

Chagim uMoadim

— from the Masorti Movement



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Sukkot - True Happiness

Several years have already passed since I read a fascinating book by Rabbi Harold Kushner: *"When all you've ever wanted isn't enough."*

I remember I was very young and I was going through a phase of profound personal search and what comes to my mind are images of how I read it extremely quickly because it really caught me and I recommend it to you very much. But more than that I recommend the book on which Kushner's work is based, which is Kohelet – Ecclesiastes – a little twelve-chapter book that is in our Tanach and is read traditionally in Sukkot's Shabat.

What is Kohelet about? It's the story about an angry, cynic and skeptical man who has doubts around God, life, happiness, and questions the imperative of doing good. "What do people get from all of their hard work and struggles under the sun?" "vanity of vanities, and all is vanity." It is about a man who persistently asks himself in a crudely and confronting way what is the meaning of all that man does. What for? What does wisdom or wealth, pleasure or health really mean? Why should we be good to others? According to the Tradition, this book was written by King Shlomo (Solomon) who in his old age after he had accumulated wealth and power, had many women and experienced fame and many pleasures, he felt empty and lacking of meaning.

Precisely in the festival where we leave the comfort and safety of our homes and when we're prescribed to rejoice "vesamachta bechagecha", we ask ourselves what is the meaning of our material possessions.

Kushner points out in his book that if any person is asked what is more important to them, making money or dedicate themselves to their families, almost anyone will say family without hesitation. But if we observe how that same person invests their time and energies we'll realize that they don't live in accordance to their ideals. That man has been convinced that if he leaves to work earlier in the morning and comes back more tired in the evening, he's showing how much he loves his family because he goes out of his way to give them all the material goods advertised.

If we ask any person what means more to him or her, the approval from strangers or the affection of loved ones, they would not even understand why they're being asked that question. Obviously the most important people for them are their family and close friends. However, how many of us have suffocated our children's spontaneity out of fear of what neighbors and strangers might think? How many times have we unloaded over the people that we had closer for what someone at work did to us? And how many have become irritable at home because we were on a diet to be more attractive to the eyes of people who don't know us enough to see beyond appearances?

Ask anyone what they expect from life and they will probably answer: “All I want is to be happy”. And I believe them. I truly believe that most people aspire to be happy and that all of us make every effort to be it.

We buy books, attend classes, change our lifestyle in a constant effort to achieve that commodity so difficult to define that is happiness. But in spite of all that I suspect that most people are not happy most of the time. Why is that happiness sensation so illusory both for those who find what they want in life and those who don't? Why some people that have so many motives to be happy feel inside them that something is missing? Is the wanting to be happy asking too much of life? Could it be that happiness, as well as eternal youth and perpetual movement, is an unattainable goal, no matter how much we struggle to achieve it? Or is it possible for humans to be happy but the problem is that they have taken the wrong path?

Oscar Wilde once wrote: **“In this world there are only two tragedies. One is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it.”** What he was trying to warn us about is that no matter how much we try to do things right success will not leave us satisfied. When we get to that point after sacrificing so many things in the pursuit of success we understand that it wasn't that what we wanted. Those gratifications create almost as many problems as solutions. **Our souls are thirsty of meaning and that is what Sukkot is about, with the frailty of the sukka that we build.** What we yearn for is the sensation that we have learnt to live in such a way that our existence is important, that the world is at least a little different for the fact that we have traveled through it, that we have impacted and left a mark in other's lives, that we transcend through the actions of goodness that we have done.

The book of Kohelet that we read in Sukkot teaches us that if we think that it is necessary to avoid pain for life to be pleasurable, the risk is that we become such experts in not suffering that eventually we'll feel nothing: not love, or joy, or hope.

Sukkot, the festival of joy reminds us that life is not measured by the cost of your house, nor your car, your bank account, your fame or your power but by your capability to love and be loved.

Chag Sameach!

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Rabbi Leonel Levy

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