

CAN WE ENVISION A DIFFERENT FUTURE?

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THE CATASTROPHIC EVENTS of last year's Simhat Torah serve as a stark reminder of the adage in our Haggadah, "In every generation, they rise up against us to annihilate us." These events mark a turning point, further entrenching a worldview steeped in this notion of inevitable conflict. The belief that things can be different has steadily eroded, fueled not only by lived experiences but also by a pervasive discourse that assumes a predetermined fate—both for humanity in general and for the Jewish people in particular. One example of this is an assertion that Hamas fighters are the modern-day Amalek. This analogy implies that Amalek is a constant threat, merely changing form across time. Similarly, the words, "by the sword you shall live" (Genesis 27:40), are seen by some—and maybe by many—as an unalterable Jewish-Israeli destiny of violence.¹

In the shadow of these events, optimism for positive change is withering. This loss of hope breeds passivity, creating a mental and practical stagnation. People fall into a cycle of inertia, perceiving reality with no horizon for improvement. The possibility for change seems more remote than ever. Crucially, we lack the

starting point, the unwavering belief, the courage, and the resourcefulness to keep trying despite setbacks.

Our core faith was shaken on Simhat Torah because standing before such immense evil locks us into paralysis. It makes us see the world as predetermined, a fate we accept when we feel only evil lies ahead.

The events of October 7th may have also undermined our ability to do *teshuvah* (repentance). Without a belief that things can be different and for the better, the very foundation of *teshuvah* crumbles.

Unexpectedly, it's Ecclesiastes, the book traditionally associated with deep melancholy, that offers a counterpoint. Read during Sukkot, just before Simhat Torah,

Ecclesiastes reminds us to act despite the world's uncertainties. Even with the constant threat of evil and the universal certainty of death ("the same fate awaits them all," 2:14), Ecclesiastes calls us to action.

One verse that exemplifies this concept appears toward the conclusion of the book:

קהלת יא:ב

תְּרוֹחֶלֶק לְשִׁבְעָה וְגַם לְשִׁמוּנָה כִּי לֹא תִדַע מָה־
יְהִיָּה רָעָה עַל־הָאָרֶץ:

“PERHAPS THIS YEAR,
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PRECEDES IT, AND
WHAT MIGHT FOLLOW.”

1 I discussed many of these issues with R. Elazar Symon and R. Avi Killip in our podcast, *On Sacred Ground*, launched in response to October 7th. You can listen to the episodes on your podcast apps or here: <https://hadar.org/on-sacred-ground>.

Ecclesiastes 11:2

Distribute portions to seven or even to eight, for you cannot know what misfortune may occur on earth.

The verse's apparent simplicity advises diversifying one's resources and opportunities, allocating them widely among seven or even eight parts. This advice is linked to the acknowledgment of uncertainty about the future: "For you do not know what misfortune may occur on the earth." The verse suggests that while adversity and evil will likely come, its exact nature and timing remain unknown. Therefore, it advocates preparedness through diverse measures, ensuring readiness for whatever challenges lie ahead.

Roni Megidov, in her book *There is Life Before Death*, explains the worldview of the verse:

הנחת היסוד היא שבנושאים רבים הקשורים
בו ובמעשיו אין לאדם ידיעה. הוא איננו יודע
מתי צפויה פורענות.... רבים הם הדברים
הסמויים מן העין.... על אף נסיבות קיומיות
אלה של היעדר ודאות, אל ימנע עצמו אדם
מעשייה.... המתנה לתנאים הנכונים, כלומר
לאפשרות המתאימה ביותר, לביטחון המוחלט,
תבולם יוזמה ותוביל לחידלון.

The basic premise is that, in many matters related to him and his actions, man has no knowledge. He does not know when calamity is expected.... Many things are hidden from view.... Despite these existential circumstances of the lack of certainty, a person should not prevent himself from action.... Waiting for the right conditions, that is, for the ideal opportunity, for absolute security, will curb initiative and lead to failure.²

According to this interpretation, the verse before us does not diminish uncertainty or fear by simply proclaiming "it will be good." Instead, it calls upon individuals to take proactive measures in the face of uncertainty and the constant threat of evil. Moreover, the verse advocates for engagement on numerous and diverse fronts—allocating portions

to the seven and even to the eight. It rejects inertia, the comfort of familiarity, and the safety of routine. Instead, it acknowledges that uncertainty and the potential for adversity should spur individuals to heightened activity, embracing a variety of innovative approaches—without the assurance beforehand of which will succeed.

In the midrashic collection *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana*, a direct connection is drawn between *Simhat Torah* and this active worldview of Ecclesiastes, assuming that the future holds bad and evil.

A Sage begins his *derashah* by referencing our verse from Ecclesiastes (11:2), which at first glance appears unrelated to the holiday. How does this verse connect to *Simhat Torah*? The number eight, mentioned in both the verse in Ecclesiastes and in the opening verse of the Torah portion for the holiday, "on the eighth day" (Numbers 29:35), serves as a technical link anchoring the connection. However, the *derashah* in *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* also develops a conceptual link between these two verses:

פסיקתא דרב כהנא כח

ר' לוי אומר: "תן חלק לשבעה" (קהלת יא:ב),
אילו שבעת ימי החג. "וגם לשמונה" (שם),
ביום השמיני עצרת תהיה" (במדבר כט:לה).

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R. Levi says, "Distribute portions to the seven" (Ecclesiastes 11:2)—these are seven days of the festival [of Sukkot]. "And also to the eight," (11:2) [referring to] "on the eighth day there shall be an assembly" (Numbers 29:35).

The *derashah* prompts us to conceptualize Shemini Atzeret and *Simhat Torah* within the context of its preceding festival, Sukkot, which spans seven days. *Simhat Torah* stands as an "additional" holiday, occurring on the eighth day after the initial seven days of celebration.³ According to this *midrash*, Ecclesiastes elucidates that there is intrinsic value in "more," a value born out of humanity's inherent uncertainty about the future.

Rashi offers this explanation of the verse:

2 Roni Megidov, *Yesh Hayyim Lifnei ha-Mavet* (2024), pp. 162-163.

3 In the Diaspora, Shemini Atzeret and Simhat Torah are different days (days eight and nine); in Israel, they are the same (eighth) day. Therefore, the *Pesikta*, from 5th-6th century Eretz Yisrael, does not treat them as separate days.

רש"י קהלת יא:ב
 "תן חלק לשבעה" - קרבנות צבור של שבעת
 ימי פסח.
 "וגם לשמונה" - של שמונת ימי החג
 "כי לא תדע מה יהיה רעה" - אם יחרב הבית,
 ולא תקריבו עוד, ויועילו קרבנות הראשונים,
 לבטל גזרה הרעה:
 דבר אחר: "כי לא תדע מה יהיה רעה" -
 לא ידעת מה נגזר על הגשמים בחג. ויועילו
 הקרבנות, ויבטלו גזרות רעות:

Rashi to Ecclesiastes 11:2

"Distribute portions to seven"—The communal sacrifices of the seven days of Pesah.

"Or even to eight"—The eight days of the Festival of Sukkot.

"For you cannot know what misfortune may occur on earth."— If the Temple will be destroyed, and you will no longer be able to bring sacrifices, [perhaps] the first sacrifices will be effective in annulling the evil decree.

Another explanation: "For you cannot know what misfortune may occur on earth"—You do not know what has been decreed on the Festival regarding the rains, and [perhaps] the sacrifices will be effective in annulling evil decrees.

Rashi, likely drawing from the *midrash*, correlates the call for increased activity, sacrifices, and expanded communication with a twofold uncertainty highlighted by Ecclesiastes' admonition: "for you cannot know what misfortune may occur on earth." Firstly, the verse underscores uncertainty about the future: since we cannot predict whether personal troubles, religious crises, national discord, or even war may arise. Secondly, there is uncertainty regarding the impact of our actions: what will prove beneficial, influence reality, and foster connections? Therefore, the directive to do more—to divide into seven and even eight—emerges from Ecclesiastes as a profound response to this dual uncertainty: grappling with the meaning and consequences of present actions while acknowledging the unpredictable nature of the future and its challenges.

The future is influenced by the past, intertwined almost fatefully, shaping its essence. Yet, the future is not monochromatic; it can appear bleak and stagnant—a result of fear and the repetition of familiar patterns—or vibrant and varied—born from innovation, movement, and expansive endeavors.

By linking Simhat Torah to an eighth attempt, an eighth action, and giving an eighth portion, the author transforms this holiday into a day that calls for ever-increasing activity. Simhat Torah becomes not a day of stopping, but a day of ever-more experimentation, even in the face of possible failure. Ecclesiastes encourages us to persist, repeatedly trying anew, and demands that our worldview cannot be confined to a single event—no matter how foundational it might seem—recognizing that various influences shape our perception and reality. This openness allows for change, for *teshuvah*, and even for hope.

Perhaps this year, we should aspire to understand Simhat Torah not only within the context of the immediate past but also in light of what precedes it, and what might follow. I pray that this Simhat Torah will bring a renewed ability to think creatively, the courage to take action, and the resourcefulness to keep trying, especially with innovative approaches, in the face of any challenges that may lie ahead. ♦