

For the Jewish community this is our second Thanksgiving celebration (and if I was Canadian as well, this would be my third!) In the Biblical Book of Leviticus, chapter 23, we see described the three God-ordained Pilgrimage Festivals when the community was to make pilgrimage to the Jerusalem Temple for communal offerings. All were originally agricultural: the first in the Spring beginning the barley harvest, the second in the summer for the wheat harvest, and the third in the fall, the “Great Festival” at the final completion of the harvest. The spring festival became Passover, the summer one is called the “Festival of Weeks”, and in the fall we celebrate Sukkot, sometimes called “Tabernacles”—the final, great Thanksgiving commemoration.

In Leviticus we read that for Sukkot families are to build temporary shelters, “booths”, that we decorate with harvested fruits and vegetables, and top with leafy branches. We take sets three individual branches: willow, myrtle and palm, and a single lemon-like fruit, hold them together and wave them up and down, north, south, east and west. The Sukkot/Thanksgiving festival lasts for 8 days, during which we eat meals in the booth, welcome guests and even sleep there if possible.

The waving of the branches and fruit up and down and in the four directions is an expression of thanksgiving that God has given us rain from above and water from below, providing crops in all directions the moisture they need. And as we give God thanks we also pray that the rainy season (in the ancient Mideast) that begins in the fall and ends in the spring will come again this year, that God will bless us again with a healthy harvest.

In addition, the rabbis 2000 years ago, assigned the Biblical Book of Ecclesiastes, or Kohelet in Hebrew, to be read during the eight days of Sukkot. The Book of Kohelet presents itself as the work of “the son of David, king in Jerusalem” and Jewish tradition takes this at face value, ascribing the book to Solomon. In reality the book was written much later, and in fact it was one of the very last to merit inclusion in the Jewish Bible. And whether or not to include it at all was a matter of much debate!

The argument against including it in the biblical canon becomes apparent from even a cursory reading of the text. The author, Kohelet asks very difficult questions in his quest to find faith in God and meaning in life. And the message of the Book of Ecclesiastes, is a direct challenge to the other books of our Bible which declare that those who live a life of wisdom, virtue and obedience, will be blessed by God, while those who do not, are cursed. To which Kohelet declares: “not true!” He writes:

*I have seen everything in my ephemeral life:
A virtuous person, perishing in his virtue
And a wicked person, living long in his evil (7:15)*

And he continues:

*There are virtuous people who receive what the wicked should expect
And wicked ones who receive what the virtuous should expect (9:14)*

Kohelet asks what so many of us ask: ‘why do bad things happen to good people?’ The normative answer from Scripture is that the apparent success of the wicked is only temporary, and though the promised blessings for the virtuous take longer to arrive-- they are permanent. We see this in the Psalms (92:8, 13) “The wicked spring up like grass, flourish, but are quickly destroyed, but the righteous flourish like the palm tree, grow like a cedar in Lebanon.” To which Kohelet declares: “not true!” The innocent, the righteous and the virtuous, like everyone suffer and die. And if virtue does not guarantee God’s blessings, neither does wisdom:

*Again I saw in the world that the race is not to the swift
Nor the battle to the strong
Nor bread to the wise
Nor riches to the understanding
Nor gracefulness to the knowledgeable (9:11)*

And if neither wisdom nor virtue are a guarantee of blessing—what are we to do? Kohelet ‘goes back to the drawing board.’ He begins by declaring that suffering has nothing to do with sin. And while wisdom and virtue cannot promise God’s blessing, they are nevertheless keys to finding happiness. What Kohelet rejects is that they “guarantee” happiness and blessing. So what, Kohelet asks, are we to do now that we know that God “doesn’t promise us a rose garden”? His answer:

*I saw that there is nothing better
Than for a person to be happy with what he does
For that is his portion
And who knows what will come later? (3:22)*

So we should be happy in the present with what we have, with what we are able to do. Yet at the same time be aware that our life in God’s world can change in a moment, because nothing is permanent. And Kohelet concludes:

*It is better to go to the house of mourning
Than to go to the house of feasting
For this is the end of all people
And the living should take it to heart (7:2)*

“Better to go to a house of mourning, than to a feast”?! Yes, Kohelet says, because an awareness of death teaches us how to live! We should live in the moment, in the fullness of life, celebrating the gifts and blessings we enjoy today. Kohelet writes: “Whatever your hand finds strength to do-- do! (9:10)”. His advice: In the face of uncertainty and mortality, live life fully.

Which brings us back to our Jewish Thanksgiving Festival of Sukkot. The temporary booth that we build is never meant to last. In fact it is the most unprotective of shelters: vulnerable in time-- lasting only a week, and vulnerable in space with a roof that is not only leafy but supposed to be *leaky*, to let in sun and moonlight, and gusts of wind and rain. The booth we build is a reminder that we are always vulnerable, that we live in a world that can quickly change from secure to precarious. Thankful for the multitude of God’s blessings – yes, but knowing that nothing in Nature or in Life, is a sure thing.

And so we build the leafy, leaky, temporary and frail booth, and read from Kohelet, and realizing that God’s blessings may only be for the moment, that ours is at best a tenuous and tentative hold on security and well-being. On the Jewish Thanksgiving Festival of Sukkot, sitting in our booths, reading Kohelet-- we learn this:

We are sincerely thankful for all of God’s blessings.
We celebrate these gifts and blessings that we enjoy today.
And because all around us is a world of uncertainty and mortality,
We must, each day and every day-- live life fully.

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