

L’shana Tova u’metuka! A good year, a sweet year!

That’s what we wish each other on Rosh Hashanah, but have you noticed that everything seems to be sort of doomsday lately? I’m waiting to wake up and see the headline ripped straight from Ecclesiastes:

הֵבֵל הַבָּלִים הֵבֵל הַבָּל: (Ecc 1:2)

Ok – well, maybe not in Hebrew.... In English it’s often translated something like: Utter futility! All is futile! Whoever gets elected in November... you can see some news organization running, “All is futile!” as the headline, right? About two thirds of the country feels like we’re headed in the wrong direction and both major presidential candidates have unfavorable ratings over 50%. As we enter into 5777, it certainly feels a little grim.

But maybe everything isn’t so futile... There are challenges that we face individually, as a nation, and as a world, but perspective really does matter. To change our perspective this morning, we’re going to jump from Ecclesiastes to Cain and Abel to Satan. Now that might sound strange, but trust me on this - it all fits in together.

We start with Ecclesiastes, aka Kohelet. The word, “hevel,” is mentioned thirty-eight times in this one book. Hevel means mist or steam or breath as well as vanity, meaningless, and futile. In Ecclesiastes, learning a skill, wealth, pleasure, wisdom... everything under the sun... it’s all “hevel”. But is our Bible trying to say that all of this is meaningless?

I say, “no.” So does Ethan Dor-Shav¹, an advertising/marketing guy who also happens to be a Bible scholar. And we’re able to back it up by taking a closer look at this word, “hevel.” Dor-Shav learns about the meaning of “hevel” by focusing in on Cain and Abel. You see Abel in Hebrew is “Hevel.” All that most people know about Hevel or Abel, if you will, is that he’s the one who gets killed by his brother, but he’s actually noteworthy for other reasons.

Abel was the first shepherd, paving the way for Abraham, Isaac, Rachel, Jacob, Moses, and King David. We even refer to God as our shepherd on numerous occasions. Abel is also the first person to make an offering that God accepts – and God not only accepts his offering, it says that God looked with favor **on Abel** and his offering. So Abel is a role model through his work, he’s brought closer to God through his sacrifice, and God likes him, God really likes him. Does this sound like a vanity or futility? It sounds like he’s living a meaningful life, so what could hevel mean as it refers to Abel?

¹ http://jbgnew.jewishbible.org/assets/Uploads/364/364_dorshav1.pdf;
http://jbg.jewishbible.org/assets/Uploads/371/371_dorshav2.pdf

The answer comes from the fact that Abel is the first person in the Bible to die. He lives a life full of meaning and with his death, introduces the idea that life is finite. And just like mist or a breath, we can understand hevel as temporary, transient, fleeting. This puts Ecclesiastes in a very different light. It's not that every part of life is pointless or hopeless. Rather all aspects of life, including life itself, are temporary or fleeting. They are with us for a short time and then they're gone.

With this understanding, Ecclesiastes isn't giving up on life, rather the author is expressing frustration with the reality that we only have so much time. It's not something that we like to think about – that our lives will only last so long, but that's a lot better than, “All is futile.” And for our rabbis, the idea that we remember that we're not going to live forever – it's actually very important – as is captured in this Chasidic story about Satan, not Satan the devil, but Satan who's the accuser or adversary in Jewish tradition:

So as Rosh Hashanah was approaching, Satan gathered his assistants together to talk about the most effective method of destroying the meaning of people's lives. You know, just your regular business meeting.

One said, “Tell them there is no God.” Another suggested, “Tell them there is no judgment for sin and they need not worry.” A third proposed, “Tell them their sins are so great they will never be forgiven.”

“No,” Satan replied, “none of these things will matter to them. I think we should simply tell them, ‘There is plenty of time.’”

There's plenty of time... when I first heard the end of the story, my initial reaction was, “what's so bad about that?” But then I thought about it more and I got it. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik puts it more eloquently than I ever could. He writes, “The finite experience of being arouses man's conscience, challenges him to accomplish as much as possible during his short life span. In a word, finiteness is the source of morality.”²

If I've got plenty of time, I'm not too concerned about my legacy. If I've got plenty of time, I don't need to try to fix the grudge that I've been holding on to for way too long. If we've got plenty of time, there's no urgency to having good family time; no urgency to call my mom; there's no urgency to being of service, bettering my community.

² Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, Days of Deliverance: Essays on Purim and Hanukkah, p. 33

But life is fleeting. And on Rosh Hashanah we can and should ask the question, what am I leaving behind? How will I be remembered? That is very much a part of this day. We just heard the blast of the shofar – it’s our annual wake up call. What are we waking up to?

Sure, the world isn’t perfect, the country is headed in the wrong direction. There are real difficulties and challenges. But instead of tossing up our hands and saying, “all is futile,” our tradition encourages us to ask, “what am I going to do about it?”

Some have the ability to dream big and have a huge impact. With South Africa in the midst of a terrible drought, Kiara Nirghin, a sixteen year old girl from Johannesburg used orange peel and avocado skins to create a super absorbent polymer that can store reserves of water hundreds of times its own weight.³ That’s absolutely true – I can’t make it up – Orange peel and avocado skin.... She won the Google Science Fair's Community Impact Award for the Middle East and Africa. It would allow farmers to maintain their crops in a drought at minimal cost and it’s made out of using recycled and biodegradable waste products.

Sixteen years old! That’s not going to be my legacy – the only think I know how to do with orange peel is make zest...

Talking about legacy, I had to mention Shimon Peres this morning... Former Prime Minister of Israel, Former President. He only had 93 years and time was fleeting. He spent his life building up the State of Israel, defending the State of Israel, and trying to make peace for the State of Israel. He said that, “it’s better to be controversial for the right reasons, than to be popular for the wrong reasons.” His legacy is one of integrity. His legacy is one of peace. His legacy will live on.

For others, the impact isn’t as global, but they make a huge difference in our lives. Passing on our traditions l’dor vador – from generation to generation, teaching Judaism, strengthening Jewish community, pitching in – helping in big and small ways. Healing relationships, staying connected with family, taking the time to listen. Sometimes these efforts make the biggest difference of all.

It doesn’t matter how old we are... it doesn’t matter if our dreams are big or small... today is Yom HaDin – the Day of Judgment. A day filled with Awe and Trembling. And we don’t have all the time in the world. There are no guarantees. With the limited time we have left, let’s make the most of it. Talk with family and friends, take the time to reflect, and do all you can to leave a legacy that that matters. L’shana Tova.

³ <http://www.cnn.com/2016/08/09/africa/orange-drought-kiara-nirghin/>