

Shabbat Chol HaMo'ed Succot, 5780, 2019:

*The Essence of the Jewish People*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof and Pittsburgh, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

One of the high points of Shabbat Chol HaMoed Succot is the reading of *Megillat Kohelet*, written by *Shlomo HaMelech* (King Solomon). In many ways, it is a very difficult and challenging work. Moreover, its three-fold repetition of the famous phrase, “‘Vanity of vanities,’ said Kohelet; ‘all is vanity,’” (1:2, 2:2 and 12:8) casts a decidedly pessimistic shadow over the entire *sefer*. Why, then, did *Chazal* (our Sages of blessed memory) choose this *megillah* to be read during Succot, the most joyous festival of the entire year?

I believe that one answer to our question may be found in the penultimate *pasuk* (verse) of this work: “The end of the matter, after everything has been heard, is to view G-d with *yirah* (awe) and keep His commandments, *ki zeh kol ha'adam* — for this is the essence of man.” (Translation my own). The *Midrash Pesikta Zutarta (Lekach Tov)* on our verse suggests that the phrase, “the end of the matter, after everything has been heard,” refers to the ultimate wisdom one can acquire, namely, “view G-d with *yirah*.” It then proceeds to elaborate upon *yirah*'s significance:

Great is *yirah*, for *Kohelet* (that is, *Shlomo HaMelech*) concluded his two works, *Kohelet* and *Sefer Mishle* (Proverbs) by highlighting this term. Here, [in our *sefer*] it is written: “view G-d with *yirah*,” and in *Sefer Mishle* it is written: “a woman who views Hashem with *yirah* — she is to be praised.” We find this, as well, in reference to Moshe, the epitome of the man of G-d, when he states: “What does the L-rd your G-d ask of you — nothing

other than to hold the L-rd your G-d in *yirah*.” (*Sefer Devarim* 10:12, all translations my own)

We are now able to understand why *Chazal* ordained the reading of *Megillat Kohelet* during Succot. In truth, it serves as a counterbalance to the overwhelming joy represented by this *chag* (festival), the sole time of the year we are commanded, “*v’ha’yitah ach sameach*” — “and you will only be joyous.” (*Sefer Devarim* 16:15) While we must celebrate Succot with consummate happiness, the reading of *Megillat Kohelet* keeps us ever be mindful of Rabbi Eliezer’s celebrated maxim: “*Dah lifnei mi atah omade*” — “Know before Whom you stand.” (*Talmud Bavli, Berachot* 28b) In sum, when our rejoicing on Succot reflects a union of *simchah* and *yirah*, then, and only then, can we authentically serve Hashem in the proper manner.

The *midrash* further notes that when our *pasuk* states, “view G-d with *yirah* and keep His commandments,” it is teaching us that there is an inextricable link between *yirah* and *mitzvot* observance, and that *yirah* is the very basis of loyalty to the Torah. Moreover, the *midrash*’s concluding interpretation of the final words of our *pasuk*, “*ki zeh kol ha’adam*” as referring to *kiyum hamitzvot* (fulfillment of the commandments), reveals another layer of meaning, namely, that our unique essence as Jews is ultimately realized by living lives in consonance with Hashem’s *Torah hakadoshah* (holy Torah). As the text states in *Sefer Shemot*:

And now, if you obey Me and keep My covenant, you shall be to Me a treasure out of all peoples, for Mine is the entire earth. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of princes and a holy nation... (19:5-6, translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

The overarching message of the *midrash* and meaning of our *pasuk* is now clear: *Yirah* leads to fulfillment of the *mitzvot*, which leads to the actualization of our spiritual essence.

With Hashem's help, and our fervent desire, may each of us grow in our *yirah* of the Almighty, expand our Torah observance, and thereby climb ever upward on our paths to become all that we can be. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom and *Moyadim l'Simcha*

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>  
They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org> using the search criteria Etengoff and the *parasha's* name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpd>

\*\*\* I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.