

THE FESTIVAL OF SUKKOS

Time Capsules

Philosophy is an intimidating subject. Most of us would rather deal with concrete intellectual and emotional issues, something into which we can get our teeth - and our hearts. And yet, during the Festival of Sukkoth, amidst our most joyous celebrations, our Sages instituted the reading of King Solomon's Koheleth (Ecclesiastes), an often brooding work that agonizes over the philosophical problems of existence. What is the connection between this work and the transcendent joy of Sukkoth? What message does it carry that could not have been delivered in a more conventional form?

Let us take a brief look into this penetrating book. In its recurring theme, Solomon declares, "All is emptiness," the pleasures of the world are all without value. More than any other Jewish king in history, Solomon enjoyed virtually limitless honor, wealth and luxury. He had vast properties, numerous slaves and one thousand wives and concubines. His palaces were adorned with the most exquisite works of art, and his tables were laden with the finest foods and wines. No material pleasures were denied to him, and no one was in a better position to assess their true value. Having sampled everything that the material world had to offer, he was able to step back and take an honest look at it. And he concluded that all was emptiness. The only reality was to fear and obey Hashem.

So what are we meant to derive from this philosophical evaluation? How can we relate to concepts of extreme unreality when we've just taken out a mortgage on a house and the car needs a new brake job?

Let us look a little further into the words of King Solomon. "For everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under Heaven, a time to be born, a time to die, a time to plant, a time to uproot, a time to weep, a time to laugh, a time to grieve, a time to dance." These lines, so clearly profound and meaningful, have been quoted and paraphrased and borrowed for poems and songs the world over. But what do they really mean? What insight into the meaning of time is immortalized in King Solomon's enigmatic words?

Time, if we stop to think about it, is an inexorable current which sweeps us along through the passages of life. It is the framework in which we live, the receptacle of our experiences. We create terms and classifications - years, days, hours, minutes, seconds - in a vain attempt to gain a modicum of control over time, but it remains uncontrollable. We feel its relentless flow through our very beings. There is no stop

button, no pause button. The unstoppable tick of the clock controls our lives. But what is this thing called time? Is it merely the passive blank canvas on which we paint the stories of our lives? Or is it something of far deeper significance?

These are the questions King Solomon is addressing. "For everything there is a season." Time is more than a path upon which we tread. Time is Hashem's most amazing creation in the natural world. It is a dynamic force, the source of all life energies. The mystical sources point out that time is not defined by the artificial units we assign to it but by the different energies and emanations that infuse it. One particular block of time may be charged with the energies of planting, and that activity is therefore most suited to it. Another block may be charged with the energies of uprooting, and so forth. Each moment has its distinctive challenges and opportunities, and therefore, only by tapping into the correct energy source of each moment of time can we utilize it to its fullest and capture it.

"All is emptiness," King Solomon tells us. The only reality is that which can be contained and preserved in time. The accumulation of material possessions has no real value. It does not connect with the synergies of time. It is no better than a boulder by the riverside, left behind by the rampaging current. Only the way we live and the things we do penetrate to the core of time and are carried along with us through and beyond our lifetimes.

On the Festival of Sukkoth, when we begin the new year with a clean slate, King Solomon's profound message shines for us like a beacon in the dark. Throughout the year, we have been caught up in the mad rush of the daily grind, pummeled by the spinning hands of the clock. We have allowed ourselves to be subjected to the tyranny of time. But with our new insight into time, we can harness and control this relentless flow. If we can perceive the nature of time as it passes, if we do not plant in a time of uprooting nor weep in a time of laughing, we can spare ourselves the frustrations of futility and find serenity and peace of mind. Only then can we capture and preserve the capsules of time for all eternity.