

Shabbat Hol Hamo'ed Sukkot A Time for Perspective

On the Shabbat that falls in the middle of Sukkot, synagogues around the Jewish world traditionally chant the Scroll of Ecclesiastes/Megillat Qohelet. Given that what will be read from the Torah on Shabbat morning is an excerpt from *parashat Ki Tissa*, which we will explore together later this year, we will take this week to focus on the themes and ideas of this scroll from the Writings/*K'tuvim* section of the Bible, which we read only this one time in the Jewish year.

The band called The Byrds made famous some of the verses from the Scroll of Ecclesiastes, which is a very odd textual selection for the holiday of Sukkot, which is also known as “The time of our joy.” The table below includes both the biblical original and the adaptation by the Byrds.

Turn, Turn, Turn The Byrds	Ecclesiastes/Qohelet Chapter 3
Refrain: To Everything (Turn, Turn, Turn) There is a season (Turn, Turn, Turn) And a time to every purpose, under Heaven	1 To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:
A time to be born, a time to die A time to plant, a time to reap A time to kill, a time to heal A time to laugh, a time to weep	2 A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted;
Refrain	3 A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;
A time to build up, a time to break down A time to dance, a time to mourn A time to cast away stones, a time to gather stones together	4 A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
Refrain	5 A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
A time of love, a time of hate A time of war, a time of peace A time you may embrace, a time to refrain from embracing	6 A time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away;
Refrain	7 A time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, {and a time to speak;
A time to gain, a time to lose A time to rend, a time to sew A time for love, a time for hate A time for peace, I swear it's not too late	8 A time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.

There are a number of reasons why Sukkot is also called “the time of our joy.” The most central

two are: 1) We have emerged from the penitential season of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur with a clean spiritual slate; and 2) This marks the end of a laborious Fall harvest season and we recall the celebration that took place when we were an agrarian society. The Torah, in fact, instructs us that we are to be “nothing but happy” on these festivals of Sukkot and the upcoming Sh’mini Atzeret. So, why then would the Rabbis instruct us to read from the Scroll of Qohelet, which contains a message that seems so contrary?

The answer is quite simple...perspective. In the same way that it is traditional to smash a glass at a Jewish wedding to remind us that even in our times of greatest joy, we must recall that we live in a broken and imperfect world, so too is such perspective necessary during the religious festivals of our greatest celebration. Indeed, the words made famous by The Byrds remind us of precisely this message. There are times for the amazingly good things that lead us to a high, but there are lows that are part of life as well.

The entirety of this message is encapsulated within the structure of the Sukkah. This fragile and temporary dwelling puts us into much closer touch with God, something for which we strive on a daily basis in Jewish life. However, the Sukkah also reminds us of just how fragile and temporary life is and how dependent we really are on forces that are beyond our control. Just one rainfall or strong gust of wind can have tremendous impact on our observance of this festival. That’s really how little in control we are, as much as we try to exert greater and greater control upon all aspects of our lives.

Shabbat is the best time of our week to be able to take pause and consider our perspective on life and all that happens in it. It allows us to take stock and think about our goals and priorities. With the message of Megillat Qohelet in mind this Shabbat, may we all consider higher pursuits and priorities, for, as Qohelet explains, all material longings and aspirations are “senseless” and “futile.” Let us identify ways to find deeper meaning in life and to perform acts that will lead to *tikkun olam*, the repairing of our fragile, broken and imperfect world.

Shabbat Shalom and Mo’adim L’simḥa!