



REBBETZIN SHIRA SMILES

FACULTY, OU ISRAEL CENTER

SUKKOT

A Joyful Symphony

It is a widely accepted custom to read the book of *Kohelet* on *Shabbat Chol Hamoed Sukkot*. (This year, when there is no *Shabbat Chol Hamoed*, we will read *Kohelet* in Eretz Yisrael on the first day of Sukkot, and in *Chutz La'aretz* on *Shemini Atzeret*.) It is curious since *Kohelet* speaks of the vanities of this world and has a somewhat depressing tone, while Sukkot is a time of joy and celebration. Why was it chosen to be read at this time?

In *Sukkos: A Symphony of Joy*, Rabbi Immanuel Bernstein cites the *Avudraham*, who relates that Shlomo Hamelech would deliver numerous discourses to the people on *Sukkot*, which were then compiled into the book of *Kohelet*. Indeed, the word “*Kohelet*” derives from the root word *kahal*—assembly. The Ramban notes that many people from among the nations of the world gathered to hear these speeches, hence, the universal tone of the *sefer*. The *Netziv* points out that gentiles would specifically come at this time to

Yerushalayim since Sukkot was when special offerings were brought in the Beit Hamikdash on behalf of the seventy nations. The *Netziv* further notes that this is one of the reasons Shlomo Hamelech exclusively employs the name *Elokim* throughout the *sefer* as it is a universal name of Hashem and the audience came from many diverse places.

The Gemara understands *Kohelet's* theme to be that all pleasures found “under the sun,” meaning in the temporal realm, are of limited value. However, pleasures found “above the sun,” those of spiritual value, have meaning and joy. This is truly in sync with the sukkah’s message; we leave our secure, physical structures to remind us of life’s transience. We enter the sukkah, like a mini-Beit Hamikdash, to experience the joy of closeness to Hashem.

Halachically, a kosher sukkah must have at least 2 full walls plus part of a third wall. The Arizal teaches that this symbolizes a “hug from Hashem,” embracing us and elevating us to a higher sphere. The special atmosphere of the sukkah invites the *Usphizin* to join us, underscoring the primacy of spiritual values in our lives. “*Sof davar hakol nishma et ha'Elokim yira ve'et mitzvotav shemor ki zeh kol ha'adam*—The end of the matter, everything having been heard, fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the entire man.” *Kohelet* 12:13)

The *Netivot Shalom* describes the goal of *Sukkot*; channel your love toward Hashem and distance yourself from love of the material because it will create a barrier to achieving this goal. He quotes the Rebbe of Kobrin zy”a,

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who teaches that the world is filled with light and sweetness, available to those who are not immersed within it. This same world will feel dark and bitter to those who are consumed with its physicality.

Reading *Kohelet* guides us to shift our focus and pursue true simchah, the joy and light found in the context of authentic *avodat Hashem*. ■

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