sup>34</sup> שמות כג:טז, among other places.

<sup>35</sup> דברים טז:א.

<sup>36</sup> שמות כג:טז.

<sup>37</sup> ויקרא כג:מג.

<sup>38</sup> See גמ' סוכה יא'.

progression of the Jewish people from their birth, to the acceptance of their mission, and finally to the completion of the task for which Hashem created them.<sup>39</sup>

Sukkos is also the conclusion of the *Yamim Noraim*, the High Holidays. In fact, Sukkos, the holiday of joy, is not just the chronological end of the time period including Rosh Hashanah, the *Aseres Y'mei Teshuvah* (the Ten Days of Repentance), and Yom Kippur, but rather its climax. One cannot enter the exclusive protection of the sukkah when one is still full of sin. Therefore, prior to Sukkos, Hashem granted B'nei Yisroel the gift of the High Holidays, which give the Jews the opportunity to repent and be forgiven. Only after the Jews have progressed through the process of repentance and forgiveness can we celebrate the joy of Hashem's protection in the sukkah.<sup>40</sup>

The highest point of happiness on Sukkos took place in the *Simchas Beis Hashoeva*.

*One who did not see the happiness of the Simchas Beis Hashoeva (literally 'the happiness of the house of the drawing') never saw happiness in his life.*

**Sukkah 51a**

מי שלא ראה שמחת בית  
השואבה לא ראה שמחה  
בימיו.  
גמ' סוכה נא.

What was the *Simchas Beis Hashoeva*? In the procedure of *ניסוך המים*, the pouring of the water, water (instead of the customary wine) was placed on the altar in addition to the daily sacrifice all seven days of Sukkos. Prior to the pouring, there was great happiness and celebration the entire night, which was called the *Simchas Beis Hashoeva*.<sup>41</sup>

One explanation why the pouring of the water generated such a happy celebration could be that it was an expression of the unity of B'nei Yisroel. B'nei Yisroel progressed through the agricultural and spiritual cycle of the year, which came to a head on Yom Kippur, at which point each Jew stood equally before Hashem and begged for forgiveness. The barrier to unity, the ego, was negated when mankind was on trial, and all were equal. This unity carried through to Sukkos, when all, rich and poor, were required to dwell in a hut.<sup>42</sup> This message is an additional reason why Sukkos is referred to as *הג האסוף*, the holiday of gathering, for all the Jews gathered together equally.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, plain water, not fancy wine, was poured on the altar, to symbolize that Hashem accepted all Jews, regardless of stature, as long as they 'put themselves on the altar' and approached Him sincerely.<sup>44</sup> Accordingly, the happiness of the *Simchas Beis Hashoeva* is related to the progression of B'nei Yisroel from individuals into a united nation.

Alternatively, the *Sfas Emes* explains that the happiness of Sukkos comes from the completion of Hashem's dominion over everything. Therefore, B'nei Yisroel offered seventy cows on the altar during the days of Sukkos for the seventy nations of the world, praying that Hashem's rule

<sup>39</sup> R. Nosson Scherman, the Artscroll Machzor Sukkos, retrieved from [www.innernet.org.il/article.php?aid=244](http://www.innernet.org.il/article.php?aid=244).

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> גמ' ראש השנה טז. One reason for the pouring of the water is that on Sukkos we are judged for the coming year's waterfall, and so we pour water on the altar to pray that the coming year's rainfall be blessed.

<sup>42</sup> Retrieved from <http://www.torah.org/learning/yomtov/sukkos/vol3no21.html>.

<sup>43</sup> שפת אמת, דרוש לסוכות, שנת תרל"ד.

<sup>44</sup> Retrieved from <http://www.torah.org/learning/yomtov/sukkos/vol3no21.html>.

becomes complete over the entire world. Similarly, the pouring of the water was a prayer that Hashem extend his authority over the entire creation.<sup>45</sup> According to this understanding as well, it can be explained that progression, in this case the evolution of Hashem's rule over the entire world, is key to the happiness of the moment.<sup>46</sup>

## Progression is the True Joy

It is not surprising that the Torah ascribes the most joy to the holiday of Sukkos. There is a general commandment to have שמחה יום טוב, happiness on the holidays, which applies to all the festivals. In addition to this general command, Pesach has no direct mandate for additional gladness, and Shavous has one extra instruction for enjoyment.<sup>47</sup> By Sukkos, however, the Torah includes **three** additional directives for joy!<sup>48</sup> The *Yalkut Shimoni*<sup>49</sup> states that the extra delight of Sukkos comes after we have atoned for our sins on Yom Kippur, as well as the culmination of the agricultural year. Sukkos elicits the highest feeling of accomplishment, progression, satisfaction, and therefore happiness.

Ultimately, the greatest pleasure of all comes from progression, from attaining a goal. Sukkos symbolizes not only the completion of agricultural targets, but also the accomplishment of spiritual aims – both the Jewish nation's completion of its mission to dwell in Hashem's presence, and also the attainment of forgiveness through Yom Kippur. This is truly the reason why Sukkos is זמן שמחתנו, the time of our greatest bliss.<sup>50</sup>

Thus, Koheles, which teaches the lesson of progression, is the most appropriate book to be read on Sukkos. Far from a depressing book, Koheles teaches about the avoidance of *hevel*, of working without advancement, of traveling in a circular path without accomplishing any objective. It teaches about the importance of moving forward, which brings the ultimate joy. How apt for Koheles to be read on Sukkos, the holiday which celebrates our greatest elation that has come through the progression of the seasons, of the holiday cycles, and of our own repentance. May the lessons of Koheles inspire us to progress to new heights in our own lives, allowing us the ultimate joy of the rebuilding of the *Beis HaMikdash*, speedily and in our times.

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<sup>45</sup> שפת אמת, דרוש לסוכות, שנת תרל"ד.

<sup>46</sup> Interestingly, the number of cows offered as קרבנות on each day of Sukkos **decreased**, seemingly negating the idea of progression on Sukkos. See the מהרש"א on כא: שבת גמ' who discusses the discrepancy between the number of קרבנות decreasing and the concept of מורידין ואין מורידין, that it is preferential to progress in holiness and not regress.

<sup>47</sup> דברים טז:יא.

<sup>48</sup> ויקרא כג:מ – "ושמחתם לפני ה' אלוכם שבעת ימים", דברים טז:יד – "ושמחת בחגך", דברים טז:טו – "והיית אך שמח".

<sup>49</sup> ילקוט שמעוני פרשת אמור אות תרנד.

<sup>50</sup> שפת אמת, דרוש לסוכות, שנת תרל"ד.