



Sukkot
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Reading Kohelet
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On Tuesday, Solomon and I spent hours lugging wood and trellises up three flights of stairs to assemble the frame of our sukkah on the roof. At the end of the day, I asked Solomon to take a picture of me, in between the walls of our sukkah, in a power pose. I sent the picture to our family with the caption “we did it!”

דְּבַרֵי קֹהֵלֶת בֶּן־דָּוִד מֶלֶךְ בִּירוּשָׁלַם:

On Sukkot, we read Kohelet and Kohelet has a lot to say here.

On Wednesday, I woke with a start. An ominous crash sounded on our roof. I catapulted out of bed, imagining that our sukkah had collapsed or was about to blow off the roof to cause who knows what damage. I ran up to the roof in my pajamas, dodging the plants that had toppled in the wind. Our sukkah was still standing, but barely. The wooden walls bent and swayed perilously in the wind, and the ropes connecting it to the roof deck were coming loose. I grabbed the trellis and held it down against the wind, praying that it wouldn't fly off with me attached. As I was using additional rope to lash the sides of the sukkah more firmly to our roof deck and watching the trees sway dangerously behind our home, I started to think this would be a really dumb way to go. Please God, I thought, don't let a tree fall on me. Let this be ok.

An hour later, I had used all the rope we have in our camping supplies. The sukkah seemed reasonably stable, though I still worried it might snap apart. I righted the plants and headed downstairs thinking “*What a weird ritual we have. Every year we starve ourselves for an*

entire day, and then we head out hypoglycemic and barely recovered to build a temporary hut where we'll live for a week. Most of us don't have any real carpentry skills to help us. We're winging it every year and praying that the whole project doesn't fail. That is unless we have a kit, in which case we're facing the challenge of following directions. What's the point of all this? What's the point of leaving our comfortable homes, the security of stable walls, for a structure that I'm still not positive is completely safe?"

If you look closely at our haftarah reading today, you'll notice an interesting paradox. While we are roughing it in our sukkot, and focusing on building and enjoying temporary natural fortresses, the text focuses on a rather more grand, and ideally more permanent construction.

It's the beginning of the book of Kings. Solomon and his mother Bathsheba have deftly navigated a political challenge and manage to snag the kingdom away from Adonijah with David's blessing. Solomon has since killed every one of his potential rivals and has demonstrated his expansive wisdom to all, affirming that the right succession of leadership has taken place. And he has built the first Temple, in honor of his father David, and as a permanent display of love and connection with God.

הַבֵּל הַבָּלִים אָמַר קֹהֶלֶת הַבֵּל הַבָּלִים הֵלֵל הַבֵּל:

Utter futility, said Koheleth, Utter futility! All is futile! If COVID has taught us anything, it has taught us that the things we thought are permanent are anything but.

The ability to rely on a job, on an economy, on a marketplace—impermanent.

The ability to rely on our physical health and well-being—impermanent.

The ability to plan, to expect that tomorrow will unfold like today—impermanent.

All is impermanent.

Certainly that was true for the Temple. David dreamed it and Solomon built it—a beacon of hope and connection, a place for Jews to gather and to serve God forevermore. The Temple was supposed to last forever. But it didn't. It couldn't. Because nothing that we humans create has the potential to last forever. The work of our hands, our physical construction projects, they will always fall apart at some point. The Temple was destroyed, rebuilt, and then destroyed again. Today, there is no physical Temple. There is no one place that Jews can go to pray.

The Temple's idealistic permanence is in tension with the world as we know it. we've worked all week to build structures that we know are impermanent. Our sukkot are designed to feel a bit precarious. The roofs must leak to be kosher. The floors are never finished. The walls never completely protect against the cold. Even as we read about that finished Temple, our experience reminds us that every structure in our lives is like a sukkah—here today, gone tomorrow.

מה-יתרון לאדם בכל-עמלו שיעמל תחת השמש:

What's the value of working so hard to build permanent structures in this world when we know they are all going to come down at some point?

This week, the Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks shared a powerful dvar about Sukkot. He quoted the midrash Torah Kohanim, which declares that “etrog zeh Avraham avinu”—that Avraham personified an etrog. Why? He explains an etrog is pri etz hadar—a fruit that lives on a tree. Unlike most fruits, etrogs have this amazing ability to stay on the tree forever. If they aren't picked, they will shrivel and dry on the branch. Similarly, Avraham Avinu never abandoned his values or his dedication to God. No human arrogance could shift him away from

kindness, no fear could prevent him from advocating for the vulnerable, no personal desire could stop him from answering God's call to sacrifice his son. In an impermanent world, Avraham modeled consistency and commitment.

And while the structures of Abraham's day are no longer, his courage, his compassion, his kindness—these qualities live on.

יִדְעָתִי כִּי אֵין טוֹב בָּם כִּי אִם-לְשֹׁמוֹחַ וְלַעֲשׂוֹת טוֹב בְּתָיִיד

Kohelet reminds us—nothing in this world lasts forever. All we can do is rejoice in the moment that exists before us, and do whatever good we can to make the world a better place.

The structures of justice and injustice that we see—those are impermanent. We must keep working to protect and promote justice and equality. Our careers—those are impermanent too. We have to fight the impulse to pour our life's energy into just our work. Our homes are impermanent. We have to fight the impulse to hibernate in our own bubbles. Our commutes and our cars and our planes are impermanent. We must fight the sense that our world is replaceable—we are tied to this land. Our bodies are impermanent. Nothing is guaranteed.

But you know what is permanent?

וְזָרַח הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ וַיָּבֹא הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ וְאֶל-מְקוֹמוֹ שׁוֹאֵף זָרַח הוּא שָׁם:

Every day, the sun rises and sets and rises again in its place. In the darkest night, there is light. In the anxiety of impermanence, there are permanent blessings. Our love, our connection, our wisdom, our values—all of those remain. The physical Temples in our lives may be torn down, but in our collective memory, those structures stand tall and strong.

Last night, Solomon and I sat together in our sukkah. The winds were calm. Our electric heater was running strong. We could see the stars peaking through the schach. In that moment, I thought, Sweet Loving Lord, let this moment last forever.