



The Pardes Parsha Discussion by Rabbi Alex Israel

Sukkot: The Key to Happiness

Sukkot is “*zman simchateinu*” – the “time of our joy.” In ancient times, when people were largely farmers, the “ingathering” would have been the time in which people felt maximally secure; their barns filled with grain, oil, nuts and dried fruit to keep them through the winter months.

But we don’t celebrate in our comfortable homes or even in the barn. We leave our secure homes for a *sukkah* to remember that happiness depends on more than material things.

On the Shabbat of Sukkot, we traditionally read Ecclesiastes – Kohelet. It is a sober and depressing read:

²Utter futility!—said Koheleth— Utter futility! All is futile!

³What real value is there for a man in all the gains he makes beneath the sun?

... ⁷All streams flow into the sea, Yet the sea is never full;

... ⁹ That which has happened shall happen,

Only that which has already occurred shall occur;

There is nothing new beneath the sun!

¹⁰Sometimes there is a phenomenon of which they say, “Look, this one is new!”—it occurred long since, in ages that went by before us. (Kohelet ch.1)

Why do we read such a miserable book on our feast of rejoicing? What does Kohelet teach us about happiness? Rabbi Sacks has a wonderful insight on this book:

Poor Kohelet. He was the man who wrote Ecclesiastes. Tradition has long identified him with King Solomon. He was, we recall, the man who had it all and discovered it was not enough. Palaces, gardens, wives, wealth - all promised happiness. None delivered. The more wealth, the more worry. The more knowledge, the more weariness of spirit. In the end all he could say was, 'Meaningless, meaningless, everything is meaningless.'

We recognize Kohelet. He is the billionaire with the private jet, the apartment on Fifth Avenue, the holiday home in Cap Ferrat, the Armani suits and the

expensive wife, who discovers that it all adds up to less than the sum of the parts. The route to happiness turns out to be harder than taking the waiting out of wanting.

Kohelet forgot something that I discovered by chance... Someone had written to the [Lubavicher] Rebbe in a state of deep depression. The letter went something like this. 'I would like the Rebbe's help. I wake up each day sad and apprehensive. I can't concentrate. I find it hard to pray. I keep the commandments, but I find no spiritual satisfaction. I go to the synagogue but I feel alone. I begin to wonder what life is about. I need help.'

The Rebbe wrote a brilliant reply that did not use a single word. All he did was this: he circled the first word of every sentence and sent the letter back. The disciple understood. The Rebbe had answered his question and set him on the path to recovery. The ringed word was 'I'.

It is hard to translate a biblical text from classical Hebrew into contemporary English and still preserve the nuances of the original, but Kohelet's problem was the same as that of the letter-writer above. 'I built for myself... I planted for myself... I acquired for myself...' In Hebrew the insistence on the first person singular is striking, reiterated, discordant. There is no other book in the Bible that uses the word 'I' so many times as do those first chapters of Ecclesiastes. Kohelet's problem was that he kept thinking about himself. It made him rich, powerful, a great success. As for happiness, though, he did not have a chance. Happiness lives in the realm called Not-I." (*Celebrating Life*, pg.47-8)

As the Rebbe explained and as Rabbi Sacks amplifies, happiness is not created by being self-centered. Our happiness is generated when we serve a higher cause, when we assist others, when we live for something larger than ourselves, when we raise another person, when we build for the community.

At the time of year in which the farmer may be feeling most complacent, most materialistic, Kohelet reminds us that joy doesn't rest in our possessions or in our self-centeredness, but rather, somewhere beyond ourselves.

So please discuss:

- We all want to be happy. But how do we get there?
- Is Rabbi Sacks correct? Is the person with the "private jet, the apartment on Fifth Avenue, the Armani suits" really not happy? If so, why do many people have so much interest in celebrities and their lifestyle?
- Are celebrities happy?
- Do you agree that happiness lives in the realm call "Not-I"? Why is that?
- What gives you real joy?
- When have you had a situation when you have had an insight into what creates lasting happiness?