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A Parsha Weekly by the Friedman Kollel of Metropolitan Washington

Succos
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Gatherings of Joy

By Rabbi Eliezer Lachman, Rosh HaKollel

On this Shabbos, Shabbos Chol HaMoed Succos, it is customary to read Koheles, the Book of Ecclesiastes. Why do we read a book of the Bible that does not have any apparent connection with the Succos holiday? Koheles, with its rather somber teachings of the vanity and meaninglessness of human striving, seems to conflict with the joyous mood of Succos, which is Zman Simchaseinu, the time of our rejoicing. Some have suggested that Koheles is read to moderate the rejoicing of Succos so we do overindulge in merriment and levity, however this explanation does not sufficiently justify the custom. What, then, is the reason for reading Koheles on Succos?

There is a very deep thematic connection between Succos and Koheles. The name "Koheles" is derived from the Hebrew word kahal, congregation. King Solomon was called Koheles because he caused people to congregate and assemble to hear his wise teachings. The Book of Koheles is a compilation of these teachings. Succos is called Chag HaAsif, the Festival of Gathering (Shemos 23:16). Inasmuch as congregations (or assemblages) are nothing other than gatherings of people, we can readily see the first glimmer of a thematic connection.

But this only begs another question: Why is Succos called Chag HaAsif? On a simple level, this is a reference to the predominant agricultural practice in the Land of Israel during Biblical times. Farmers would leave the grain in the fields to dry during the summer months and bring it indoors right before Succos. They would then celebrate and thank Hashem on Succos that they were able to ingather the crop and possess it to eat or to sell during the coming months. But what relevance does this have to us? And what does this have to do with the theme of the Succos holiday?

Maharal explains that while the aforementioned explanation of Chag HaAsif is true, there is a deeper significance to this appellation as well. Succos is not only the time in which we ingather the grain into our houses and silos; it is also the time in which Hashem ingathers the Jewish people into His structures. This is what happened in the desert after leaving Egypt-Hashem enveloped the Jewish people in Clouds of Glory that protected them throughout the forty years of wandering. This is reenacted every year on Succos-we leave our houses and Hashem ingathers us in the Succah, signifying that we are under His protection and not under the protection of wood, bricks and mortar.

The Book of Koheles, which gets its name from the gatherings of people who came to hear and learn from the wisdom of King Solomon, is dealing with this very concept. It, too, focuses on the ingathering of people to Hashem, but in a somewhat different way. It teaches that human desires, plans and accomplishments are "futilities," in that they have no permanence or independent meaning, but are all ultimately subsumed (or "ingathered") within the unchanging Divine plan for the world. This is why these teachings, in particular, are placed in a book titled "Koheles," even though undoubtedly many other Torah teachings were taught to assemblages. It is also why, though these teachings appear on their surface to be sobering and perhaps even depressing, when internalized properly, they bring one to a deeper level of simcha, because of the connection between the human and Divine that they clarify.

Thus, the lesson of this reading would seem to be that it is not enough to leave our physical houses in order to be ingathered by God; we must also leave our intellectual "houses," i.e. the beliefs that set us apart from Him as if we live and act in "houses" of our own that He cannot enter. Succos is about leaving both sets of houses and living only in "the shade of the Holy One."

About the Friedman Kollel

The Rabbi Samuel and Zehava Friedman Kollel, located in Olney, Maryland, offers learning opportunities for Jews of all backgrounds. These include one-on-one chavrusas, public lectures and classes for men and women, as well as after-school structured learning for public school teens. The Kollel operates under the leadership of Rabbi Eliezer Lachman and Rabbi Shaya Milikowsky. For more information or to sponsor an upcoming Capital Torah, please contact Rabbi Elyakim Milikowsky at FriedmanKollel@BetterFamily.org.

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