

Shabbat Chol Hamo'ed Succot: Everything is New Under the Sun

Dear Friends, Mo'adim L'Simcha,

On Succot it is customary to read the book of Kohelet in shul or at home. Ashkenazi and Yemenite Jews read it on Shabbat of Succot.

Kohelet is attributed to King Solomon because of the opening words:

“The words of Koheleth son of David, king in Jerusalem.” It is one of the five megillot (scrolls) in the “Writings” of the Bible, and one of the three books called “The Books of Wisdom”, the others being Proverbs and Job.

Kohelet's basic experience is one of despair. Everything seems to repeat itself, and therefore everything feels stale and utterly futile. There is nothing new under the sun: **“All such things are wearisome... That which has been is that which shall be, and that which has been done is that which shall be done; and there is nothing new under the sun. Sometimes there is a phenomenon of which one may say, “Look, this is new!”— [but, alas] it too has already occurred, in ages that went by before us.”** (Kohelet 1: 8-10)

Is this feeling familiar? The oppressive sense that everything is already known, recycled, has-been?

On the other hand, are you also familiar with the wonderful, energizing feeling that comes with renewal? For example, a new idea, something entirely outside of the box, that strikes like lightning?

The former experience, that of the known and banal, is very familiar to us. The latter, on the other hand, that bolt of lightning, is less so. Where does it come from?

Where does any renewal come from? How is something created? Where does the ability to rejuvenate ourselves come from?

There are those who will say that both repetition and originality come from the same feverish and repetitious brain that activates us all, because there is no other source.

In my experience, renewal and repetition come from two different sources.

Both are processed by our brain, but one comes from within the box we call our mind, whereas the second comes from outside of it. It arrives as a burst of inspiration, a flash of new thought.

Our brain by far prefers repetition and habit. It seeks to strengthen the intricate, permanent wiring that is achieved through repetition of familiar actions and responses. This is its greatness.

Our education system knows this all too well, teaching and educating by means of repetition and - at best - deepening knowledge already acquired. The graduation diploma we receive at the end of 12 years of school is the stamp of approval, that we are the proud product of the educational process. The diploma declares, that we are prepared to deal with life: "All systems have been properly installed, and they are ready to begin their job. You already know everything you will ever need to know, and from this point on you will use this knowledge in order to cope with any new situation you might find yourselves in. You will not acquire any radically new knowledge, but rather, you will deepen and enrich the knowledge you already have, because everything that is important has already been learned, and we are proud of you."

This may sound somewhat cynical, but it is an ingenious process, and it is very effective from an evolutionary perspective, because we can't invent new coping mechanisms every time we are confronted with new obstacles. This would be a tremendous waste of energy, and a danger to our survival as an organism.

...Until we reach Kohelet's age - not the chronological age, but the developmental one - when we feel utterly bored by everything we already know and we are desperate for renewal. (No, not everyone reaches this stage in his or her life. There are those who happily remain in the realm of what is known and familiar, and that is absolutely fine!)

For those seeking renewal, what stands in their way? Why not simply "open our minds" to new possibilities??

Because it is very difficult to do!

We are all imprisoned by and within the walls of our early programming. Our existing mental wiring is stronger than our desire for change. The mind is actually programmed to resist change because change is a threat to survival. Stick with what works! So stepping outside of the box and enabling something new to happen is not at all a simple thing. Our Sages said **"A prisoner cannot free himself from prison, but depends on another to release him from his shackles."** (Brachot 5:B) Or, as another Jewish sage, Albert Einstein, said: "No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it."

At the end of Kohelet there is a verse which many researchers think was added on by a prejudiced editor. It definitely sounds quite “religious” for a book that is so revolutionary and anti-establishment. Whether true or not, this ending is the only means I know (though there are surely others) to allow for renewal. Be forewarned, though, it must be read with an open mind: **“The sum of the matter, when all is said and done: Revere God and observe His commandments! For this the lot of the human being.”** (Kohelet 12: 14)

I understand this final verse to mean that at the end of the day, **from a human perspective**, all has already been said and done, and nothing new is possible. But from the Divine perspective, rejuvenation is always possible.

The Divine - **in the broadest, most infinite sense, and definitely not in the narrow nationalist, ethnic, or Shulchan-Aruch sense** - is synonymous with the Source of Creation, the Life-Nurturing spring of energizing water which permeates all of Creation. This, I have come to believe, is the only possible source of genuine renewal.

For many Israelis, the word “Elohim” is challenging, because it activates a deep-seated wiring which warns them against the religious-establishment-God, the God of the Chief Rabbinate, which is trying to coerce everyone into abiding His laws...

If you too are stuck in that paradigm (and I hope you are not), then do yourselves a favor: get out of this wiring, out of this scenario. God is NOT on the Rabbinate’s payroll.

So how do we allow rejuvenation to penetrate through our old wiring?

It’s really quite simple. And if it seems complicated, it is only because the mind has gotten in the way.

One needs to understand and accept that our precious, brilliant mind - and I mean it! - is also very limited. It is bound by what it already knows, and it indeed knows a lot. But its expertise is in recycling knowledge and not inventing anything new. Renewal is a threat to it. Therefore, if we stop taking our knowledge and our minds too seriously, thinking they have anything to do with truth, then this newly acquired humility will make room for awe, and both humility and awe will allow infinite Divine wisdom - the source of all renewal - to shine through. Indeed, it all begins with a willingness to see our mind for what it is: limited, and regurgitating. And then we become open to noticing flashes of inspiration, flashes of ingenuity.

It is to this God of renewal that we turn to every morning, saying “He who renews the act of Creation every day, always.” Every day, every moment the universe is renewing itself and nothing is as it was previously.

Outside of the box everything is new under the sun. Everything!

Shabbat Shalom and Chag Sameach,
Elisha