

Sukkot

Lev 22:26–23:44; Num 29:12–16; Zech 14:1–21; John 1:1–18

notes by Tim Hegg

Sukkot (Festival of Booths) is known by the Sages as זמן שמחתינו, *z'man simchateinu*, “the time of our rejoicing.” This comes from the commandment to rejoice at Sukkot:

Now on the first day you shall take for yourselves the foliage of beautiful trees, palm branches and boughs of leafy trees and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before ADONAI your God for seven days. (Lev. 23:40)

The “foliage of beautiful trees, palm branches and boughs of leafy trees and willows of the brook” form the Lulav with etrog, the rabbinic determination of these four species. But how are we to rejoice before Adonai? The phrase “before Adonai” (לפני יהוה, *lifnei Adonai*) is often found in connection with the Tabernacle or Temple (note these references in Exodus: 27:21; 28:12,30,35,38; 29:11,24,26,42; 30:8,16; 34:34; 40:23,25). The sacrifices are offered “before Adonai;” the incense is burned “before Adonai;” Aaron and his sons serve “before Adonai;” and in the three pilgrimage festivals (Pesach, Shavuot, Sukkot) all adult males are to appear “before Adonai.” There is little doubt, then, that when the text commands us to rejoice “before Adonai” the context is in connection with the Temple and Festival service that is prescribed there. Of course, the Temple does not stand in Jerusalem and thus it is impossible to fulfil this commandment in all of its detail. Yet, like so many of the Festival commandments that require the involvement of Temple and priesthood, there are parts we can obey, and “rejoicing” is one of those. While we cannot rejoice in the Temple “before Adonai,” we can rejoice in our own place as we anticipate the coming of the Messiah and the rebuilt Temple. As our Father looks upon us, we can prepare for the time when the Temple will stand again by practising everything possible in anticipation of Messiah’s reign. We can build a sukkah and dwell in it; we can bring the four species of foliage into the sukkah, and we can rejoice in the presence of HaShem.

From ancient times the people of God built sukkot: a temporary shelter in which to celebrate this festival. Likewise, from ancient times God’s people gathered the foliage as prescribed in the Torah, and brought them into the sukkah. A remarkable account of this is given in Nehemiah 8 as the returned exiles studies the Torah under the leadership of Ezra.

A few questions arise from this remarkable passage. First, it is clear from the text that they began to read the Torah on the first day of the seventh month: this Rosh Chodesh was Yom Teruah, what later became known as Rosh HaShanah. The next chronological notice is in v. 13: “on the second day.” Is this the second day of the seventh month? This would be the most obvious meaning, but if so, the text continues as though Yom Kippur, which occurs on the tenth day of the month, is passed by, for the narrative goes on to describe the preparation for Sukkot, which comes on the 15th day of the seventh month. It hardly seems possible that Yom Kippur was passed by. Yet the fact that it is not mentioned should be taken seriously. Does this suggest that though the Temple had been completed (by standard chronologies it was completed in March of 515 BCE, twenty years after the foundations were laid, cf. Ezra 6:15) the service of the Temple was not yet functioning as prescribed in the Torah? Is it possible that the High Priest did not perform the Yom Kippur duties, and that therefore it is passed by?

We might speculate that though the Temple was rebuilt, the Torah had been so neglected as

to make the accurate service of the Temple still a distant memory. This is likewise confirmed by the fact that even after Ezra returned to Jerusalem, the festivals apparently were still not being observed. Granted, the text only singles out Sukkot as having been neglected since the days of Joshua, but one might presume that if the returnees from Babylon were unaware of the Torah commandments regarding Sukkot, they may well have been ignorant of the other Festivals as well. So while the Temple had been rebuilt, the people continued to function in some measure as though they were still without a Temple. Its central role in the Festivals was still lacking.

Thus, their celebration of Sukkot as recorded in Nehemiah 8 appears to have been carried out *apart from the sacrifices and ceremonies which the Torah prescribes for the Temple*. They celebrated the Festival by building sukkot, bringing in the four species, and rejoicing—the same way they would have celebrated even if the Temple had not been rebuilt. This pattern, given to us by the returning exiles, gives us an example in our day, when we celebrate the festival apart from the Temple. We may celebrate the feast by sitting or dwelling (יֹשֵׁב) in a sukkah, bringing the four species within it, and rejoicing in the presence of HaShem. Like the exiles, we *anticipate* the full functioning of the Temple in connection with the Festivals.

Note carefully that as the Torah was read and explained to the returned exiles, they wept and mourned over their lack of obedience to its clear teaching. Yet in the face of the commandments, Ezra and the Levites instructed the people to put away their mourning and to rejoice. One of the first lessons the people needed to learn and practice was that *God's commandments take precedence over feelings*. The need to do what God commands must rule over how we feel—over our natural responses to the situation in which we find ourselves. If God commands us to rejoice, we must find within ourselves both the will and the motivation to obey.

We may learn from this that rejoicing before Adonai is not a matter of “being in the right mood.” The kind of rejoicing that God commands at Sukkot does not attach itself to our present circumstances, but to a recognition of what is eternally true. God is with us in spite of our circumstances; God's Torah endures; God's promises are sure; He has not changed, and His plans for His people are “on track.” We therefore find our rejoicing in Him, not in our circumstances. Here we find the heart of Sukkot—the foundation of our rejoicing is God Himself, and the unchanging, ever present blessings that come from being His covenant people.

This basic concept of the unchanging, unfailing covenant of God with His people, and the blessings this covenant brings to those of faith, is the reason that the Sages from ancient times prescribed the reading of Qohelet (Ecclesiastes) during the Festival of Sukkot. In this short wisdom book of Shlomo, the enduring riches of covenant blessings are taught against the backdrop of life in a fallen world: “under the sun.” Cloaked in the subtle language of poetry and ancient wisdom sayings, Shlomo points us again to the true nature of rejoicing.

The Torah section chosen by the Sages to be read on Sukkot begins with Lev 22:26 for the obvious reason that the *parashah* begins with a seven day period to which is added an eighth day, just like Sukkot. Sacrificial animals of the flock (ox, sheep, or goat) included the newly born, though such new born animals were to remain seven days with their mother, and only from the eighth day on were they acceptable as a sacrifice (cp. Ex 22:30). Likewise, the matter of ritual purity incorporates the eighth day motif. The leper (Lev 14), a man or woman unclean from a discharge (Lev 15), and a Nazirite who becomes defiled by corpse impurity (Num 6:9ff) all become purified on the eighth day. Of course, the first time the eighth day become significant in the Torah is the ritual of circumcision, which occurs on the eighth day of boy's life (Gen 17:2).

What does the Torah intend to teach us by this pattern of the eighth day? It seems clear that the symbolism of the number seven is one of completion. Given by God from the beginning of creation in the pattern of the Sabbath, the seventh day motif speaks to a complete cycle. This is emphasized in both the Sabbath and the sabbatical year (*sh'mittah*) and ultimately in the Jubilee (*yovel*) which is the completion of seven sabbatical years. Moreover, the Fall festivals (*mo'edim*) that complete the cycle of festivals specifically occur in the seventh month.

If, however, the repeated motif of “seven” points to completion, what are we to make of the “eighth day” pattern? Clearly, the eighth day speaks to the matter of consummation. If the seventh day motif emphasizes completion, the eighth day signals the goal to which the seventh day moves—that of consummation or finality. In the pattern of the sabbath, the seventh day is followed by the first day, and the cycle starts all over again. The same is true for the sabbatical year, and the Jubilee. But the eighth day seeks to teach us that there will be an end, even to the seventh day/year cycle. For the eighth day pattern is never followed by yet another appointed day (such as the “ninth day”). The eighth day therefore speaks to the final or eternal goal to which all creation is moving. In this respect, the eighth day speaks of the world to come, of an eternal sabbath. It is therefore of high significance that Sukkot, the last in the festival cycle, is the only festival particularly connected to the eighth day pattern. Indeed, the fact that circumcision is marked by the eighth day points us to the fact that the covenant (of which circumcision is the sign) is finally and fully complete in the eternal consummation of God’s purposes.

Lessons from Qohelet

If we were to distil the teaching of Shlomo in the book of Qohelet, what is the concentrated message? The final verses of the book gives the immediate and clear answer:

The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His mitzvot, because this applies to every person. For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil.

By prescribing the reading of *megilat Qohelet* at Sukkot, the Sages teach us that the rejoicing required by HaShem during the festival consists primarily in simple, consistent obedience to His Torah. But the message of Shlomo’s wisdom book makes it clear that obedience to God’s Torah is not found primarily in the outward rituals of worship, but in the everyday application of Torah principles to our lives. As we obey God by conforming our daily lives to His ways, we maintain and guard the most important possession we have in this life: family relationships.

No less than four times does Shlomo conclude that “eating and drinking” and “enjoying” life is the blessings HaShem has given. In chapter 9 he combines this with “enjoy life with the wife whom you love all the days of your fleeting life.” “Eating and drinking” draws the picture of family sitting together at table, for in the ancient world “eating and drinking” was viewed as an expression of covenant relationship. For Shlomo, after all of the experiences of life, nothing could compare with the joy of family and friends gathered to engage in the blessings God had given: the food and drink He brings forth from the earth, and the celebration of life together.

But there are any number of things we mistakenly believe will give us life’s joy, and Shlomo warns us that to set our hearts on these things is folly, because in fact they are like a vapor that appears and vanishes. What is more, in our attempts to gather these vapor-like things, we neglect the very thing that does bring true joy: life lived out in the context of family and community.

Perhaps one of the most important keys to understanding Qohelet is the correct translation of the word הֶבֶל, *hevel*, almost universally translated as “vanity” or “useless” by our modern English translations. An investigation of this word in the Hebrew Scriptures, however, makes it clear that the meaning of this word is “breath,” “wind,” or “vapor.” Since its base meaning is this concept of “vapor,” the word also came to have a metaphoric sense of “folly” and even “idol,” since from a Hebrew perspective an idol only represented the figment of man’s imaginations. Thus, while the word can have a derived meaning of “vanity” or “worthless” (since the meaning “vapor” can mean “transitory,” “without real substance,” etc.), we should allow its base meaning to inform the interpretation in any given context. In Qohelet, then, Shlomo is pointing to the transitory nature of things in our lives, and the relative low value of such things when compared with the enduring blessings of relationships with family and community. Thus, הֶבֶל הֶבְלִים, *haveil havalim*, should be understood as “vapor of vapors,” a Hebrew way of saying “thinnest of vapors.”

Obviously, there is nothing wrong with a vapor! But Shlomo’s point is that it is here one moment and then gone. *To expect that one’s joy in life could be based upon a vapor is to play the part of fool.* That is Shlomo’s wisdom, and it fits the message of Sukkot perfectly. When God brought us out of Egypt we had relatively little for a nation our size. Sure, we had the silver and gold that the Egyptians had given us, and we had our livestock and what personal belongings we could carry. But in terms of the wealth of Egypt we were leaving, comparatively we had very little. Yet we had our freedom, and we had each other. So when we made our temporary dwellings (our sukkahs) along the way and dwelt within them, we had plenty to rejoice about! In God’s wisdom, He ordained that each year we should return to this simple reality, dwell in the sukkah, and remember that the foundational joy of life is not in our things, our money, our positions of influence, or even in our religious activities, but in our relationship with God and each other. Sitting in the sukkah, eating and drinking together, brings this truth home to us in very tangible ways.

So Shlomo, in Qohelet, reminds us of this. He teaches us to remember that many things in life are transitory—like a vapor. While they may be good and even important, they cannot be relied upon as the basis for our happiness. And he turns our attention to the covenant in which we are members, and our relationship with the Almighty. He then reminds us that in this covenant relationship we find enduring joy as together, family and community, we walk in the ways of this covenant.

The things that Shlomo warns us about—those things that are transitory in nature are: money (wealth), power or influence, our occupation, our health, entertainment (pleasure), and religion.

When we think we have security in our wealth—in the treasures we have stored up in the bank—we are fooling ourselves. All of our economic security could be gone in a day. We don’t like to admit that but it is true. Surely money is important (cf. 10:19) but it is a vapor and may vanish overnight.

Our positions of influence are equally transitory. Political leaders find the winds of society shift quickly. Leaders in any venue may find their positions change quickly: one’s superior may move one, and his or her replacement may change the executive landscape in a moment.

Many define themselves by their occupation (this is traditionally more true of men than women). But our occupation is actually a vapor. Any number of factors could bring a change in a moment. Issues of health, natural disasters, changes in economy, etc. can make a job like a vapor.

“If you have your health, you have everything.” Yet we know that our health is not entirely in our hands. Though we may do all in our power to maintain our health, unexplainable sickness may

come upon us and render us unable to continue our normal way of life. Thinking that we can guarantee health is the fool's folly.

It is common for mankind to think that happiness exists in various forms of entertainment. Shlomo was an expert at this! With his unending wealth he amassed every conceivable form of entertainment, yet he found it was a vapor. One experience only left him wanting the next moment of fun. And he realized that growing older meant some forms of entertainment would not be available to him, and this brought a vexation of his soul. Our society and era is bent upon entertainment. People use entertainment like a 'drug' to numb the reality of life and give them a moment or two to leave the pain and hurt of a twisted world and enter a fantasy world where they can pretend they are someone else in a world where everything is right. But then the entertainment is over and reality sets in with even greater weight.

Even religion can be a trap. Thinking that a weekly ceremony will somehow "please God," this world's pilgrim hopes to find happiness in feeling good about his worship. Setting one's hope on the religious events in life, however, becomes a subtle substitute for an on-going relationship with God. And the substitute ends up being less than satisfying.

Now if one reads Shlomo without recognizing the manner in which he uses "vapor," one could presume he is discounting all of these things. But he is not! Money, influence, occupation, health, entertainment, and religious ceremony are all good things—all necessary things. They are not to be avoided or discouraged like the monastics who secluded themselves from all of life's pleasures, reckoning that any pleasure was sinful. No, all of these things are good and have their necessary place in our lives. But Shlomo's message is this: don't place your hope in any of them, nor seek to find your enduring happiness in possessing them. *They are all a vapor and may be gone in a moment.* Rather, in each of them remember that the moment of joy which they may bring is just that: a moment. Grasp that moment with a heart of thanksgiving to God, and remember that the only enduring happiness you have is in obeying Him and in the relationships which He gives among family and friends. Thus, the common things like eating at the family table, conversing with family and friends; the hug of a child, the common conversations around the table; the laughter which comes in common times of friendship—these are the moments of happiness that have the greatest endurance. So don't overlook them—savor them, bless HaShem for them, guard them, and allow these to be the priority in our life's energies. May this be our focus as we celebrate Sukkot once again.

Such a focus will also remind us that this festival looks forward to the dwelling of Messiah in His millennial reign—our seeing Him, being with Him, listening to His teaching, and rejoicing in His presence. Valuing the relationships we have now prepares us to value His physical presence among us as we anticipate His soon return. Next year in Jerusalem!