

Chol HaMoed Succot 5782, 2021

“Why Kohelet?”

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, Shayndel bat Mordechai Yehudah, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah, Chana bat Sarah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The public reading of *Megillat Kohelet* is one of the highlights of *Shabbat Chol HaMoed Succot*. *Chazal* universally maintain that *Shlomo HaMelech* authored this work, as he did *Mishle* and *Shir HaShirim*. Our Sages differ, however, regarding the order of their composition:

He [*Shlomo HaMelech*] wrote three works: *Mishle*, *Kohelet* and *Shir HaShirim*. Which one did he compose first? ... Rabbi Chiya Rabbah said: “He wrote *Mishle* first, and afterwards *Shir HaShirim*, followed by *Kohelet*.” ...Rabbi Natan said: “He wrote *Shir HaShirim* first, and afterwards *Mishle* followed by *Kohelet*.” He brought his proof from the life cycle of humankind (literally, *derech erez*): When a man is young, he says words of song [*Shir HaShirim*], as he grows older, he says parables [*Mishle*], and when he reaches old age, he proclaims words of futility [*Kohelet*; literally, *divrei havalim*). Rabbi Yanai, the father-in-law of Rabbi Ami, said: “Everyone is in agreement that *Kohelet* was said last.” (*Midrash Shir HaShirim Rabbah* Vilna edition, *Parasha* I, translation and brackets my own)

If we apply this *midrash* to our practice of reading *Megillat Shir HaShirim* on Pesach and *Megillat Kohelet* on Succot, a crucial idea emerges: When people are young, they are in the springtime of their lives, the perfect moment to proclaim words of song and joy; therefore, Pesach, the festival par excellence of spring, is the ideal occasion upon which to read *Megillat Shir HaShirim*. In contrast, while Pesach is in many ways about the springtime and beginnings, Succot, which the Torah additionally calls *Chag HaAsif* (the Fall Harvest Festival, *Sefer Shemot* 34:22), represents the end of the growing season and

the temporary cessation of creating new agricultural life. As such, it is somewhat analogous to the period of old age, when many people recognize that the hopes, dreams, and visions of their youth which they longed “to grow” remain unrealized. Consequently, it is the most appropriate time of the year to read *Megillat Kohelet*, whose second verse proclaims the famous poignant words, “Vanity of vanities, said *Kohelet*; vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” (“*Havel havalim amar Kohelet havel havalim hakol havel;*” this and all Tanach and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*).

This is one of the many possible approaches to understanding why we read *Megillat Kohelet* on *Chol HaMoed Succot*. Yet, an even more fundamental, and seemingly radical, question can be asked: Why do we read *Megillat Kohelet* at all? In Rabbinic terminology, why is it included in Tanach? I must stress that this is not my original question. It was implicitly asked more than 1400 years ago in *Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 30b*: “Rav Yehudah the son of Rav Shmuel bar Shilat said in the name of Rav: ‘The Sages sought to place *Sefer Kohelet* in the *genizah* (hidden archives) because its words are contradictory.’” The *Gemara* continues and explains why *Megillat Kohelet* did not meet this ignominious fate:

And why did they not place it in the *genizah*? This is because its beginning and conclusion contain words of Torah. Its beginning comprises words of Torah, as it states: “What profit has man in all his toil that he toils under the sun (*tachat hashemesh*, 1:3)?” And, as it was said in the yeshivah of Rav Yanai: “*Tachat hashemesh* is where man’s toil has no intrinsic value, before the sun [existed, however,] this is where his exertions have true meaning (Rashi, 1040-1105, explains that the Torah was created before Hashem formed the world; hence, Torah study has inherent worth.) The end of *Megillat Kohelet* is also composed of *divrei Torah*. As it is written: “The end of the matter, everything having been heard, fear G-d and keep His commandments, for this is the entire man.” (12:13)

In sum, *Megillat Kohelet* was saved from the *genizah*, “because its beginning and conclusion contain words of Torah.” In my estimation, the penultimate *pasuk* of *Megillat*

Kohelet, “The end of the matter, everything having been heard, approach Elokim in awe and keep His commandments, for this is the entire man,” is an aphoristic summation of what we, as a people and as individuals, should do in order to authentically serve Hashem. This is congruent with Rashi’s gloss on our verse:

The end of the matter, everything having been heard, approach Elokim in awe: “What you can, do, and let your heart be to Heaven.”

And keep His commandments, for this is the entire man: “Because for this matter, the entire man was created.”

Rashi’s words, “what you can, do,” are reminiscent of Rabbi Tarfon’s epigrammatic phrase: “It is not up to you to complete the work, but because this is so, you are not free from undertaking the task.” (*Pirkei Avot* II:16, translation my own) The work and the task in this statement refer to the study of Torah. Moreover, Rashi teaches us that this is not a trivial pursuit. Rather, the mission of Torah study performed with hearts and minds totally dedicated to *Shamayim* enables us to “keep His commandments” — the ultimate purpose of our creation. Little wonder, then, that the entire congregation repeats our *pasuk* aloud at the conclusion of the public reading of *Megillat Kohelet*: “The end of the matter, everything having been heard, approach Elokim in awe and keep His commandments, for this is the entire man.” May our awe of Hashem and dedication to His *mitzvot* bring us ever closer to Him. *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom and may Hashem in His infinite mercy remove the pandemic from *klal Yisrael* and all the nations of the world.

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of Rabbi Soloveitchik's English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link: [The Rav zatzal](#)