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| Shabbat Sukkoth | Contemplating His Goodness |
| Torah: | Exodus 33:12-34:16 |
| Haftarah: | Ezekiel 38:18-39:16 |
| Brit Chadashah: | John 7:31-43 |

After the shameful incident with the golden calf, Moses was understandably quite shook up. He knew that the people deserved to suffer the full wrath of G-d for allowing pagan idolatry and fornication to take over the camp so easily. While they were sinning, they could still see the cloud on the mountain, but the sinful core among the people took advantage of Moses' absence to stage a take over of the camp. Not much detail is given about how they accomplished this, but one possibility is that they may have thought Moses and Joshua had been killed by YHVH and they wanted to protect themselves from a similar fate.

They did not yet understand that there was only one G-d and that He had to be worshipped without any the pagan rituals they were surrounded by. Aaron was likely stalling for time when he agreed to make the golden calf and many of the people may have been dismayed and confused when the fornicating idolaters took over the leadership of the camp. I think we have to be careful of the power of idolatry, because it does not just suddenly disappear from our lives when we come to the truth of G-d's Word. It may also repeatedly try and make a come back, once we have excluded it from our lives.

We are not told whether Aaron and the elders put up a fight, but the leadership established and confirmed by Moses was overthrown. The rebels required that Aaron and the priesthood adopt both a new belief system and a new way of worshipping the god they were promoting. Many of the Talmudic rabbis feel that the rebellion was led by the mixed multitude of Egyptians who came out of slavery with them. They even go as far as to say that this evil group of people used witchcraft and magic to make the golden calf.

Now, when little or no detail is given, there may be room to fill in the gaps, as long as you do not change the biblical narrative and say things which have no biblical support. The Bible clearly says that Aaron either moulded the idol himself or at least supervised the process, and by doing so gave his approval to the process. The rebels are also described as coming from among the people in general and not just from among the mixed multitude.

The Talmudic rabbis may be wanting to minimize Aaron's participation in the process and also to blame a group of strangers who were not fully integrated into the people of Israel. The mixed multitude did have some problems integrating, but they came out with Israel because they believed in YHVH and did not want to continue to wallow in paganism. The Bible does not indicate that the idolatry came from any specific segment of the people or that any specific segment of the people took a stand against it. Magic was not involved in the process.

The moulding of the golden calf and the organizing of the new pagan festival likely took more than one day, but even if there were people who did not agree with what was happening, there is no indication that there was an organized resistance to the takeover. When Moses came down the mountain in great wrath, the rebels appeared unable to put up any effective resistance and Moses called for a military purge among the people. The tribe of Levi rallied behind Moses and around three thousand of the people were executed.

They were told not to spare any of their relatives and, again, there is no indication that the executions were limited to just one segment of the people. In the next generation, during the idolatry on the plains of Moab, some 24,000 people perished, but with the incident of the golden calf, the smaller number of those executed, may indicate that only the leadership among the idolaters were singled out. The sinful core among the people seems to just have gone underground, until another opportunity to take over presented itself.

Before he came down the mountain, Moses was able to intercede for the people and prevented their complete annihilation. Only the leaders of the takeover were targeted and the people had to drink water containing the ground up fragments of the gold of their defeated false god. Aaron even tried to minimize his participation in the criminal takeover, but there is no indication that Moses was buying it. He may have been spared because all the priests and the other Levites rallied behind Moses and for Aaron and the priests, it may have been an aggressive form of repentance.

Once the rebellion was put down and the leadership of the people was restored to the ones to whom it belonged, Moses went back up the mountain to see if G-d was still willing to have Israel become His covenant people. He was likely still quite shook up and wanted to have a more intimate relationship with G-d. And even though the Bible says that G-d spoke to Moses face to face, we learn in today's portion that no one can see G-d's face and live. Face to face indicted more of a man to man communication without the need of engaging in any kind of indirect communication.

From the context of our passage, when G-d spoke to Moses, He did so from inside the cloud, without revealing any of His lethal glory. He put Moses in the cleft of a rock and covered him with His hand. YHVH's glory passed by and Moses saw it from behind. Either YHVH has a very long arm and a very big hand, or this is another figurative reference to how Moses was protected.

But the most amazing part of this encounter was not just seeing the glory of YHVH, but also involved having the meaning of the sacred name proclaimed to him. Does this mean that the glory of G-d through His Word is the most glorious part of Him? No. Every part of YHVH is glorious and we can get as close to Him as we are allowed, through the proclamations of His Word. Part of our Sukkoth rejoicing means reminding ourselves of both what YHVH is like and how He wants us to relate to Him.

This declaration of the name of YHVH is called the thirteen attributes and because it begins by repeating His name. This repetition is seen as an affirmation which introduces such a marvellous description of the wonder of our merciful G-d. Of the thirteen attributes, only one appears punitive, but it really refers to the limits which YHVH puts on sin when it infects His people. The three or four generations refers to the generations which are still living and we must remind ourselves that in the Bible there are no generational curses.

The blessing of G-d is said to apply to a thousand generations. His blessing is generational, while sin has a short shelf life. It is only when we repent and learn to walk in faithful obedience to His Word that His punishment is replaced by His mighty blessing. Said another way, YHVH is 99.6% or 99.7% mercy and love and only .3% or .4% wrath. We do not serve an angry G-d who is intent on our destruction or on the destruction of our sinful world. It is always because of His mercy that we are not consumed. How is G-d's mercy doing in your life, campers? The G-d we serve is amazing beyond description. Always rejoice in Him.

Sermon: Shabbat Sukkoth: Rejoicing When Things Don't Make Sense

(An examination of some of the main themes of Ecclesiastes – Kohelet in Hebrew)

Before I gave my heart to the Messiah, I once read through the book of Ecclesiastes. I do not remember where I got a Bible from, but I was very impressed with the content of this book. I had studied various aspects of philosophy and to me, Ecclesiastes presented a balanced view of life and its uncertainties. I did not find it particularly pessimistic, but if we want to be realistic, there will always be things in life which we do not understand why they happened.

When I came to faith, I continued to study this book because I wanted to have a realistic, balanced approach to the things in life which do not seem to make sense, no matter how long you have been a believer and no matter how well you study and know your Bible. This goes beyond the category of secret things which Deut. 29:29 refers to and includes events in our lives over which we have no control and which make no real sense, because they are unfair.

It is a very organized book and presents its material in groups of seven. There are two groups of 28 affirmations, one near the beginning of the book and one near the end. The first group of 28 affirmations asserts that there is a purpose to everything which happens under the sun, even when we are unable to see it. The second group of 28 assertions deals with how quickly time passes and our need to make the best use of the time which is given to us.

The concept of vanity appears frequently throughout the book and especially when we do not understand what is happening, we have to have faith in YHVH and walk according to His commandments (Eccl. 12:13). Even for us today, this is the whole duty of man, because one day He will judge even the secret things, whether they are good or whether they are bad (Eccl. 12:14). We need to spend our brief live studying for the coming final judgment.

In the Makzor, I give you one way to break down Ecclesiastes and I highlight some of the main points Solomon is making. While some people feel that Solomon was not the only author who contributed to the book, it is clear that the book is fully inspired and contains no errors or pagan, secular content. Solomon uses very poetic language when he discusses some of the dilemmas which we face in our lives and for which there appears to be no logical explanation (or solution). Sometimes, bad things happen to good people and surprisingly, sometimes good things happen to bad people (Eccl. 8:14).

I want to take you on a tour of some of the main features (concepts) of this wonderful book, so that we can balance our rejoicing with wisdom and not be troubled by things which we do not understand and which make no sense to us. So fasten your seat belts, hold on tight as we take a brief journey through one of the books in the Bible which is hard to understand.

In the first two chapters, Solomon says seven times that all is vanity, because even when you do your best, sometimes nothing works and you suffer (Eccl. 2:21). After proclaiming that there is a time and a purpose for everything under the heavens (Eccl. 3:1 and 3:2-8) Solomon says that YHVH made everything beautiful in its time. This does not mean that YHVH will turn every hurtful thing into joy, it means that horror, terror and darkness can not extinguish or quench the goodness that YHVH also brings into the world (3:11). As well, there is great courage and even heroism which is found in the darkest moments of great pain. Things always look different when they are examined in the light of Eternity and the purposes of G-d.

In the same verse, Solomon says that YHVH has put the thought of eternity into the human heart, even though we will always be unable to understand the work of G-d, from the beginning to the end (Eccl. 3:11; 8:17). He also says that you can add nothing to what G-d has done, nor can you take anything away from the work of His hands (3:14). Throughout the Book, Solomon also frequently asks questions for which he gives no answer.

He wants to know how we can be so sure that the spirit (breath) of man ascends (to Heaven) and that the spirit (breath) of beasts descends into the earth (3:21). He is challenging us to question some of the things which we have taken for granted and have not taken the time to think through. Our faith should not be based on assumptions, but on the clear teaching of the Scriptures. There might be some cherished pets in Heaven, but do sharks and grizzly bears also make it? Does mankind alone possess an eternal soul? No matter what position you take on this, you need to exercise caution in what you are basing your beliefs on.

In chapter four (4:5), he says that a lazy man crosses his arms and ends up eating his own flesh. He says that two are better than one (4:9) and that a threefold cord is not easily broken. He goes on to say that a poor child is better than a foolish king who does not how to listen to advice (4:13). I will not cover all the material in this book, but I will cover a big chunk of it and encourage you to read rest on your own.

In chapter 5, he cautions us against using many words when we come before YHVH, because He is in heaven and we are on the earth (5:1). He even says that you can hear the voice of a foolish man when he uses many words (5:2). He goes on and says that (most) dreams come from being too busy (5:2).

Later on in chapter five, he changes direction and says that the working man will have sweet sleep, whether he has a little of a lot, while the wealth of a rich man will deprive him of sleep (5:11). The search for riches will bring a lot of trouble for a man and he will have great sadness (5:16). He says that it is good to eat and drink and enjoy good health in the midst of all the work you have to do (5:17). He also says that no matter what some men do, their work will not bring them any satisfaction (6:7) and that what you see (possess) is better than being tormented by the desire for things which you do not have (which you cannot possess) (6:8).

Chapter seven begins with a series of statements of: "it is better than". He says that it is better to hear the reprimand of a wise man than to listen to the songs of a fool. He compares the laughter of fools to the sound of thorns crackling in the fire under a pot (7:5, 6). Quite often his remarks are given without any explanation and it may take some time to understand what is being said. This is on purpose. I have often said that the fact that you think is more important than anything that you think.

We are warned to choose our battles and not always insist on being right (7:16). When it comes to understanding mankind, he makes two statements which at first appear to contradict each other. He first says that there is not a righteous man on earth who does not sin (7:20). He then says that G-d made men righteous, but we have taken many detours (into sin) (7:29).

I was in the Sikkah a lot this week and did not have enough time to finish writing up my usual verbatim notes. So from this point forward I will speak from my point form notes. Also, please be aware that there are some differences in versification between English Bibles and my French Bible. It is the same content with different verses. So as I go through the list, if your verse number is different from the one(s) on the list, do not worry.

7:9 anger rests in the bosom of fools. calmness prevents great sins (10:4)
7:21, 22 don't pay attention to every word you hear.
9:4 a living dog is better than a dead lion.
9:10. Do everything with strength (enthusiasm)
9:11 The race is not to swift and war is not to valiant men. Everything depends on time and circumstances.
9:17 words of wise listened to quietly are better than the screams of a fool.
9:18 a single sinner can destroy much good.
10:1 dead flies infect perfumers oil.
10:8 one who digs a pit will fall into it.
10:19 silver is the answer to everything (not really, he is making a point about corruption).
10:20 Do not curse the king or a rich man, cause you will be found out.
11:1 cast your bread on the waters, cause you do not know what will succeed (11:6) Sometimes you have to take calculated risks.
11:4 lazy people get nothing done.
12:1 enjoy your youth but understand that you will be judged (wild oats are hard to get rid of). So seek the L-rd while you are young.
12:2 youth does not last – enjoy it while you have it.
12:3-9 (12:2-7 in yours). Second group of 28 propositions about how time passes quickly and you better enjoy life while you are still able to enjoy it.
12:11 the words of the wise are like goads and nails, given by single master (they only have one purpose).
12:12 the making of many books is an endless task and much study can be a weariness for the flesh. (cf. Prov. 25:16 – have you found honey. . .).
12:13 hear the end of the whole matter (discussion) the whole duty of man is to fear (respect) G-d and keep the commandments.
12:14 For G-d will bring every work into judgment, even those which are hidden, be they ever so good or ever so bad.

Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes for us to see that even when things happen to us in our lives which sadden us or which we do not understand, G-d is still in control. Also, all of the evil and folly which has been done since the beginning, will be judged, because nobody gets away with anything forever. Sometimes evil, lazy people prosper and sometimes good, hard working people are reduced to poverty. We need to learn patient wisdom so that we can keep on walking with YHVH and not get bent out of shape. Things may not often turn out the way we expect them to, but it is always our job to relate to these happenstances in the way G-d wants us to (which mainly means to obey the commandments). Wisdom is always better than folly and we need to not always try to understand why some things happen. G-d should always be our strength and our guide as we wander through the good, he bad and the ugly. Shabbat Shalom, campers and Shavua Tov.