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Sukkot Dvar Torah 2014

## **I. Intro--Depressing Times**

There's been a lot of talk recently, in divrei torah in shul, on facebook, on the daily show and john oliver, about what an awful summer, or even year, it's been. All of these sources discuss the global tragedies we have been dealing with--war, ebola, terrorism, climate change, police brutality, the NFL in general... and while all of those things are indeed awful and overwhelming, I want to move away from global tragedy and response, and talk about personal tragedy and response.

When I think about this summer I start thinking about June, the start of summer, when school ends. This June, right after Shavuot, my grandmother died (and on a side note, in June of 1933 my grandmother was born, and in June of 1953 my grandparents were married, and on top of all of this, her name was June).

When I think of the rest of the summer, I think of mourning, I think of shiva, I think of my family, and I think about the family trip we went on to Israel to "get away from it all"--to get away from the mourning, get away from the memories of Bubby that seemed to haunt me everywhere I turned in Skokie. You all know how that turned out.

While I was not haunted by my own family tragedies, in Israel I was confronted with violence. Peace protests turned violent, riots, missiles, and my own personal guilt at wanting to run from everything, and my own additional guilt over trying to hide the fact that Ezra is technically Israeli because I want him to be as far away as possible from that mess. The truth is you can't really hide from any mess.

September came, finally the summer was over, time to start anew, get ready for Rosh Hashanah, a new year indeed, but then my father's mother died, and I was thrown into a state of mourning all over again. I felt like death was confronting me everywhere I turned, and I kept asking myself--how do I embrace life when I feel like I'm surrounded by death? This has been especially weird for me, because my body is literally embracing life right now through my pregnancy! How cyclical it all feels...

## **II: Kohelet and Death**

Which leads me to Kohelet.

Ok, so I had a bad summer. People definitely have it worse. Why am I standing up here telling you all this? Well, as you may know, on Shabbat we read Kohelet, a book that, in my opinion, is primarily about finding personal meaning in the face of death.

Kohelet is a difficult book to describe. There's not a clear narrative structure, and sometimes it even feels like we're reading a philosopher's diary where she randomly writes down her musings about life in disconnected paragraphs.

The philosopher in this case is called Kohelet, and the claim is made in the first pasuk that he is the son of David, and described as if he is Shlomo HaMelekh.

The second pasuk of the book, which is repeated again in one of the last psukim of the book, says "*havel havalim, amar Kohelet, Havel Havalim, HaKol Havel*"

This is translated by JPS as "Utter futility!--Said Kohelet--Utter Futility! All is futile!" This concept that everything is Hevel is repeated again and again throughout the book.

Kohelet is on a mission to find meaning in his life. He tries to find it through pleasure, wealth, wisdom, but after each of his trials, he keeps coming back to the idea that everything is "Hevel." So then, what is hevel really? Is Kohelet really saying, as JPS translates, that everything is futile? It's all meaningless?

I looked up the word in the BDB Biblical Hebrew Lexicon, and saw the translation "vapor, mist, breath." This seems to change Kohelet's outlook on life. He is no longer saying that everything is futile, he is saying everything is breath. What does that mean?

Think about your breath for a second. Note it. One of the things I've learned in practicing breathing meditation is to pay attention to your breath as it goes in and then out. On a meditation retreat in Thailand our teacher actually had us pay attention not only to our breathing, but to the physical sensation of our stomachs rising and then falling with each breath. Breathing is a full body experience!

One of the things I've come to notice through breathing meditation practice (with the help of meditation teachers!) is that a breath is fleeting, and also continuous, meaning that when we're breathing it means we're alive! And there's something glorious in that! BUT at the same time, each breath is gone in an instant. You breathe in, you note that breath, you breathe out and you revel in that out breath, and then--it's gone. Just like that. Ahh, but don't worry, another breath comes and you can note the whole thing all over again.

So what does this mean for our friend Kohelet? What I think it means is that he sees everything as breath, which means one moment you're noting it, and the next moment it's gone. In other words, it's not that life is futile and meaningless, it's that it's fleeting and transient. Just as each breath fades, and then another one comes, every experience ends, and most of the time these lead to new experiences, but ultimately everything ends, ultimately everyone dies. No one lives forever.

This might sound like a bit of a downer, and Kohelet often seems to think so too. In the first few chapters of the book he seems angry about the transient nature of the universe.

In 2:15-17 he says:

So I reflected, “the fate of the fool is also destined for me; to what advantage, then, have I been wise?” And I came to the conclusion that that too was Hevel. Because the wise man, just like the fool, is not remembered forever; for, as the succeeding days roll by, both are forgotten. Alas, the wise man dies, just like the fool!  
And so I hated life. For I was distressed by all that goes on under the sun, because everything is Hevel and pursuit of wind.

In these psukim, Kohelet wonders about the point of wisdom, if both the wise man and the fool end up dead. I think this is a natural first reaction to the realization that life is fleeting, that nothing lasts.

I was in Israel for the year after high school at brovenders, when the 2nd intifada broke out. That year I saw lots of people wearing those Hadaya rings that said “gam zeh yaavor” “this too shall pass” on them, and I was appalled. I found it really depressing, because instead of reminding me that the intfiada would one day end, I thought of all the good things that would come to an end. Friendships, family, maybe even my own life?! At 18, I found transience terrifying to consider.

It seems that in the early chapters of the book, Kohelet too finds transience terrifying, or at least wrong. He hates it because it means that you can be wise, powerful, rich, etc, but in the end you will die just like an average bum.

In later chapters, Kohelet’s feelings about hevel seem to shift, and he embraces the idea of hevel. He even seems to find joy in hevel! (In my later chapters, I too learned to embrace Hevel, and after that meditation retreat in Thailand 3 years ago, I actually went to Israel and bought a gam zeh yaavor ring)

Along with the word hevel, simcha (joy) is the other word that is repeated over and over again in this book, and in the last few chapters Kohelet repeatedly stresses that life is hevel/fleeting, so we should enjoy life while we’re alive (YOLO according to my students). By the end of the book, Kohelet seems to be telling us that with his realization that all is hevel, he learns that all is also joy. His awareness of transience leads to joy.

Realizing that life is fleeting, that everything passes, can be a very powerful thing. It can remind us to let go of negative behaviors, it can remind us to embrace happiness, and, I think most importantly, it can remind us that we are not in control of everything, because the world keeps going with or without us.

### **III. Sukkot as Zman Simchateinu, and how that’s connected to Hevel**

We read this book on Sukkot--zman simachateinu--a holiday that's all about joy. But what is joyous about Sukkot?

When I think about sukkot, I think about sitting with my family in a sukkah in a winter coat. Sukkot is about putting yourself outside of your PERMANENT dwelling place, and entering the world of impermanence, where you're not in control, where you can't turn on the heat, where you rely on the weather, something we absolutely do not control. On sukkot, it's just you, your temporary hut, and the stars.

After YK, we might feel in control, we've just confessed all our sins, we heard the shofar, we're all good now. But then we leave our homes and live in the "wilderness" where we are under God's control. We are forced to deal with only what we CAN control. We cannot control the weather. We cannot control death. What we can do is choose HOW we will live our lives in the face of this transient reality, and perhaps THAT is Joy. JOY is coming to terms with transience, embracing it, and learning to let go of what we cannot control, and bring our best most joyous selves to all aspects of our lives.

#### **IV. Conclusion: Bubby story--finding blessings in death**

To conclude, I want to tell a story about my Bubby, a woman who embodied joy in the face of transience, and even in the face of death.

As I mentioned earlier, Bubby died right after Shavuot. In the last few weeks of her life, lots of her friends made sure to come over to her house and spend time with her, and as she got progressively weaker, she kept asking us if it was time for shul for Shavuot, not yet, in a few days, we would keep telling her, and she kept reminding us that she had to be there.

I didn't go with her, but my mom told me that after shul she positioned herself right by the door of Or Torah to make sure she could see every person who walked out of the building.

Over the next few days she told me, "you know, I really am very lucky, all of these people have come to say goodbye to me, and not everyone gets that, some people don't get to say goodbye. A lot of people don't get to die like this."

She was very aware that she was dying. She would call me every few days and tell me I had to come pick out jewelry immediately, didn't I know she was in hospice?? But even in her death, she found joy. Bubby was a fighter, but she also recognized in the end that she couldn't control the fact that she was dying, but she could live out her last days, as she lived most of her living days, with joy.

So what do we do with this? Well, I know that for me, I am going to try to recognize hevel, recognize the impermanence of being, try to embrace it, and allow it to give me freedom and joy. Freedom to let go of things I cannot control, and the freedom to embrace joy even in my most vulnerable times.

I wish everyone a Chag **SAMEACH**, filled with joy.