

Reeh

Baseball and Koheles

The Sukkos holiday you shall make for seven days...and you shall rejoice on your holiday.
Dvarim 16:13–14

In our prayers, we refer to the holiday of Sukkos as “the time of our joy.” And on Sukkos, we read the scroll of Koheles (Ecclesiastes). A quick glance at Koheles – pick any spot – will let you know that this does not seem like joyous reading. A Rabbi who stood to address his congregation on Sukkos and began speaking of how all is futility and there is no happiness to be found in this world would likely get strange looks. And yet, he would simply be quoting the book of Koheles. Why is this apparently morbid book read on Sukkos? It would almost seem more appropriately placed on Tisha B’Av! And how on earth does it help us experience the “time of our simcha”?

An example may help us bring our point across. The fellow whose life is about baseball is a fascinating specimen. We are not speaking of the garden-variety baseball fan, but rather, of one who finds no pleasure in anything else. Imagine – the only joy that he finds in life is when the New York Yankees win a game. When they lose, he is terribly unhappy. When they make a good trade, he is happy; but if fewer members of the Yankees are invited to the all-star game than members of the Boston Red Sox, he is depressed. This gentleman will find no happiness in life. There are a number of reasons for this. Firstly, the Yankees will not win every game, every year. They will not always succeed. But a more important reason that he will not find happiness is that even if the Yankees were to win every single game, and succeed in every way, he would still not be fulfilled; for, while baseball is a pleasant pastime, it is simply not capable of filling the void in the human heart and psyche. His deep emotional self will remain unrealized if his life is focused completely on Major League Baseball.

In fact, teaches Koheles, this world is also something that gives a person no happiness. Even were one to be completely successful in every physical pursuit, and he were to grow wealthy, receive honor and popularity and every other desire of man, he would still be completely miserable. This is as hard for us to hear as it is for that baseball fan to hear that life is not about baseball. But the only opportunity that this baseball fan has to engage in life productively is to be told clearly, in a way that he can accept, that life is not about baseball. There is love, and there are sunsets. There is fine wine, and there are meadows. Elephants, trees, waterfalls, apples – these are not just obstacles to baseball, but can be great sources of pleasure. We are taught on Sukkos that life is not about our homes. They are all really temporary, like our Sukkahs. We are not living in a world that is permanent, and thus, we ought not make our lives all about this silly world. But we also discover what most baseball fans know as well. In the context of a happy, healthy life, baseball can be a pleasant little diversion, and can even enhance one's life. As long as one's life is not about baseball, baseball can have a place in one's

life. The same is true regarding the pleasures of this world. Ideally, Sukkos is a cathartic experience for us, teaching us that life is not about our temporary homes, permanent as they may seem, but about the real things in life. If we get the message, we can then spend the rest of the year in our homes, for though they are not all that meaningful as goals in themselves, they can wonderfully enhance a life that is focused on the right things.

Sukkos is the time of our joy. We read Koheles on Sukkos, for we discover that the key to happiness is realizing that this little world is, in fact, nothing at all to live for. Life is about truth, happiness and accomplishing real things – in other words, following and implementing and studying and mastering the Torah. When a person does study Torah, and takes the words of Koheles to heart, he is then set on the path to the most pleasurable life that is possible, where neither this world nor the game of baseball is blown out of proportion.