Why Kohelet on Sukkot?

As a psychiatrist, I was once asked to explain why we read Kohelet on Sukkot, the season of joy. After all, Kohelet is so terribly depressing, negating everything as futile and worthless.

Sukkot is indeed the season of simcha. However, our concept of simcha is flawed.

I have heard people say, “If only I could get out of debt, I would be happy,” or “If only I had a better job, I’d be happy,” or “If only I could get relief from my arthritis, I’d be happy,” or “If only my daughter would do a shidduch, I’d be happy.” The “If onlys” are countless. I’ve been around long enough to see people get what they thought would make them happy, but remain unhappy.

Happiness does not depend on comfort or pleasure. They are indeed admirable desires but they do not produce happiness. The Talmud says, “No one leaves this world having achieved even half of his desires.”

In Kohelet, Shlomo states this clearly. “As a king, I was the richest of all. I did not deny myself any human pleasure. But I found that this too was a vexation.”

It is wonderful to enjoy good things, but don’t deceive yourself that these enjoyments will bring you happiness. Happiness is achieved when you work toward becoming what G-d wants you to be, a mentsch!

What separates a mentsch from animals is not his greater intellect. Animals are totally self-absorbed, seeking their physical pleasures. One cannot be happy if one lives a life of self-absorption, seeking pleasure. You are a mentsch when you get out of your own skin, when you do chesed, when you have a goal in life of serving G-d instead of expecting that G-d should fulfill all of your desires.

Shlomo ends Kohelet by saying, “In summary, fear G-d and do His mitzvot, because then you will be a mentsch.” Only when one is a mentsch can one be happy. So, reading Kohelet on Sukkot is most important. We live in a culture that places self-gratification as a goal in life. Kohelet tells us this can never result in simcha.

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