

NOT COMPETITION, COMPOSITION!

by Rabbi Label Lam

There's something sweet and warm about sleeping in a Sukkah at night tucked under a layer of blankets, stars and shy moon peeking between the branches above. The little children can't stop squirming and giggling with excitement. It's too fabulous, the feeling of getting away with such an easy Mitzvah. It's like getting paid to play baseball or eat ice cream.

To the mature mind and graying beard it seems a little eerie to be lying on one's back, in a flimsy box, staring into the night sky. One can't help but wonder if this temporary hut is conspiring with the requirements of the day to drop a heavy message at our doorstep.

It's through the lens of the bramble and branches atop the Sukkah and the special readings that certain profound lessons for life can begin to come into rich focus. We read the words of that person reputed to have been the wisest of all men, King Solomon, in the book of Koheles.

There he states the case for existential nausea, "Futility of futilities! - said Koheles- Futility of futilities! All is futile! What profit has man from all his labor that he toils under the sun?" (Koheles 1:2-3) We could be depressed and be excused if as the song goes "that's all there is!"

The Dubner Maggid offered the following Parable to make more vivid the human condition according to King Solomon. There was a group of blind people on a tour. They became separated from their leader. A jokester approached them and played a cruel trick.

He said aloud, "Here is a bag of gold coins for you to divide between you, amongst the members of the group." He gave no one a single coin. In a few moments, each one became suspicious of everyone else for harboring what he felt was justly his. A huge fight erupted and their energies were tragically wasted in search of nonexistent coins and such. Rabbi Dessler describes in his treatise "On Kindliness" having once witnessed a pack of wolves tearing and bloodying each other over an unclaimed carcass. In the end, the snow was covered in blood and they were all too wounded to enjoy the prize. What a waste of effort! What a waste of life! No winners! All losers!

A few weeks ago my eight-year old daughter came home from the first day of school and asked my wife with a sense of urgency, "What's competition?" My wife spent the next few minutes defining the word and the mechanics of the concept. "When there are limited resources, people will tend to compete for a slice of the pie. Sometimes it's good. It provides an incentive to excel. Sometimes it's not beneficial, when people act desperately and harm others on the way to their goal." In the middle of her diatribe, my wife interrupted herself and asked, "Sarah, why do you want to know?" She

answered, "My teacher said I need a competition notebook!" "Sarah!" chuckled my wife, "Not competition, composition!" All was not for naught!

In the end, concludes King Solomon, in the final analysis, everything counts. "Fear G-d and keep His commandments, for this comprises the whole man. Every deed-G-d will bring to judgment, even on all the hidden- to determine if it's good or if it's bad." (Koheles 12:13-14) With a Mitzvah mentality, the chilling sense of forlornness furthered by studying the cracks in the Sukkah where the cold gets in can be cured. The feeling of being totally enveloped in a Mitzvah warms better than a bundle of blankets. The chuckling of the children is not so childish as it once seemed. With whom are we fighting a whole day? In a composed and sober state of mind it's real and clear. There's no shortage of Mitzvos to be done here. Nobody's goodness takes away from anyone else's. Each only adds and multiplies benefits for all. The Sukkah helps us to focus upon what a wolf could never know, "Not competition, composition!"

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