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## *An Optimist Sees Pessimism in Ecclesiastes*

**J**ews have one major festival dedicated to the theme of happiness. This may come as a surprise to many. Is there a human being “with heart so dead” that he requires a special day to remind him how important happiness is? The answer is that most people do require it. True, they crave the blessing of joy but they do not always fathom what is the best way to achieve it. And among those seeking answers to this question were philosophers and kings and those who were both philosophers and kings.

Such a man was King Solomon who tradition credits with the authorship of the Book of Ecclesiastes, one of the writings of the Bible. And it is that book that tradition bids us to read precisely on the festival of Tabernacles (Sukkot) which is the season for our “happiness” and the time for pondering what happiness is.

Many reasons are given for our reading the book in connection with the joyous holiday. However, on its face, it would appear that it is the worst possible choice. The book is the most pessimistic of all the sacred writings. It describes a man who had everything but, in fact, it was all as nothing in his eyes. He appears to have tasted of all the pleasures but ultimately delighted in none. Do we read the book on Sukkot only to put a damper on our celebration? To urge us not to indulge in excesses? To remind us that happiness is an unattainable goal? Were our sages capricious or sadistic - to prescribe a holiday dedicated to happiness and to pinpoint its pointlessness?

I dared to give my own answer to the question on my 75<sup>th</sup> birthday - a milestone in one's life when one inevitably becomes philosophical. Many experts have dealt with the issue, I am not such an expert. But my answer has its source in my personal experience as a human being and not in any expertise as a scholar.

It seems to me that King Solomon wrote as pessimistically as he did because he completely failed to discover the three principal

sources of meaningful happiness. The book of Ecclesiastes fails to make any mention whatever of what to me - the congenital optimist - are the greatest blessings a human being ought to crave. These are the love of family, the capacity for genuine friendship, and the ability to perform good deeds and bring happiness to others.

Perhaps I err. Yet, whenever I read the Book of Ecclesiastes I have the feeling that the author could not even enjoy the thought that the wealth he acquired would be enjoyed by his heirs - his family - his progeny. It were as if he begrudged them what he had bothered to accumulate. Many of us - by contrast - feel that one of the main drives that prompt us to achieve is that we may thereby bless those of our loved ones who survive. The Book clearly expresses the author's resentment that others will enjoy the fruit of his toil and there is no suggestion that these others may include those whom he ought to have loved - if, indeed he loved anyone.

Second, there is no reference in the Book to the blessing of friendship. Needless to say, there are many kinds of friendship and not all of them are of equal value. Maimonides - a greater philosopher than King Solomon - distinguished between three types of friendship. (*See Avot 5:15*)

There are people who seek the friendship of others in order to exploit them. This goal is not an ethical one and is hardly recommended. We ought to never exploit one created in the divine image. Then there are people who seek the friendship of others in order to dispel loneliness and enjoy the companionship of fellow-men. This goal is a worthy one but hardly the sublimest of all possible impulses. It is not unethical for it does not really involve the exploitation of others. One rather seeks in it sharing - the sharing of life's experiences and perhaps even the sharing of worldly goods. But the highest type of friendship is the friendship that two or more persons enjoy because in their togetherness they want to achieve the loftiest values of the human heart - sharing not only the facts and things of their lives but the aspirations that motivate them, the dreams that they dream and the deeds they perform as one to fulfill the dreams.

There is not the remotest suggestion of this yearning or blessing in the Book of Ecclesiastes. Thus, without the love of family or

friends, how could King Solomon have achieved happiness? It is no wonder that he wrote as he did.

Yet, the greatest of all sources of happiness is the ability to bring happiness to others. Nothing ought to make a person as happy as his making others happy. This is other-directed happiness rather than self-centered happiness and one can never feel satiated with it. That is what the Torah orders in connection with all the major holidays. Enjoy them! How? Bring happiness to the widow and the orphan - to the expropriated Levite and the poor. And King Solomon, with all of his wealth, did not know this use of wealth. And he probably did not try it. Otherwise, he would have referred to it. He discusses all that he did - and all that he tried. But this very simple answer to his search is that he did not try.

That is why for me the book is a classic, made holy, because it is a documentary as to how one can best achieve the state of misery - depression, disillusion, pessimism. And if one wants to avoid such despair then one ought to abandon self-centeredness and focus on the happiness of others rather than one's own. It may not be easy to achieve such a goal in the fullest measure but it is certainly worth the try.

Saints did not achieve happiness this way. Whether in the love of God or the love of human beings they transcended their love of themselves and instead of maintaining a pessimistic view of life theirs was an optimistic one. "God's law was perfect and refresheth the soul."