

UPDATED!

RETHINKING

Sukkot

WOMEN, RELATIONSHIPS
& JEWISH TEXTS

jwi

Rethinking Sukkot:

Women, Relationships and Jewish Texts

a project of



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Shalom Colleagues and Friends,

On behalf of the Clergy Task Force, we are delighted to offer this newly revised resource to enrich Sukkot celebrations. *Rethinking Sukkot: Women, Relationships and Jewish Texts* is designed to spark new conversations about iconic relationships by taking a fresh look at old texts. Using the text of Kohelet, which is read on the Shabbat that falls during Sukkot, as well as prayers, *midrash*, and modern commentary, the guide serves to foster conversations about relationships. It combines respectful readings with provocative and perceptive insights, questions and ideas that can help shape healthier relationships. We hope it will be warmly received and widely used throughout the Jewish community.

We are grateful to our many organizational partners for their assistance and support in distributing this resource in preparation for the observance of Sukkot. We deeply appreciate the work of the entire Clergy Task Force and want to especially acknowledge Rabbi Donna Kirshbaum, project manager and co-editor of this guide, and each of the contributors for their thoughtful commentaries.

Please visit jwi.org/clergy to learn more about the important work of the Task Force. We welcome your reactions to this resource, and hope you will use it in many settings.

Wishing you a joyful Sukkot,

Rabbi Marla Hornsten
Co-Chair, Clergy Task Force

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Co-Chair, Clergy Task Force

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CEO/Executive Director, JWI

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The Goal: Conversations about Relationships

Whether you happen to be sitting in a sukkah just now or not, we're glad you have this holiday guide in hand to help start important conversations. We know how hard it can be to set aside time for them in the sheer busyness of everyday life. We hope you'll make Sukkot not only a time to celebrate and pass on cherished traditions but also to speak about health, peace, and safety in our homes and intimate relationships.

One of the most familiar activities of the holiday is eating in a sukkah – an ideal setting for thought and conversation. What you are now holding in your hands is a guide in the sense that it offers a way forward along a particular conversational path. Our commentators have chosen passages, many excerpted from the holiday's central text, Kohelet [Ecclesiastes, said to be written by King Solomon] that call attention to three features along that path. We believe that calling attention to them in guided conversation can lead to more clarity about whether our intimate relationships are healthy ones, and lead to more deliberation if the time has come to imagine a different future for ourselves.

- **Balance.** *Are we and those we love able to face life's losses, setbacks, and hardships, secure in the rhythms of life – in the knowledge that there is a "time to every purpose"?*
- **Vulnerability.** *We think of our willingness to be emotionally exposed, to be open to wounding and healing, as signs of true intimacy. But what if our wounds are physical or carry with them economic, social, or emotional risks to ourselves and those we love?*
- **Joy.** *Is it happiness? pleasure? something else? Can we make more of it? Can we pass it on?*

On behalf of my colleagues on JWI's Clergy Task Force, I wish you a Sukkot that allows you time to reflect, and to begin harvesting your reflections, in ways that lead to more health, safety, and wellbeing for you and those you love.

Hag Sukkot sameakh,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rabbi Donna Kirshbaum" with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Rabbi Donna Kirshbaum
Omer, Israel

FAQs and Facilitator Tips

Q: What are some of the ways this guide can be used?

A: We envision women, men, families, friends, study partners, and other sitting around tables in beautifully decorated sukkahs, eating delicious food, and engaged in discussions based on the conversations starters in the guide.

Q: Is this guide for women only?

A: No, not at all. Men are often part of the equation of a healthy relationship, and we hope they'll join the conversation!

Q: What is the recommended amount of time for the program?

A: Forty-five minutes to an hour will allow you to introduce the guide, read one text and commentary, and begin a conversation. An hour to 1 ½ hours would allow you to select readings from each of the three themes and have substantial conversations about each of them. If the group is really engaged, you can always plan to continue the discussion at a later date.

Q: What needs to be done before the discussion takes place?

A: Simply assign one person the responsibility to read the entire guide and to select the texts and commentaries that will be used for discussion. Alternatively, a more informal, free-flowing discussion may be fitting depending on the nature of the group. Either way, make sure each participant has a guide to follow.

Q: What is the format for the program?

A: Once everyone is seated, the 'leader' should explain the goals of the program, the themes that will be discussed, and, briefly, some reasons for sharing this resource. Participants may be asked to say or think of the name of someone in whose honor or memory they want to devote this study. Ask for volunteers to read the text and the commentary out loud. Try to ensure that everyone who wants to read has an opportunity to do so. Use the accompanying prompts to begin the conversation and encourage everyone to participate. If a prompt doesn't lead to a vibrant conversation, move on to the next. If there is additional material to cover when the allotted time is over, then make plans to get together again.

Q: Are there guides like this one for other holidays?

A: Yes, the "Rethinking" series also includes guides for Purim, Shavuot, Shabbat, and the Shamor L'Amour campaign. If you have any questions, or want to share feedback, please email Deborah Rosenbloom at drosenbloom@jwi.org.

We'd love to hear from you!

Theme: Balance

Are we and those we love able to face life's losses, setbacks, and hardships, secure in the rhythms of life – in the knowledge that there is a “time to every purpose”?

Text • *Kohelet* [Ecclesiastes], attributed to King Solomon • Chapter 3: 1 – 8

לכל זמן ועת לכל-חפץ תחת השמים:

A season is set for everything, a time for every experience under heaven.

A time for being born and a time for dying,

A time for planting and a time for uprooting the planting;

A time for slaying and a time for healing,

A time for tearing down and a time for building up;

A time for weeping and a time for laughing,

A time for wailing and a time for dancing;

A time for throwing stones and a time for gathering stones,

A time for embracing and a time for shunning embraces;

A time for seeking and a time for losing,

A time for keeping and a time for discarding;

A time for ripping and a time for sewing,

A time for silence and a time for speaking;

A time for loving and a time for hating;

A time for war and a time for peace.

[Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures. Jewish Publication Society (JPS) 1988]

Suggestion: To help make the transition to a conversation about a “time for every purpose under heaven,” search on YouTube for The Byrds’ or Pete Seeger’s rendition of “Turn, Turn, Turn.”

Commentary by Rabbi Marla Hornsten

This famous passage from Kohelet [Ecclesiastes] finds its way into many funeral services thanks to its ability to capture the whole of the life experience—times to embrace and laugh and dance and times to weep and lose and discard. It captures life’s imperfection and the need to create balance between the good and the bad, life’s trials and triumphs, pain and joy. As Kohelet reminds us, we may experience either pole of experience at any point in our lives. Perhaps the measure of a full life is appreciating each of these moments for what they are – a natural part of life well-lived.

Rabbi Hornsten is a rabbi at Temple Israel in West Bloomfield, Michigan, where she has been since 2000. She is the co-chair of JWI’s Clergy Task Force and is also involved with domestic violence prevention work in her local community.

Conversations

1. What are the markers of a successful life? A life well lived?
 - Is it whether we have been able to create a network of people whom we can count on, and who can count on us, to be there in tough times, not to mention to celebrate with in good times?
 - Is it whether we have allowed ourselves to get out of our comfort zone - be vulnerable in relationships, challenged ourselves professionally, and committed ourselves to take new risks?
2. Are you motivated to live a fuller life this year? How will you go about that? What stands in your way?

Commentary by Deborah Rosenbloom

King Solomon got it right. Indeed, life includes all these different emotions and behaviors, particularly when we're in a relationship. But he emphasizes that there is a set time for all of these experiences. My question is: how do we know what time it is?

How do we know whether it's time to hold on or to let go? What if we're wrong and we choose 'to keep when we should discard,' or 'to uproot,' rather than 'to plant?' What are the consequences of not knowing the time? What happens to our self, our partner, our relationship when we choose to be silent when it is time to speak, or when we fail to acknowledge that it is time to cry?

How can we know what time it is? By listening to the quiet voice inside each of us, the voice we'd sometimes prefer to ignore, the one that we hear in the hush of the night, in the quiet of the dawn, the voice that may be saying something different than what our friends advise, what our favorite columnist might say, or what we want to hear, but the voice that is often truest.

Trusting ourselves to know what time it is can be hard when there's so much competing wisdom. But if we trust that like Kohelet says, there is a time for all experiences, it may make it easier to acknowledge what time it is.

Deborah Rosenbloom is the co-editor of the "Rethinking" guide series. She is the vice president of programs and new initiatives at JWI, working closely with the Clergy Task Force.

Conversations

1. Think back to a time when you 'listened' to your inner voice – did it help you make the right decision? How do you know?
2. Think back to a time when you ignored your inner voice – or didn't even hear it. Were there any consequences that could have been avoided?

Text • *Kohelet* [Ecclesiastes] (attributed to King Solomon)

(ב) הבל הבלים אמר קהלת הבל הבלים הכל הבל:

Utter futility!—said Koheleth. Utter futility! All is futile! (*Kohelet* 1:2)

Only this, I have found, is a real good: that one should eat and drink and get pleasure with all the gains one makes under the sun, during the numbered days of life that God has given to us; for that is our portion... that is a gift from God. (*Kohelet* 5:17–18)

Commentary by Rabbis Marla Hornsten and Amy Bolton

How do we find the balance between the Book of Ecclesiastes and the Festival of Sukkot?

Reading the book of Ecclesiastes can be discouraging, leaving us with the overall feelings of disenchantment and depression. Better to go to a funeral than a party. There is, indeed, a time for every experience under heaven, including doom and war and death. Over and over again, the text begs the question, where is the meaning in life? For Kohelet says, “I have observed all the happenings beneath the sun, and I found that all is futile and the pursuit of wind.” Mirth—futile. Revelry—madness. Wealth—useless. So, where is the potential for hope?

We can in fact find hope in the sukkah itself, when we remind ourselves that the book of Ecclesiastes and the festival of Sukkot go hand in hand. Despite the cool autumn weather that sometimes accompanies this holiday, it is a festival filled with warmth, abundance and prosperity. Sukkot is even called by our Rabbis z'man simchateinu, the season of our overflowing joy. Simply being in the sukkah reminds us to take advantage of the moments we have, however fleeting, with those we love; to treasure the legacy of those who have come before us and made us who we are today. This, to quote Kohelet, “is a real good.”

Although the sukkah is a fragile structure, it nevertheless protects us, shelters us, and provides refuge. It can serve as the antidote to the hopelessness of Kohelet. The sukkah doubles as our home, or the way a home should be—a place of safety and a place where we feel cared for and loved. When we dwell in the sukkah, we can open ourselves up to the experience of God's warm embrace, reminding ourselves that in fact, there is time for every experience under heaven: including a time for healing, a time for laughing, a time for dancing, and a time for peace.

Rabbi Bolton is the spiritual care counselor for Visiting Nurse Services of New York and a former member of JWI's Clergy Task Force.

Rabbi Hornsten is a rabbi at Temple Israel in West Bloomfield, Michigan, where she has been since 2000. She is the co-chair of JWI's Clergy Task Force and is also involved with domestic violence prevention work in her local community.

Conversations

1. When you are feeling hopeless or in despair (as the writer of Kohelet often seems to feel), from what or whom do you take the strength to go on? Can you share an experience of how your heart was healed after a period of hopelessness?
 2. In his commentary on Ecclesiastes 5:17, the medieval scholar Rashi challenges us to be “happy with our portion.” How can we do that when we face difficult, seemingly unbearable, challenges?
 3. Are there possible new avenues for help and protection this year that you feel ready or almost ready to investigate? What is most likely to help you take the first step toward them?
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Theme: Vulnerability

We think of our willingness to be emotionally exposed, to be open to wounding and healing, as signs of true intimacy. But what if our wounds are physical or carry with them economic, social, or emotional risks to ourselves and those we love?

Text • The Zohar • Section 3, Page 103b

The Zohar, the foundational text of kabbalah, is a collection of mystical commentaries on the Bible.

תא חזי בשעתא דבר נש יתיב במדורא דא צלא דמהימנותא שבינתא

Ye shall dwell in booths.... (Lev. 23:42) Observe that when a man sits in this abode of the shadow of faith, the Shekhinah [divine presence] spreads her wings over him from above and Abraham and five other righteous ones make their abode with him. Rabbi Abba said, "...and David with them."

... Rab Ham'nuna the Elder, when he entered a sukkah, used to stand at the door inside and say, "Let us invite the guests ... And he used to greet them, saying, "... Sit, most exalted guests, sit..." He would then raise his hands in joy and say, "Happy is our portion, happy is the portion of Israel, as it is written (Deut. 32:9), 'For the portion of the Lord is his people'" and then he took his seat.

[translation from Soncino Classics edition of the Zohar, published by Davka]

Commentary by Rabbi Ben Greenberg

The Zohar envisions that a visit by ushpizin is an event that can also bring us a sense of peace, comfort, and safety. The text of the Zohar makes it clear, initially, that their visit requires neither an invitation nor a blessing on our part. But the Zohar then shares the custom of Rabbi Ham'nuna the Elder who would invite these special guests into his sukkah, teaching us a powerful lesson by transforming a passive event into an active one.

Rabbi Ham'nuna demonstrates that we have the power to invite and, hence, also the power to say no. Just as we can invite someone, whether Abraham and Sarah or a neighbor or family member, we can also choose not invite them. We have the power not only to say yes but also the power to say no.

On the holiday of Sukkot we model what it means to have a community, a set of relationships, and an environment that is open and inviting but at the same time is also safe and peaceful. It is fairly easy to extend invitations to others into our sukkahs and into our lives; it is harder to learn how to draw boundaries and say no to people who make us feel uncomfortable or unsafe.

The teaching of Rabbi Ham'nuna in the Zohar is our call to do so.

Rabbi Ben Greenberg is the director of adult engagement at Central Synagogue in New York City. He is a member of the Clergy Task Force and received his smicha from Yeshivat Chovevei Torah. Previously he has worked at UJA-Federation of New York, as a congregational rabbi in Colorado and as the campus rabbi at Harvard Hillel.

Conversations

1. In the first paragraph of his commentary, Rabbi Greenberg speaks of transforming a passive event into an active one. Can you think of other situations in your life that are calling out for you to be more active than passive? What's your hunch about how to begin making that change?
2. Think of a family simcha [joyous occasion] for which you've shared responsibility. Did you have any differences of opinion with a family member about whom to invite? about whom you felt obligated to invite? How did you resolve these differences? How would you go about preparing that guest list now?
3. What has helped you to cultivate what Rabbi Greenberg calls "the power to say no" in any aspect of your life?

Commentary by Rabbi Sean Gorman

One delightful sukkah custom is to invite special guests [ushpizin, an Aramaic word for guests] to join us, at least in our imaginations. Traditional ushpizin were illustrious men from our tradition (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Joseph, and King David) but now the list has expanded to include heroines from the Bible such as Sarah, Miriam, Hannah, Deborah, and Queen Esther. Some families encourage their own flesh-and-blood dinner guests to come prepared to introduce and share a personal ushpiz, especially what it is about them that is so inspiring.

With the addition of ushpizin, Sukkot becomes a holiday to tap into people as sources of inspiration. Tucked into a sukkah, we can also think about what is inspiring about the people sitting around its table and more broadly about whom we invite into our homes and choose to break bread with. Further, we have the chance to think about, and share with others, those who inspire us to be our best selves. And if we're in a relationship with someone who does not inspire us, we can use this special time to confront that difficult fact. Sharing a meal in a sukkah with living people – and sharing with those living people the memories of those who have inspired us – offers a very special type of intimacy.

Rabbi Gorman serves as the rabbi of Pride of Israel Synagogue in Toronto and is a U.S. Navy chaplain currently in reserve status. He is a member of JWI's Clergy Task Force on Domestic Abuse in the Jewish Community.

Conversations

1. Whom would you invite as your ushpiz for the kind of sukkah meal described above?
2. There's vulnerable and there's vulnerable. Are you comfortable sharing memories of those you've lost, especially among those with whom you're currently sharing your life?
3. Our tradition sees a sukkah as both fragile and protecting. Does this contradiction resonate in your life?

Text • *Siddur* • *Hash'kiveinu* [from the evening service]

השכיבנו יי אלהינו לשלום, והעמידנו מלכנו לחיים ופרוש עלינו סכת שלומך

Hashkiveinu, Adonai Eloheinu, l'shalom, v'haamideinu malkenu l'chayim, ufros aleinu sukat sh'lomecha,

Lay us down to sleep in peace, Eternal One our God and raise us up to renewed life. Spread over us the shelter of Your peace....

Suggestion: Before beginning this text study, search YouTube for a rendition of Hashkiveinu..

Commentary by Cantor Deborah Katchko-Gray

“ Grant that we lie down in peace, and raise us up, our God to life renewed. Spread over us the sukkah of your peace...”

The phrase sukkat shalom is usually translated as “shelter of peace.” A huppah, the Jewish wedding canopy, shares this imagery – a shelter of peace for the couple and their inner circle. The sukkah and the huppah are intentionally left open, the sukkah in front and the huppah on all sides. In addition, the huppah’s total openness can signify the importance of surrounding the couple on all sides with love. Mention is not made that this new home will also be incredibly vulnerable – open to criticism and meddling, hurt and pain.

We all enter into marriage hoping we’ve found our bashert, “the one.” But what if our partner turns out not to be who we thought he or she was? What if we realize that behavior toward us that at first seemed questionable but manageable is actually abusive? What should we do with our feelings of compassion for the abuser and our wishes for that person to be healed – while we continue to be hurt? We usually don’t ask such questions until the problem has grown into a serious reality. We tend to wait for abuse to turn around on its own or for the will of the abuser to change. It is difficult to find the strength and courage to move on, to walk away and find the peace, dignity and compassion that we (and our children) deserve.

Being compassionate and hopeful are worthy ideals. But when these ideals and reality are in conflict, it is better to choose life, to choose the inner voice that says you deserve safety, love, and peace. Just as the time we spend in a sukkah shouldn’t be dangerous, so the life we share as a couple who have chosen to stand under a huppah should be spent as if in a shelter of peace.

Cantor Katchko-Gray, a fourth generation cantor, serves Temple Shearith Israel in Ridgefield, CT. She is an International Vice President of Cantors for Women of the Wall, the founder of the Women Cantors’ Network in 1982, and a member of JWI’s Clergy Task Force.

Commentary by Rabbi Rachel Ain

You and I belong to a tradition that, every autumn, makes a fascinating shift in its relationship to God. From Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur, we are meant to feel judged by God; we pray for forgiveness and mercy. Immediately following Yom Kippur, we begin building a sukkah, a special symbol of protected space, and our image of God becomes one of Protector.

Being protected, nurtured and cherished, is at odds with being judged. Our culture however is judgmental, which is often reflected in our own relationships with the people we care about. We get married under a chuppah, the wedding canopy that symbolizes our new home, and a reminder of God's protection. Like the sukkah, the chuppah is open, fragile and temporary, and is a reminder that we should cherish our relationship. Although we don't get married every day and we only build a sukkah once a year, we're fortunate that the sukkah appears in every evening prayer service, on Shabbat and weekdays. During the Hashkiveinu prayer in which we recite the text quoted above after the extended Shema section, we ask to live under God's shelter of peace (sukkat shalom). This image of God can be comforting as can the notion that, just as our ancestors built temporary shelters during their wilderness journey as a symbol of God's protection, we still do the same in our backyards and on our balconies.

The holiday of Sukkot dares us to hold on to memories of the coziness and sweetness of sitting in a sukkah, dares us to allow ourselves to turn away from judgment and enter into partnerships based on trust and the expectation of protection. The Hashkiveinu dares us to remember all this, always – every night in fact. During this Sukkot may we be reminded of the places and people in our lives that serve as protection for us and may we find the courage to be protectors more often than judges of others.

Rabbi Ain serves as the rabbi of Sutton Place Synagogue in New York City and was a member of JWI's Clergy Task Force on Domestic Abuse in the Jewish Community. Most recently she was the senior director for National Young Leadership of the Jewish Federations of North America. She also served as the senior rabbi of Congregation Beth Sholom-Chevre Shas, a Conservative synagogue in Syracuse, N.Y., from 2004 to 2011.

Conversations

1. It's exhausting and demoralizing to feel judged all the time or even some of the time. In work and in personal relationships, exposure to critical people and those with exacting demands always takes its toll. If you're facing this situation now, are you able to step back and ask yourself – as if you were trying to protect someone else – what kind of help am I ready to seek?
2. If you're not in the habit of reciting evening prayers, what might be a way to incorporate the ideas of the Hashkiveinu into your life?
3. Can you share how, if you're feeling judgmental, how you manage to restrain yourself? Are you more likely to offer judgment rather than support in some situations more than in others? How do you, or can you, help create a shift in any aspect of your life toward nurture and protection?

Text • Siddur • [from the *Amidah*]

Baruch atah Adonai...

masheev haruach umoreed hagashem.

ברוך אתה יי...:

משיב הרוח ומוריד הגשם:

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, who causes the wind to blow and the rain to fall.

Commentary by Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin

The seasons in Israel are not like the seasons in America. Even more than differing by being hot or cold, they differ by being wet or dry. The land of Israel is sustained in the winter by renewing rains that recharge her cisterns, aquifers and rivers. But she is watered in the summer by the ephemeral gift of morning dew.

On Sukkot, as we enter winter and celebrate the harvest past, we pray that God returns the rains to replenish the land. On Passover, as we enter summer's dry season, and begin the hard exodus from slavery through the wilderness, we pray that God gives us the blessing of dew. These prayers remind us that throughout our lives, our days are punctuated now with dustings, now with rushes, of the nourishing features of life.

Sometimes our spiritual nourishment comes in gushes – when we are smothered in a rain of mother's kisses, encircled by a warm group of friends, graced with accolades for a job well done. Other times, though, we hit hard, dry spells. Perhaps it is because we are stuck in a barren wilderness of harshness. Perhaps it is because others just don't have time to notice. Perhaps it is because of the lonely exodus out of a dark place that we have at long last had the courage to make. It is then that the dew, the tiny drops of life-giving moisture that seem to come out of nowhere and just as quickly disappear, can best be seen for the nourishment they give. The offer of a friend to visit and listen; the peace and safety in the house late at night; the hug of a trusting, grateful child; the care of a community; the freedom to begin again.

When the season of rain is not yet here, these delicate, daily doses of dew, the blessings that seem to come from thin air especially after the darkest nights, can nourish us and remind us that we are not alone, that we can hang on, day by day, until the nourishing rains return.

Rabbi Cardin founded the Baltimore Jewish Environmental Network and the Baltimore Orchard Project, which grows and distributes food to the needy. Her publications include *The Tapestry of Jewish Time: A Spiritual Guide to Holidays and Life Cycle Events* and *Tears of Sorrow, Seeds of Hope: a Jewish Spiritual Companion for Infertility and Pregnancy Loss*. A former member of JWI's Clergy Task Force, she received her ordination from the Jewish Theological Seminary.

Conversations

1. Think about the 'rain' and 'dew' in your life, in the life of your partner, and in the life of your relationship. Are they provided by the same sources? Do they overlap? Would your lives improve if there were more overlap, or would it be detrimental?
 2. Are you and your partner able to provide both 'rain' and 'dew' for one another?
 3. Can you share how you've sustained yourself and/or others through life's "hard, dry spells?"
 4. At the end of *Sukkot* comes *Sh'mini Atzeret*, a day on which we specifically pray for nourishing rain, the kind that penetrates to the roots of crops and grasses. Do you have roots that need rain at this time?
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Theme: Joy

Sukkot brings with it a challenging commandment: to be happy, to concentrate on our blessings and the goodness in our lives and let the joy of the holiday sweep over us. In relationships, happiness may feel elusive at times. But in a healthy relationship, each person should feel a sense of deep-seated happiness in being with the other person and a sense that this person adds to your joyfulness, at least some of the time.

Text • Kohelet [Ecclesiastes] 9:9

(ט) ראה חיים עם אשה אשר אהבת כל ימי חיי הבלך אשר נתן לך

Enjoy happiness with a woman you love all the fleeting days of life that have been granted to you under the sun – all your fleeting [literally, empty] days. For that alone is what you can get out of life and out of the toil at which you toil under the sun. [based on JPS translation, 2003]

Text • *Kohelet Rabbah* [Midrash] on 9:9

(Midrash is a kind of rabbinical homiletics used to explain, expand on, or in some cases subvert, the original meaning of the text.)

ראה חיים וגו' – א"ר יהושע בן לוי, כל השרוי בלא אשה שרוי בלא חיים,

Enjoy (lit. see) life... (Kohelet 9:9) Said R. Yehoshua ben Levi, “whoever abides without a wife abides without life, as it is written “enjoy life with a woman whom you love.”

Commentary by Rabbi David Rosenberg

Sukkot is considered to be the most joyous of the pilgrimage festivals. “You shall rejoice in your festival... you shall have nothing but joy” (Deut. 16:14-15). Ecclesiastes [Kohelet] the biblical book associated with Sukkot, finds happiness in the context of intimacy: “Enjoy happiness with a woman you love all the fleeting days of life that have been granted to you under the sun...” (Eccl. 9:9). Other biblical verses similarly proclaim, “it is not good for the human to be alone” (Gen. 2:18) and “you shall rejoice with your household” (Deut. 14:26).

The teachers of midrash cannot find joy outside marriage: “Any [man] who does not have a wife abides without goodness... without joy, without blessing...” (Kohelet Rabba ch. 9). In his Torah Temimah, Rabbi Baruch Epstein (d. 1941) wonders why this passage does not positively celebrate the joy of one who is married (comment to Eccl. 9:9, note 33). Rabbi Epstein then suggests an answer. While a caring spouse can pave the way to joy, a bad spouse will embitter the life of his or her partner. Even the pursuit of happiness can become futile, selfish, destructive. Sukkot serves as an antidote. The ‘festival’ par excellence teaches that joy results when we gladden those whom we love and to whom we are responsible (Eccl. 9:9 and Deut. 16:14).

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Conversations

1. Does happiness mean the same thing to you and your spouse? How do you know? Can you share a special way you've made those whom you love happy?
2. Because "joy is not a simple matter" and "even the pursuit of happiness can become futile, selfish, destructive," how can we maintain a sense of joy in our relationships that is unique and exciting and continue to search for joy with optimism and hope?
3. Think about ways you can use this holiday to reflect on any bitterness in your life and then commit to changing it.

Commentary by Rabbi Donna Kirshbaum

How many of us thought – if we even gave it a thought – that joy was pleasure, multiplied? At least until British novelist Zadie Smith came along in 2013 with an essay in the New York Review of Books that began: "A lot of people seem to feel that joy is only the most intense version of pleasure, arrived at by the same road... That has not been my experience. And if you asked me if I wanted more joyful experiences in my life, I wouldn't be at all sure." For Smith, pleasure is a small emotion she manages to experience daily – for instance, by popsicle-eating or people-watching – and its end brings no harm to anyone and can always be replaced with another of more or less equal worth. But joy? It doesn't fit with the everyday, Smith decides. "The thing no one ever tells you about joy is that it has very little real pleasure in it. And yet if it hadn't happened at all, at least once, how would we live?"

Her personal example of the problem with joy is this: "Occasionally [our] child, too, is a pleasure, though mostly she is a joy, which means in fact she gives us not much pleasure at all, but rather that strange admixture of terror, pain, and delight that I have come to recognize as joy, and now must find some way to live with daily."

Commenting on Zadie Smith's essay, Rachel Hodin in Thought Catalog writes, "I guess one way of distinguishing joy from the rest of your emotions is by detecting that acute sensation of dread – dread that this joy will not last or dread of the inevitable death of us all – which will halt this ecstatic sensation. For me, that feeling also defines love. I know I'm truly in love if I'm terrified our time together will cease to exist." Thank you, Zadie and Rachel and Sukkot's brooding text, Kohelet, and our joyful harvest holiday of Sukkot itself, which marks the moment when there's nothing left in the fields and the darkest season of the year is about to begin, for reminding us of how intimately true joy and real loss are bound together.

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Conversations

1. Were you puzzled when you first read Zadie Smith's observation, "The thing no one ever tells you about joy is that it has very little real pleasure in it. And yet if it hadn't happened at all, at least once, how would we live?" If so, what do you make of her statement now?
 2. Can you share a memory of a present or past love – not necessarily romantic love – that reminds you of journalist Rachel Hodin's test for real love: *I know I'm truly in love if I'm terrified our time together will cease to exist.*
 3. Our Torah contains the commandment to be joyful on Sukkot just as elsewhere it contains the commandment to love God. Although there are many famous commentaries about this seeming contradiction between the strictness of a command and the inherent freedom involved in feeling an emotion, how do you personally understand the idea of commanded emotions?
 4. Does autumn usually make you feel joyful or sad or both?
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Acting on Our Learning

1. Ask your friends to save their etrogs and invite them to your kitchen for an etrog cooking fest. Some ideas include a salad with etrog juice in place of lemon juice, etrog marmalade, etrog bundt cake, or, if you're really in the mood for a party, prepare some etrog liqueur.

With its curvy shape, much like the shape of a woman, the fragrant etrog that we use on Sukkot is a symbol of fertility, a symbol of beauty, and a delicious fruit. "A midrash suggests the etrog, not the apple, was the forbidden fruit Eve ate in the Garden of Eden. Because the pain of childbirth was Eve's punishment, it is a tradition for a Jewish woman to bite off the tip of the etrog on the last day of Sukkot, then give charity and say a prayer: "Rescue me that I may give birth with ease, and without pain, and that neither I nor my child suffer any harm." A woman in labor may also bite off the pitom (the tip of the etrog) and place it under her pillow to ease the pain; expectant mothers may make etrog jam... and eat it on the 15th of Shevat, the New Year for Trees, in hopes of an easy delivery. Russian Jewish women often sent a gift of etrog marmalade to a new mother." By Aliza Green, September 2010, "Etrog: A Holiday Fruit Filled with Flavor and Female Symbolism," *Jewish Woman* magazine.

2. Host a Tools for Talking to Teens workshop on healthy relationships and dating abuse – a free program by JWI. Help the teens in your life find joy and balance in their relationships! Learn more at jwi.org/teens.
3. Watch the Israeli movie *Ushpizin* (2004); it's all about relationships. Invite some friends over to watch the movie together, enjoy etrog treats, read through this guide and use the conversation starters to discuss your relationships.
4. Support JWI's National Library Initiative (NLI), an ambitious undertaking to establish 100 children's libraries in homeless and battered women's shelters across the United States. Books, teddy bears, rocking chairs – these simple items can turn a battered women's shelter into a 'Sukkat Shalom' for children! Learn more at jwi.org/nli.



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JWI is the leading Jewish organization working to end violence against women and girls in the U.S. and worldwide, and empower women through leadership development and financial literacy. Our advocacy and programmatic initiatives work to ensure economic security and end domestic violence, dating abuse, sexual assault on college campuses, gun violence and human trafficking. JWI convenes the Clergy Task Force on Domestic Abuse in the Jewish Community and the Interfaith Domestic Violence Coalition, which advocates at the national level for anti-violence legislation.