

## Finding Joy Even in Times of Distress

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Mount Zion Temple – Rabbi Adam Stock Spilker

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There is a time for piety and a time for philosophy. Tonight we can handle both.

We look upon our lives, reflect on memory, strive to be good in our relationships with family and friends and God, and gaze into the horizon of our own mortality.

Sometimes the gaze is pious: we can do better and make this life full of meaning.

And at other times, our gaze is more tired, more philosophic, even cynical. Ecclesiastes lifts up this view: “Vanity of vanities,” he writes, “all is vanity הַבָּל הַבָּלִים הַכֹּל הַבָּל *Havel havelim, hakol havel.*”

A few years ago, Katie Bowler had it all, a blessed life, a thriving career, marriage to her high school sweetheart and a newborn son. Then at age 35 she was diagnosed with stage four cancer. Her faith and American can-do spirit taught her one can shape life with a “surge of determination” or else it was a failure. So how could she reconcile her life and her attitude? Bowler, a Duke Divinity School professor, reflects on her journey in a new book “*Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I’ve Loved*”.<sup>1</sup>

In *his* book, we imagine the author of Ecclesiastes to be King Solomon writing in his elder years. He was chastened by life when he penned it, unlike his youthful flirtations with love in Song of Songs or his thoughtful wisdom in the book of Proverbs. King Solomon is not so named in this book. He goes by the name Ecclesiastes, son of David; in Hebrew, *Kohelet ben David*. Kohelet is a name related to the word for community, *kahal* or *kehilah*. Toward the end of his days, Solomon sees the value of community, even as he offers the most poetic and philosophical views of life in our bible.

Vanity of vanities, all is vanity. הַבָּל הַבָּלִים הַכֹּל הַבָּל *Havel havelim, hakol havel.*

In the opening chapters, Solomon tries to discern what has lasting value if everything can go away. Power can be taken away. Possessions too. People too. What makes our life have any more meaning whether a fool or a sage, a rich person or poor? He writes: “So I reflected: ‘The fate of the fool is also destined for me; to what advantage, then, have I been wise?’ And I came to the conclusion that that too was *hevell/futile*.” (2:15).

הַבָּל הַבָּלִים הַכֹּל הַבָּל *Havel havelim, hakol havel.*

Katie Bowler writes:

Every day I prayed the same prayer: “*God, save me. Save me. Save me. Oh, God, remember my baby boy. Remember my son and my husband before you return me to ashes. Before they walk this earth alone.*”

I plead with a God of Maybe, who may or may not let me collect more years. It is a God I love, and a God who breaks my heart.

Anyone who has lived in the aftermath like this knows that it signifies the arrival of three questions so simple that they seem, in turn too shallow and too deep.

Why?  
God are you there?  
What does this suffering mean?

Solomon seems to stumble upon an answer, one that doesn't fully respond to his despair, one that doesn't fully satisfy, but upon reflection is the best response: *simcha*, Joy. Respond to life with joy, no matter its challenges, no matter its embattlements.

The word *simcha* appears more times in Ecclesiastes, in *Kohelet*, than in all of Torah. Joy only appears once in Genesis, once in each of the other books except for Deuteronomy which has twelve references. But Solomon speaks of *simcha* seventeen times in *Kohelet*. One of the most depressing books of our Bible has more joy than all of Torah!

*Simcha* feels like an emotion that is far from the solemnity of Kol Nidre. And it is. This is the night of looking at our lives with honesty, aware of our mortality – the empty ark earlier in the service is meant to look like our empty casket – so that we cannot turn away.

Yom Kippur is a deprivation of joys, no eating, no drinking, no sexual relationships. We turn inward to assess, to seek forgiveness for what we have done wrong, and to commit to change.

Yet in only five nights from now comes a holy day that is completely the opposite. Sukkot is full-bodied life, called “the Festival”, *heChag*, the most celebratory of all holy days. It is about food and abundance. In our farming days, it was the time of the harvest.

Amazingly, *simcha* does not appear at all with Pesach, only once with Shavuot, but three times with Sukkot in Torah. I would think that on Pesach commemorating freedom from slavery, we would rejoice. I would think that on the day we receive the Torah, I would rejoice. But the day that celebrates 40 years of wandering in a shed without a roof, then we rejoice!?

We hardly notice that we are celebrating in a flimsy hut. The structure, the *sukkah*, is a reminder of *Kohelet*'s refrain: life is fragile, shaky, even temporary. However long we have to live, wandering in the wilderness of our days, our response can be *simcha*. It seems incongruous and so right.

Yom Kippur and Sukkot are linked, less than a week apart, the holy day that is about mortality and the holy day that is about our response.

We read *Kohelet* once a year on the Shabbat during Sukkot. The rabbis wanted *Kohelet*'s philosophic view to temper our joy: “I have further observed under the sun [says *Kohelet*] that: The race is not won by the swift, Nor the battle by the valiant; Nor is bread won by the wise, Nor wealth by the intelligent, Nor favor by the learned. For the time of mischance comes to all. (9:11).” *Kohelet*'s recognition is that there is a limit to what we can do to avoid challenges in

life; there is a limit to what prayers can accomplish; there is even a limit to what kale can do or going to the gym or getting the right gene pool. Solomon's observation is unvarnished by ideology or theology; just an unblinking stare into what he has seen. By having us read Kohelet during Sukkot, it is as if our tradition is saying that there is a time for faith and there is a time for doubt and even cynicism.

This came to Katie Bowler too:

I was becoming more and more like Solomon in Ecclesiastes, pulling at dark threads. There is a time to get, and a time to lose. A time to tend, and a time to sew. But at baby showers and dinners for job promotions, I listened to the tradition anew. There is a time to speak and a time to shut your piehole." (p. 45)

We don't have all the answers. Friends who offer pat phrases try but often miss. Silence may be better.

Solomon's frustrations are summed up by the skeptical statement: הַבָּל הַבָּלִים הַכֹּל הָהֵבֶל *Havel havelim, hakol havel*. Wealth, wisdom, even wokeness – all is vanity. All is *hevel*.

What does *hevel* really mean? It is translated as vanity, emptiness, meaningless, without purpose, and futile, but the most accurate translation is "fleeting breath". Better than vanity of vanities, is *fleeting breath of fleeting breath*. *Hevel* is like the mist on a cold morning where you can see your breath in the air before you, and then it disappears.

*Hevel* appears long before Solomon ever uses the word, all the way back in Genesis connected to the first person ever to die. Solomon is well-aware of the story of Cain and Abel, and what is Abel's name in Hebrew? You guessed it, *Hevel*. Abel's name is "Fleeting Breath."

"Fleeting Breath's" brother is Cain, from the Hebrew word to "buy" as his mother Eve even states, "*kaniti*, I have acquired a son." Cain is acquisitions personified.

The first murder is not about a shepherd versus a farmer. It is about our struggle for meaning in life. Is life about our mere fleeting breath or about what we do with our life to stave off that mortality? The inclusion of the story of Cain and Abel is about trying to defeat death through building up of possessions and even children, thinking that our determination will shape our life. But that sense of protection, by trying to avoid our mortality, actually commits the first murder and Cain is forever marked.

Kohelet is left focused on Abel, despondent with Cain, knowing that possessions and power and people will not save us from all being fleeting breath.

Here you have King Solomon, the richest, most powerful man in his day who has everything, writing with despondency that at the end of the day we are all just a breath that can be extinguished at any moment. הַבָּל הַבָּלִים הַכֹּל הָהֵבֶל *Havel havelim, hakol havel*.

How do we respond to this reality? Here is how Kohelet responds:

- Chapter 3, verse 12: I know that there is nothing better for people than to rejoice and do good while they live.
- Chapter 8, verse 15: So I commend rejoicing in life, because there is nothing better for a person under the sun than to eat and drink and rejoice.
- Chapter 11, verse 8: However many years anyone may live, let him rejoice in them all.

Simcha is the way Kohelet faces his philosophy.

Bowler goes through a lot in her journey with cancer. She ends her book with this sentence: “I am going to die, just not today.” Pages before, as she thinks about death, she thinks about what she wishes for her husband and her son. She writes: “...the questions are sticking to me. On long walks, in hospital waiting rooms, in moments before sleep, *What do I want to give them?* ... For Toban [my husband], I write a word and then I shake my head. It is impossible: *joy.*”

But it is not impossible.

Joy is not the same as happiness. Happiness is a task of a lifetime. It is the first word of our Psalms, “Happy/*Ashrei* is the one who has not followed the counsel of the wicked... [That one] is like a tree planted beside streams of water, which yields its fruit in season, whose foliage never fades, and whatever it produces thrives” (Psalm 1:1-3.)

A beautiful vision, but you can’t tell someone to be happy, to be a tree whose foliage never fades. You can, however, give someone a moment of joy. Even when life is hard; even in our most troubled times, even wallowing in our sorrows, it is possible to have joy. It may be tough and for some in the depths of depression unimaginable, but others might be able to lead you there.

In March 2002, I was in Israel during the 2<sup>nd</sup> Intifada with sometimes daily, horrific terror attacks. The nation was traumatized. And then I saw an Israeli wedding. An impossible juxtaposition and yet you have never seen such joy!

This summer, I taught the book of Kohelet to teenagers at our Reform Movement camp OSRUI in Wisconsin. They, in their youthful, dramatic ways immediately took to Kohelet’s dark views. Fortunately, they also appreciated the way to pull out hope and joy from this text. I also shared with them a memory that, in a funny way, almost haunts me, the day we voted joy out of Mount Zion’s vision statement. It was 2003 and we were having a Board meeting in Margolis Hall. We had conducted over 500 conversations with congregants and we were putting their voices into the language of a new vision. Our facilitator asked whether we should add the word “joy” as a core purpose for Mount Zion. “In our holy community, we celebrate, comfort, and create meaning in our lives while we seek justice in our world.” Should we add that we bring joy? We debated and the Board voted no to joy. In my younger days, I didn’t think this was such a loss; now I disagree.

So too Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, whose insights on Kohelet are infused throughout this sermon. He writes: “Toward the end of his life, having been deaf for twenty years, Beethoven composed one of the greatest pieces of music ever written, his Ninth Symphony. Intuitively he sensed that

this work needed the sound of human voices. It became the West's first choral symphony. The words he set to music were Schiller's *Ode to Joy*. 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<sup>ii</sup> be defeated, for its spirit can never be broken nor its hope destroyed."

The human body is like a sukkah, a temporary dwelling. Both are impermanent. There is no Palace of Stone that can save us from death. True it is King Solomon and not his father King David who built the Temple in Jerusalem. But Solomon knew at the end of his days, it is the sukkah that can actually bring joy; it tempers expectations; it reminds us of reality of *hevel*, of fleeting breath, where nevertheless joy exists. We may not even notice how flimsy the sukkah is, how vulnerable it is standing outside under a thatch roof, susceptible to the winds and rains.

Katie Bowler writes:

Joy persists somehow and I soak it in. The horror of cancer has made everything seem like it is painted in bright colors. I think the same thoughts again and again: Life is so beautiful. Life is so hard. (p. 123)

Life can be beautiful and hard. Sukkot will follow Yom Kippur. We will turn from the question, "Am I going to be written in the book of life?" to saying "Whether or not I am written into the book of life; whether or not my health fails me, no matter what troubles are before me, can I see my life as a temporary structure and nonetheless find in it joy?"

On this Kol Nidre, aware of our fleeting breath, הַבֵּל הַכֹּל הַבְּלִים הַבְּלִים *Havel havelim, hakol havel*, we can follow Kohelet's lead and choose to respond with *simcha*.

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<sup>i</sup> Katie Bowler, "Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved" – Reviewed in Duke Divinity School News: <https://divinity.duke.edu/news/everything-happens-reason-and-other-lies-i%E2%80%99ve-loved-0>

<sup>ii</sup> Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, "The Pursuit of Joy – Ki Tavo (5775)". <http://rabbisacks.org/the-pursuit-of-joy-ki-tavo-5775/>