



Sacks-Herenstein Sukkot Reader

Divrei Torah by Sacks Research Scholars



Yeshiva University

**THE RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS-HERENSTEIN
CENTER FOR VALUES AND LEADERSHIP**



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Sacks Research Scholars 2024–2025

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Can You Rejoice Amidst Your Worries?

Aryeh Roberts

Sukkot emphasizes joy more than any other holiday.¹ The Midrash² observes that the Torah does not explicitly mention *simcha*, joy, in connection with Passover or Rosh Hashana,³ and mentions it only once for Shavuot.⁴ In contrast, the Torah highlights *simcha* three times in the context of Sukkot.⁵ The Rabbis explain that unlike Passover and Shavuot, which contain uncertainty regarding their upcoming harvests,⁶ Sukkot marks the completion of the summer fruit harvest, signaling the end of the year's worries. And unlike Rosh Hashana, we do not stand in judgment before God. There is, seemingly, nothing left to worry about. It is a moment of exhalation, of pure celebration.

But this Midrash introduces a subtle limitation to this joyous picture, noting how the original verse in the Torah uses the Hebrew term '*akh*,' often a marker of restriction, suggesting that even the joy of Sukkot is tempered. Even in moments of celebration, a shadow of anxiety remains.

“And you shall be *akh* (only) joyous.” What does this mean? You find that, even though a person rejoices in this world, their joy is not complete. How so? In this world, a child is born to someone, and they worry whether the child will survive or not, and thus they are distressed.

True, unblemished joy, the Midrash explains, will come only in the World to Come, where God will eradicate death, bringing complete joy, as expressed in the prophecy of Isaiah⁷ and in Psalms.⁸

This paradox resonates with particular poignancy this year, as our joy has been punctured by the pressing concern for our children and the pain of futures never realized. For some, this pertains to their biological children; for others, it extends to their “adopted” children—too many of our young people whose lives hang in the balance or have been lost far too soon.

This tension between complete joy and limited joy is also reflected in the writings of two commentators. Seforno,⁹ a 16th century Italian commentator, interprets the word *akh* as a call for unadulterated joy—we should be only joyous and not allow sadness to interfere. The 14th century exegete, Rabbeinu Bachya¹⁰ on the other hand, sees *akh* as a reminder to limit our joy: that a person should conduct themselves with moderation, *bederekh beinoni*. He adds:

Even when performing commandments, it is fitting to rejoice with trembling, as the Sages expounded (Psalms 2:11): “Serve the Lord with fear and rejoice with trembling”—where there is rejoicing, there should also be trembling.

The Midrash and Seforno present a purely joyous element to Sukkot, highlighting the festival as a time for unrestrained celebration. The latter part of the Midrash and Rabbeinu Bachya, however, remind us that the Torah acknowledges our complex emotional landscape: it does not require us to deny the reality of pain and suffering. It recognizes that in a world filled with sorrow and uncertainty, pure, boundless joy feels unattainable.

1 See also: Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Shofar, Sukkah, and Lulav 8:12-14 where he specifies the uniquely joyous character of Sukkot, particularly in relation to the “Simchat Beit HaShoevah”

2 Pesikta d'R. Kahanna, “*Piska Acharita d'Sukkot*”

3 The commandment of “*vesamachta bechagecha*” (“and you shall rejoice in your holiday”)—which today involves eating meat, drinking wine, and giving gifts to members of one's household—nonetheless applies to Passover. There is a discussion whether this practical application of *simcha* also applies to Rosh Hashana (See Piskei Teshuvot, OC 592:2 for a summary of the opinions.)

4 Deut. 16:11

5 Lev. 23:40, Deut. 16:14,15

6 The Midrash notes the additional concern on Passover of rejoicing at the downfall of one's enemies.

7 Is. 25:8. The verse reads: “He will destroy death forever. My Lord God will wipe the tears away from all faces and will put an end to the reproach of His people over all the earth” Translation: Jewish Publication Society, 1985.

8 Ps. 126:2. The verse reads: “Our mouths shall be filled with laughter, our tongues, with songs of joy. Then shall they say among the nations, The Lord has done great things for them!” Translation: Jewish Publication Society, 1985.

9 Seforno, Commentary on Deut. 16:15

10 Rabbeinu Bachya, Commentary on Deut. 16:15

But perhaps there is a third approach, one that merges these two views. The word *akh* can be understood as a request for resilience. The commandment to rejoice on Sukkot is not a denial of pain. It is a call to rise above it. The joy of Sukkot is an act of defiance, a statement that even in a year of intense concern and calamity, we will choose to celebrate.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks described the resilience of the Jewish People¹¹: “The people that can know the full darkness of history and yet rejoice is a people whose spirit no power on earth can ever break.”¹²

This Sukkot, we recognize that joy is not the absence of pain, nor are joy and pain merely woven together, requiring us to experience both simultaneously. Instead, joy is the unwavering refusal to be defeated by pain.

As we exchange the shofar for the Lulav on this most joyous of holidays,¹³ we continue to beseech God to save us, but in different tones. At the pinnacle of our *teshuva* process, we call out to God with the total reliance which breeds the deepest joy,¹⁴ allowing us to rise up and dance yet again.

11 For a fascinating application to Sukkot on a similar theme, see Rabbi Jonathan Sacks “The Festival of Insecurity: A message for Sukkot 5774 from Rabbi Sacks”

12 Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, “The Therapeutic Joy of Purim” <https://rabbisacks.org/archive/therapeutic-joy-purim/>

13 See Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Lulav 8:12

14 See Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Repentance 7:7 and Mishna Ta’anit 3:8

From Sin to Sanctuary: David's Legacy and Us

Ned Krasnopolsky

The Haftarah for the second day of Sukkot seemingly has very little to do with repentance. Pulled from the Book of Kings, it describes how King Solomon, who led the Temple construction efforts, gathers the people to Jerusalem to celebrate the bringing of the Ark to its hopefully permanent dwelling place. God confirms the initiative: His presence descends to Jerusalem.

And yet, the Talmud relates our story to one of the most famous sins in the Bible: David's killing of Uriah and his affair with Bathsheba:

David said before the Holy One, Blessed be He: Master of the Universe, forgive me for that sin in the matter of Bathsheba. He said to him: It is forgiven. David said to Him: Show me a sign in my lifetime so that all will know that You have forgiven me. God said to him: In your lifetime I will not make it known that you were forgiven; however, in the lifetime of your son Solomon I will make it known.

When Solomon built the Temple and sought to bring the Ark into the Holy of Holies, the gates clung together. Solomon uttered twenty-four songs of praise and his prayer was not answered... When he said: "O Lord God, turn not away the face of Your anointed; remember the good deeds of David Your servant,"¹ he was immediately answered... At that moment, the faces of all of David's enemies turned dark like the charred bottom of a pot. And all of Israel knew that the Holy One, Blessed be He, forgave him for that sin.²

David asks God to forgive him; God obliges. His request that the public be made aware of his repaired relationship with God, however, is only partially granted: God will provide a sign, but not in David's lifetime. The sign appears

later, in the form of God's assent to Solomon's appeal to David's merits.

Writing about our passage, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the first Chief Rabbi of Mandatory Palestine, argues that the drama of repentance largely plays out in the depths of the human soul, where we struggle with our past failures and resolve to live better lives.³ And while it is true that we must seek the forgiveness of others — full, moral actors in their own right — the road to repentance leads inward, where the hard work of introspection awaits us all.

But David's position meant that his repentance would have consequences on the broader world. Influential people are tasked with the additional responsibility of repairing the effects of their failures on society as a whole — they do not have the luxury of private repentance. That is why the Talmud focuses on the public's perception of David.

God does not immediately grant David's request for a sign. Per the Talmud's account, David dies without totally restoring his public image; the full impact of his life only becomes apparent after his death through the accomplishments of his son, Solomon. The Talmud offers a complex portrait of public repentance. On the one hand, leaders must be concerned with the impact that even their private sins have on the public. On the other hand, the true impact of repentance can only be properly evaluated in the long term.

We live in a culture allergic to inwardness. Accordingly, we tend to regard the act of public apology with suspicion. Right out of the gate, we assume insincerity. As we conclude this season of introspection, the Talmud counsels us to withhold such immediate judgment. Only time will tell if we have been true to ourselves and each other.

1 II Chron. 6:42

2 BT Shabbat 30a; modified from the *William Davidson Talmud*

3 *Ein Ayah Shabbat II:39*

Beyond Shame: Embracing the Shattered Tablets

Annie Nagel

It is perhaps the most dramatic moment in all of Jewish history. Moses, having spent forty days with God on Mount Sinai, returns to see God's nation dancing around the Golden Calf. Appalled by their actions, Moses tosses the tablets he received from God to the ground, smashing them at the bottom of the mountain. We read the aftermath of this traumatic scene as the Torah portion on *Shabbat Chol Hamoed Sukkot*.

God's direction to Moses following Israel's sin of the Golden Calf is a case study in how to repair a deep rupture. God tells Moses to "carve two stone tablets like the first ones"¹ to replace the original, now shattered, tablets made by God. These new tablets were placed in the Ark, which was kept in the holiest part of the Tabernacle. The Talmud famously relates that both the new tablets *and* the broken tablets were kept in the Ark.² This reflects Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik's conviction that "sin is to be remembered" as "it is the memory of sin that releases the power within the inner depths of the soul of the penitent to do greater things than ever before."³ The placement of the broken tablets in the Ark is a testament to God's belief that each of us can harness our mistakes to rise to new heights. Having just spent the Days of Awe grappling with our sins, the shattered tablets inspire us as we move into Sukkot.

The symbolism of these broken tablets is further illuminated by a key distinction Rabbi Jonathan Sacks made between "Guilt" cultures and "Shame" cultures. In Guilt cultures, individuals are driven by their inner conscience and thus feel a sense of guilt if their actions fall short of their internal convictions. The belief that one's sins are not to be shamefully covered up but instead used as a catalyst for change, even placed in the holy Ark, is consistent with a Guilt culture in which individuals are internally motivated to do what is right. That is Judaism. We are driven by our internal commitment to God's will and our relationship with Him.

Shame cultures, in contrast, are externally motivated. Individuals are driven not by internal barometers of morality but rather society's external conventions. "Sins" are to be erased and covered up lest one be publicly shamed, or in modern day parlance "canceled." Rabbi Sacks bemoaned the modern "return of public shaming" and the "vigilante justice of viral videos" not as a "move forward" but rather as a "regression" to the "world of pre-Christian Rome and the pre-Socratic Greeks,"⁴ where a sin was a permanent stain. In a Shame culture, there is no place for shattered tablets.

This past year the global Jewish community has experienced firsthand the dark side of Shame culture. The public shaming of Jews has a long and sordid history, that, as Israel Bitton shows in "A Brief History of Antisemitism," predates the Nazi's yellow star mandate by centuries. In the aftermath of October 7th, however, the public shaming of Jews has risen to new heights. Like in all Shame cultures, the shaming of Jews in 2024 does not stem from internal moral clarity, but rather from external social constructs that have normalized shaming Jews. For a nation in a vulnerable state, this narrative of shame can feel heavy. This environment of shame and hate makes us feel exposed, highlighting our insecurities and self-doubt. The shattered tablets in the Ark remind us that we are a people who have built our identity on our internal convictions. We are willing to carry the broken parts of ourselves in an effort to repair them and do what is right. We are motivated by God's will and the morality embedded in His commandments. Let us take this conviction into Sukkot, proud to follow God into the Sukkah. God is there waiting for us, broken pieces and all.

1 Ex. 34:1

2 BT Bava Batra 14b

3 Joseph Soloveitchik, *On Repentance*, Edited by Pinchas H. Peli (Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2017), p.169.

4 Jonathan Sacks, *Morality* (New York: Basic Books, 2020), p.212.

The Trumpet and the Flute: Crisis and the Essence of Hallel

Asher Finkelstein

Of all the prayers of the holidays, Hallel stands out as their joyous apex. Replete with passionate verses of praise and thanksgiving, Hallel gives musical and poetic expression to the joy of the holiday. On Sukkot, Hallel is accompanied by the shaking of the Lulav, expressing the unique joy of this holiday.

Surprisingly, however, the Hallel is punctuated by notes of urgent, even desperate supplication: “Not to us, O Lord, not to us but to Your name bring glory for the sake of Your love and Your faithfulness. Let the nations not say, ‘Where, now, is their God?’” (Ps. 115:1-2). Most memorably, “O Lord, deliver us! O Lord, let us prosper!” (Ps. 118:25) What is the role of these plaintive cries amidst a joyous prayer of thanksgiving?

To understand this phenomenon, we must take a brief musical interlude into the halakhic role of the trumpet and the flute. In Num. 10:2,9-10, the Torah commands:

Make yourself two trumpets of silver, of hammered-work you are to make them; they are to be for you for calling together the community and for [signaling] the marching of the camps... And when you enter into battle in your land against an attacker who attacks you, blow trilling [blasts] on the trumpets, so that you may be brought-to-mind before Hashem your God and delivered from your enemies. And on the day[s] of your rejoicing, your appointed-times, and the heads of your months, you are to sound [blasts] on the trumpets together with your offerings-up and together with your sacrifices of shalom; they shall be of you a reminder, before your God— I am Hashem your God!¹

We seem to face two distinct commandments for two very

different occasions: A command to blow short, wailing blasts (*teru'ah*) on the trumpet in times of national crisis, and a command to blow complete blasts (*teki'a*) on days of national festivity and celebration. Interestingly, Maimonides² counts both as one commandment, understanding them as different applications of the same fundamental principle. The Sages also note a common denominator between them, as the Talmud³ derives that in both situations, the *teru'a* and the *teki'a* are blown. What is this common denominator between the two opposite occasions on which the trumpets are blown?

Both the *teru'ot* of crisis and the *teki'ot* of celebration bring our remembrance before God and express His kingship over us.⁴ In both crisis and celebration, the Torah demands the same fundamental response: to connect with God in prayer and song as a community, crowning Him as our King and entreating Him to remember us like a father. In the moments of greatest intensity, we address God as *Avinu Malkeinu*, our Father, our King, and this expresses the dual theme of the trumpets.

Nonetheless, the halakha is not tone-deaf to the stark differences between times of crisis and celebration. In crisis, the emphasis is on the wailing alarm of the *teru'a*, accompanied by the primal cry of the Shofar,⁵ but bracketed by the confident, hopeful notes of *teki'a*. In times of celebration, the emphasis is on the confident, regal tones of the *teki'a*, accompanied by the prayerful notes of *teru'a*, asking God at this time of intimate closeness to grant our most significant needs and preserve our good fortune.

Hallel represents a step up from the basic *teki'ot* of celebration. In the Temple, the instrument of Hallel was the flute, described by the Talmud⁶ as the sweetest of all the instruments. As the Talmud explains, not every day which

1 Based on Everett Fox's translation, with modifications (accessed via Sefaria).

2 Commandment 59 in *The Book of Commandments*

3 BT Rosh HaShana 33b

4 see Rashi's Commentary on Num. 10:2 and 10:10.

5 see BT Rosh Hashana 26b

6 BT Arachin 10a-b

required festive trumpet blasts merited the accompaniment of the flute. Only days of שמחה יתירה [excessive joy], merited the flute and the Hallel.⁷ From comments of both Maimonides⁸ and Nahmanides,⁹ it can be deduced that the flute and the Hallel are extensions of the commandment of the trumpets, adding a note of “excessive joy” to the festive blasts of the trumpets on days of particularly acute communal happiness and celebration.

If this is the case, then the plaintive cry of ה' הושיעה "אנא" נא (“O Lord, deliver us!”) deserves its place at the climax of the Hallel. The Hallel, giving poetic expression to the duet of the trumpet and the flute in the Temple, contains notes of both *teki'a* and *teru'a*, festive invocation of our connection to God but also simple cries to our Father, our King. In the stormy flux of history, this is the greatest joy we can hope for- a sense of intimacy with God so profound that we can cry out to Him with the simple reliance of a child.¹⁰ With this, we can summon the strength and optimism to meet the challenges of Jewish history with a sense of confidence, and even joy.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks once wrote: “I think of Judaism as an ode to joy. Like Beethoven, Jews have known suffering, isolation, hardship, and rejection, yet they never lacked the religious courage to rejoice. A people that can know insecurity and still feel joy is one that can never be defeated, for its spirit can never be broken nor its hope destroyed ... as part of a moral and spiritual community, even in hard times we find ourselves lifted on the wings of joy.”¹¹

Therein lies the heart of the Hallel.

7 see BT Sukkah 51a and Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Lulav 8:12 and Laws of Hanukka 3:6

8 Laws of the Temple Vessels 3:1-6

9 Glosses to *Book of Commandments*, Principle 1

10 I first heard this idea from Rabbi Notta Greenblatt z”l of Memphis.

11 Jonathan Sacks, *Essays on Ethics* (Maggid, 2016), p. 315.

Kohelet, Sukkot and Finding Meaning

Penina Marmon

דְּבָרֵי קֹהֵלֶת בֶּן דָּוִד מֶלֶךְ בִּירוּשָׁלַם.

הַבַּל הַבָּלִים אָמַר קֹהֵלֶת הַבַּל הַבָּלִים הַכֹּל הַבָּל:

The words of Kohelet son of David, king in Jerusalem.

Utter futility!—said Kohelet—

Utter futility! All is futile! (Eccl. 1:1)

These are the opening words of Megillat Kohelet that we read on Shabbat Chol haMoed Sukkot. On a day of celebration, we read over and over again the expression of futility that seems to be in stark contrast to the day's joy. These sentiments seem to undermine the meaningful tone set by the meals we share, the prayers we recite together, and our closeness to God in our dwellings-- It is all futile! It is jarring to hear. So why do we read this text? What purpose does it serve on Sukkot?

The key word King Solomon uses in this text is the word הַבַּל, futile. This word is used over and over again throughout the text. Solomon, a king with everything at his fingertips, finds no meaning in all of the riches he possesses. As he expresses in Eccl. 2:26, “כִּי לְאָדָם שֶׁשָׂנוּב לְפָנָיו נָתַן חֵכְמָה, וְדַעַת וְשִׁמְחָה וְלֶחֶם וְסֵאֵל נָתַן עֵינָיו לְאִסֹּף וְלִכְנוֹס לְתֵת לְטוֹב לְפָנָיו הָאֱלֹהִים: גַּם-נָתַן הַבַּל וְרַעוּת רִוּחַ:” to the man, namely, who pleases Him, He has given the wisdom and shrewdness to enjoy himself; and to him who displeases, He has given the urge to gather and amass—only for handing on to one who is pleasing to God. That too is futile and pursuit of wind.” The more he indulges, the more meaningless they seem. After all, Solomon is acutely aware that every human being eventually dies. As Kohelet says in 12:7, “וְיָשֵׁב הָעָפָר עַל-הָאָרֶץ,” and the dust returns to the ground as it was, and the life breath returns to God who bestowed it.” No matter what material wealth he has or what physical experiences he partakes in, Solomon, along with everyone else, will someday die. Death is the great equalizer. It does not matter if you were a king or a pauper, kind or cruel, righteous or wicked, we all eventually die.

But is death what makes life futile? Is that Solomon's intended meaning of the word הַבַּל? Rabbi Jonathan Sacks offers an alternative reading. In his essay, “Happiness is to

be found in being, not in having,” Rabbi Sacks discusses both the theme and message of Kohelet through interpreting the word הַבַּל. He explains, based on Robert Alter's reading, that הַבַּל means a short, shallow breath. Solomon is trying to show us how fleeting and vulnerable life really is. It is as short as a breath, and all material things tied to life are just as fleeting. This leads Solomon to conclude that life is short, so we must not take the small moments that make life worth living for granted. All things worth having, doing, and reading have an end. That is what makes them so great. Life being הַבַּל heightens what is meaningful. If we could live forever, we would have no impetus to do anything at all. This temporality is what imparts meaning to life.

One of my teachers explained the connection between this text and the holiday of Sukkot. During the holiday of gathering, a joyous time, we must put our physicality into perspective. Yes, we have grain, and this is a time of great monetary rejoicing in our ancient agricultural society, but without God's expert guidance, we risk losing perspective. To balance out Sukkot's intense physical joyfulness, God has us physically embody Kohelet's lesson. We must leave our permanent houses, our comfortable furniture, and our temperature-controlled environments. Instead, we dwell in booths. We sleep and eat in a place that physically reminds us how vulnerable our lives are, and how little we actually need to be happy. We share our experience with friends and family, the people we love, who make our lives worth living. We spend our time serving and connecting to God.

Sukkot is the holiday, more than any other, that embodies Kohelet. During Sukkot we create memories by regarding every moment as precious. As Kohelet says in 12:1, “וְזָכַרְתָּ, אֶת-בְּנוֹרְאֵיךָ בַיּוֹמֵי בְּחֹרְתֶיךָ:” appreciate your vigor in the days of your youth,” be present in your life and try to appreciate every moment as it goes by.

Together Under One Roof

Batsheva Leah Weinstein

Every year my family hangs all the decorations that my siblings and I made throughout grade school in our small *sukkah*. On the first night of *Sukkot* we enter into the intimate, familial space, and enjoy the feeling of quiet togetherness.

The *sukkah* experience described in the Talmud, however, is radically different:

A person can fulfill his obligation in his friend's *sukkah*, as it says, 'Every citizen of Israel should sit in *sukkot*' – this teaches that all of Israel are worthy of sitting in one *sukkah*.¹

In this image, a *sukkah* is not a small, familiar, intimate space. It is enormous, busy, loud. The *sukkah* holds the entire nation of Israel. Rather than being a family experience, the *sukkah* is a national experience.

The *Sefat Emet*, a 19th century Hasidic rebbe, explains that *Sukkot* itself is a time of unity and joining together of the entire Jewish nation. *Sukkot* is called *chag ha'asif*, the holiday of gathering, for it is the time when all Jews are gathered together. The four species that we shake on *Sukkot* represent four different types of Jews and must be bound together, uniting all of Israel. It is through this unification, the *Sefat Emet* says, we are worthy to sit in the *sukkah*.²

What is unique about the nature of the *sukkah* that we sit in together? What is it about the *sukkah* that unites all of Israel?

The *Sefat Emet* explains that a *sukkah* is a spark from the *Beit Hamikdash*, the Temple in Jerusalem. A *sukkah*, in a sense, is a mini *Beit Hamikdash*.³ To understand how to experience a *sukkah*, then, we must understand the experience of visiting the *Beit Hamikdash*.

The uniqueness of the *Beit Hamikdash* and of the city of Jerusalem is that it united all of Israel. Jerusalem did not

belong to one tribe more than any other.⁴ The verse in Psalms refers to it as “the city that is connected”⁵ and the Talmud understands that “it connects the people of Israel, one to another”.⁶ During the three festivals, Jews from all over converged on the holy city and celebrated the holidays together nationally. The city itself united the Jews. Similarly, the *sukkah*, as a spark of the now destroyed Temple, is both a source and a product of the unity of the Jewish people.

Surprisingly, the binding power of Jerusalem survived its destruction. It is what binds us together as Jews today. Wherever Jews are around the world, we pray facing Jerusalem. In the words of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, “The Jewish people [is] the circumference of a circle at whose centre [is] the holy land and Jerusalem the holy city.”⁷ Jerusalem is where our hearts and minds are perpetually directed.

This year, perhaps more than in the past, Jews across the world have been focused on Israel. We have formed a circumference around the tiny country, facing towards it at all times. Jews from all different backgrounds, all sorts of communities, have been joined together in pain and suffering.

The *Sefat Emet* says that when we recall the destruction of the *Beit Hamikdash*, we are sad. But on *Sukkot*, when we sit in a *sukkah* which reminds us of the *Beit Hamikdash*, we are supposed to experience joy!

When we remember the destruction, we simultaneously remember the joy that once was. We remember the beautiful building that once stood and the unity we once merited to achieve. From our deep pain and suffering, we remember the promise that it will be that way again. In our family *sukkah* we can experience a microcosm of the unity we long for – that we should merit once more to sit with the entire nation of Israel in one *sukkah*.

1 BT Sukkah 27b

2 Sefat Emet for Sukkot 7 and 27

3 Sefat Emet for Sukkot 26

4 According to the opinion in BT Bava Kama 82b, BT Sotah 45b

5 Ps. 122:3

6 JT Bava Kama 7:7

7 Jonathan Sacks, Israel – Home of Hope CD: <https://rabbisacks.org/books/israel-home-of-hope/>

Reading Kohelet in Wartime

Erica Brown

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This Sukkot we will read Kohelet differently, especially this verse: “A time for loving and a time for hating; a time for war and a time for peace” (Eccl. 3:8). The biblical book that takes us to the dark heart of existential despair also invites us into a range of emotions and occasions in its third chapter. After October 7th, we will read the time poem and focus on the challenge and promise of these brief, sharp observations in war time. When will a time for hate and a time for war turn into a time for love and a time for peace?

Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra explains verse 3:8 simply: “both love and hate are dependent on time and season” without telling us the time or the season when these strong and opposing emotions are justified. One midrash suggests that we love in a time of peace and hate in a time of war (*Kohelet Rabba* 3:8). Feelings arise as natural outgrowths of the conditions that surround us. We love when we are loved. We hate when we are hated.

But life is never that simple. Human agency enables us to separate ourselves from our environments and interrogate the validity of our emotions, especially when they are complex and unsettling. Nothing in the time poem accounts for how quickly our emotions can change in times of war. We wake up devastated to a smiling photo of a dead soldier and the news of rocket fire and are then thrown into the whiplash of pride and unity when a hostage is rescued. All of this might happen within hours.

In the same midrash above, Rabbi Yehoshua of Sikkhinin created word pictures from other biblical verses to illustrate each time phrase with a biblical proof-text. “In this wilderness they will expire, and there they will die (Num. 14:35) is an example of a time to die. There is no shortage of verses on death throughout *Tanakh*, but Rabbi Yehoshua turned to a book where tens of thousands die. There is not one recorded birth. The wilderness – “a parched and thirsty land that has no water” (Ps. 63:2) - is a landscape that often swallowed its travelers.

The time phrases that raise raw, unchecked emotions

1 Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World* (Schocken, 2007), p.249.

inspired Rabbi Yehoshua to cite two tragic verses from *Eicha*. A time to kill refers to God’s destruction of Zion: “He killed all who delighted the eye” (Lam. 2:4), and a time to cry takes us to the female imagery of a desolate Zion: “She will weep at night” (Lam. 1:2). He connects a time of mourning to “The Lord God of hosts declared that day for weeping and lamentation” (Is. 22:12).

There will also be joyous times. The psalmist describes moments of happiness: “Then our mouths will be filled with laughter” (Ps. 126:2). When we read a time to dance, Rabbi Yehoshua takes us to better days in Jerusalem: “The squares of the city will be filled with boys and girls playing” (Zech. 8:5). Using a verse from Song of Songs, he takes us into a romantic garden for a time to embrace and then refers to the last prophetic book, Malachi, with its presaging of the messianic days to illustrate a time for love. A time for peace is described by the prophet Isaiah’s rushing current of abundance: “Behold, I will extend peace to her like a river” (Is. 66:12).

In one midrash we seem to travel much of *Tanakh*, reminding ourselves, as Kohelet does, that just as we cycle through times of anguish and depression, the pendulum will swing back to a baseline of love and affection, societal cohesion, and possibility. By placing two opposing feelings side-by-side, Kohelet also admits the possibility of negative emotions living in close proximity to positive ones, like next door neighbors that come and go. Invite every emotion in, and we will become more authentic, vulnerable and whole as a result. Only this will allow us to heal.

“If I were to sum up what faith asks us to be,” Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes in *To Heal a Fractured World*, “I would say: a healing presence.”¹ As we listen to the recitation of Kohelet this Sukkot, let us pause, exhale and create our own word pictures that match the emotions of this past year and pause as we read the words “a time to heal.” We turn one final time to our wise friend Rabbi Yehoshua who invites God to heal us: “Behold, I am bringing a remedy and cure” (Jer. 33:6). And may it be so.

Psalm 27: Courage of Faith amid Doubt

Shira Weiss

Liturgy that has been recited for generations has resonated with many in new ways in light of the events that have transpired over the past year. Psalm 27, known as “*L’David*,” included in daily prayers during the period of introspection from Rosh Chodesh Elul through Shemini Atzeret, expresses the human struggle in one’s relationship with God, a challenge more pronounced since Oct. 7th. The psalm encompasses multiple sentiments including praise, thanksgiving and complaint, while describing the oscillation between faith and doubt as a result of the dialectical awareness of God’s Presence and elusiveness.

This duality of humanity’s status before God can be understood through the progression of the chapter. The first half, verses 1-6, evokes feelings of closeness and trust in God, unmediated by any doubt. “The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?” (Ps. 27:1) Confidence in God’s protection and in the future defeat of enemies, is conveyed in present tense, as the psalmist speaks about God in third person without the need to appeal to God directly. “For He shall hide me in His tabernacle on the day of evil... And now my head shall be lifted over my enemies who surround me.” (Ps. 27:5-6) Certain of victory, the psalmist concludes the first half of the *mizmor* with thanksgiving sacrifices, song and praise for God’s salvation. “And I will offer in His tabernacle sacrifices with trumpet-sound.” (Ps. 27:6)

The assured depiction of the human relationship with God shifts in the second half of the *mizmor* (Ps. 27:7-13), however, as the psalmist distressfully calls to God. “Hear, O Lord, my voice as I cry out; be gracious to me and answer me.” (Ps. 27:7) Without the sense of security conveyed earlier, the psalmist beseeches God in second person, “Do not hide Your face from me. Do not turn Your servant away in anger... Do not abandon me and do not forsake me... do not deliver me to the desire of my enemies.” (Ps. 27:9,12) The latter verses describing God’s anger, remoteness and abandonment are juxtaposed to the former which express God’s compassion, care and salvation, as the psalmist’s victory no longer seems imminent.

The final verse of the *mizmor* serves as a conclusion to the entire text. The psalmist no longer speaks in first person but appeals to the reader/listener to hope in God in both confident and distressful times, as alluded to in the repetitious language. “Have hope in the Lord; be strong and He shall give courage to your heart; and hope in the Lord.” (Ps. 27:14) Rashi, commenting on the verse, interprets the unique meaning of each of the repeated phrases “‘hope in the Lord’: hope to God, and if your prayers are not fulfilled, return and hope again.” Robert Alter comments, “This last exhortation- whether of the speaker to himself or to an individual member of his audience- is an apt summary of the psychology that informs this psalm. It begins by affirming trust in God and reiterates that hopeful confidence, but the trust has to be asserted against the terrors of being overwhelmed by implacable enemies.”¹

Witnessing the atrocities of the past year, perpetrated by implacable enemies that surround and threaten Israel, as well as by those perpetuating hatred and violence throughout the world, can challenge the faith of even the most devout. The psalmist recognizes that human relationships with God often vacillate between overwhelming faith when God’s presence seems palpable and inevitable doubt when harsh realities induce feelings of abandonment by God. Through the progression of the *mizmor*, the psalmist relinquishes humanity’s false sense of security, as represented physically by the dwelling in *sukkot* over the holiday, and humbly acknowledges his doubt and dependence on God. It is amid such doubt, when God’s protection seems uncertain, that reaffirmation of faith is critical. Such faith does not refer to a state in which doubt is consciously avoided, but rather a *process* that requires constant renewal in a confusing, questioning, and challenging world.² Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes, “Faith does not mean certainty. It means the courage to live with uncertainty. It does not mean having the answers, it means having the courage to ask the questions and not let go of God, as he does not let go of us.”³

1 Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms* (WW Norton & Co., 2007), p.94.

2 Norman Lamm, “Faith and Doubt,” *Tradition* 9:1-2 (1967): 14-51.

3 Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World* (Schocken, 2007), p.197.

