

5779 Perceptions Issue #865

In the beginning, God made the Heaven
and the Earth. (Bereishis 1:1)

AND, OF COURSE everything else
that followed over the course of
the next six days of creating,
which leaves ALL of mankind
breathless to this very day. Well, ALMOST all of mankind.
ONE person begged to differ, and it might not have mat-
tered had this ONE person not been Shlomo HaMelech,
the WISEST man to have ever lived. Regarding Creation,
He wrote, as Rashi explains, the following:

VANITY OF VANITIES!" Koheles said, "Vanities of vani-
ties! Everything is vanity!" (Koheles 1:2).

If it sounds familiar, it should. We just read Koheles on
Chol HaMoed Succos, and it is obvious why. It started with



Rosh Chodesh Elul, 29 days of shofar blowing, and “L’-Dovid Hashem Ori, etc.” During last two weeks of the month at least—the Sephardim did it the ENTIRE month—we said Selichos. This, of course, was followed by Rosh Hashanah and the Aseres Yemai Teshuvah—Ten Days of Repentance—the climax of which was Yom Kippur. Koheles CLEARLY was just the SUMMARY of all of that.

You mean it WASN’T so clear?

Perhaps had we read Koheles on Yom Kippur, it would have been. On a day that we basically forsake the pleasures of the physical world, as if following the script of Koheles, and focus on fear of God, as Koheles advises at the end of the sefer. Koheles would have fit in perfectly then.

Instead however we read Megillas Koheles on Succos, after we have already joyfully moved on from the more esoteric energy of Yom Kippur back to the world of physical pleasure. We may leave the comfort of our houses and move into the succah for an entire week, but we do it in STYLE.

Perhaps that is SPECIFICALLY the reason why Koheles is read during Succos, and NOT on Yom Kippur. Maybe it was “postponed” because Chazal, in their great wisdom, foresaw how Koheles would better serve as reminder of Yom Kippur “themes” once we have forgotten about them, than on a day that they are ALL we think about.

A reminder of exactly WHAT specifically?

The purpose of life.

It was, after all, what Koheles was looking for, the purpose of life, and as the wisest man to have ever lived, he was entitled to search for it. The only question is, if he was SO wise, why did Shlomo HaMelech not save himself all

his trouble and ink, and simply rely on the word of the greatest PROPHET to have ever lived, who already taught:

Now, Israel, what does God, your God, demand of you? Only to fear God, your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, and to worship God, your God, with all your heart and with all your soul . . . (Devarim 10:12)

He DID. Koheles was not reinventing the wheel. He was showing all the “math” behind it. He was not re-teaching Moshe Rabbeinu’s conclusion, but providing all the back up for it. Moshe taught his lesson at the END of the 40 years. Koheles takes the reader on their own personal journey to the same conclusion.

This is because, from Moshe Rabbeinu, it is clear that fear of God is important only because GOD commands it. HE wants it, and if we want to please HIM, we should pursue it. If a person wants to be counted among God’s loyalists, they should make fear of Him their TOP priority in life, no matter what else might please them more.

Koheles says that fear of God is important for another reason. It is important FOR us because it is important TO us. True, a person has to work on fear of God because it is a Torah mitzvah. But, says the wisest man, a person should know that it is also what THEY want to do that changes the nature of the journey itself. Nothing motivates a person to acquire something more than their desire to have it.

What do you REALLY want from life? This is the question that Koheles is asking a person, and it is one which reverberates off the schach of the succah. Because, says Koheles, it is all too easy to think that one already knows

the answer to this question, and yet be WRONG, even during their ENTIRE life.

The Torah, of course, has the answer. The Torah was only given to discuss this answer, and to direct people towards it. Every single word of Torah is a part of the answer, and every story, an example of it. Even the letters of the words themselves hint to the purpose of life, when one takes the time to learn how.

If man was made for a specific purpose, then we can only be happy fulfilling it. If Creation was made for this specific purpose, then we can only be happy using it this way. When we deviate from this path, warns Koheles, we create something called “vanity of vanities,” the ESSENCE of emptiness and meaninglessness.

So WHERE, and WHY do we go wrong?

The Talmud answers this question in, of all masechtos, Succah:

In the Time-to-Come, The Holy One, Blessed is He, will bring the Evil Inclination and slay it before the righteous and the evil. To the righteous, it will have the appearance of a towering hill, and to the evil it will have the appearance of a hair thread. These will cry and these will cry. The righteous will cry saying, “How were we able to overcome such a towering hill!” The evil also will cry saying, “How is it that we were unable to conquer this hair thread!” (Succah 52a)

It’s the yetzer hara’s fault. It’s the evil inclination that distort’s reality and makes us pursue “vanity of vanities.” It’s the yetzer hara that made Koheles necessary. Most people just listen to the yetzer hara, and take its word as fact. Koheles listens to the yetzer hara, and then says,

“Let’s take a look at what it is saying, and see just how false its words really are.”

Because, teaches Koheles, if a person just goes the distance to work it through, they will be left, in the end, with the same conclusion: there is nothing more meaningful to pursue in life than fear of God. Once the “dust” of the yetzer hara settles, the only thing left standing is fear of God.

Thus, the same section of Talmud concludes:

The School of Rebi Yishmael taught, “If this repulsive wretch meets you, drag him to the Bais Midrash. If he is of stone, he will dissolve, if of iron he will shiver into fragments . . .” (Succah 52b)

The yetzer hara can also be found in a Bais Midrash, but rarely in the same manner that it is found in the world outside of it. The Torah lives in there. The Shechinah resides in there. Therefore, the Koheles-based truth, and therefore, the PURPOSE OF LIFE, is much clearer in there.

And this is why, as Rashi says about the very first word of the Torah, “Be-REISHIS,” the world was made for Torah. As it says:

The beginning—REISHIS—of wisdom is the FEAR OF GOD. (Mishlei 9:10)

The secrets of God to those who FEAR Him . . . (Tehillim 25:14)