KOHELET 3:1-8: A SONG FOR THE SEASONS

by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

To every thing there is a season,
and a time to every purpose under the heaven;
1. A time to be born, and a time to die;
2. A time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted;
3. A time to kill, and a time to heal;
4. A time to break down, and a time to build up;
5. A time to weep, and a time to laugh;
6. A time to mourn, and a time to dance;
7. A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
8. A time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
9. A time to seek, and a time to lose;
10. A time to keep, and a time to cast away;
11. A time to rend, and a time to sew;
12. A time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
13. A time to love, and a time to hate;
14. A time of war, and a time of peace.

This famous passage, with its fourteen pairs of opposites, has long been the subject of speculation and analysis among both traditional and modern commentators. In addition to the significance of the choice of which pairs are included here, the order and structure have come under scrutiny of late due to the fact that traditional commentators did not focus their analyses on issues of structure and sequence as explicitly as is currently done. It ought to be noted, however, that the interest and attention given to structure and sequence in T'nakh texts is shared by both the secular and traditional schools in our day. It behooves us, as serious students of the text who believe that the framework and order of passages in T'nakh have much to teach us about the underlying message of that given passage as do the words themselves, to address this thorny passage and seek a solution which is also a resolution.

The difficulties in this short (7 verse) passage are, essentially, two:

a) Why were the particular verb-pairs chosen for inclusion?

b) What is the rationale behind the order of the pairs?

The second question is exacerbated once we note that within each line, the order of (what would generally be considered) the "positive" time and the "negative" time are inconsistent. In the first two lines, the apposition begins with the positive (*plant, be born*) and ends with the negative (*uproot, die*); the next four lines begin with the negative (*kill, break down, weep, mourn*) and end with the positive (*heal, build up, laugh, dance*). This order is then inverted, with the next four lines beginning with the positive (*cast away stones, embrace, seek, keep*) and ending with the negative (*gather stones together, refrain from embracing, lose, cast away*), followed by two lines that begin with the negative (*rend, keep silent*) and ending with the positive (*sew, speak*). The entire structure is completed with two lines which are inconsistent with each other ñ positive (*love*) then negative (*hate*); negative (*war*) and positive (*peace*).

Various attempts to decipher the order are all premised on the notion that the order chosen by the author (our tradition maintains several possible authors of Kohelet - including Solomon [Tosefta Shabbat 18:11] and Hezekiah and his entourage [BT Bava Batra 15a]) is deliberate; nonetheless, most authors prefer to identify the chaotic structure as itself the message (how quickly and unpredictably our fortunes change) or are resigned to the fact that the structure is elusive (cf. Klein's comment in Olam haTanakh ad loc.) We certainly subscribe to the premise and will continue the analysis ñ and accept the challenge to find a resolution - in that light.

Among the many aphorisms expressed by the author of Kohelet, one sums up much of the wisdom of the book:

Better is the end of a thing than its beginning (7:8)

I would like to suggest that if we understand this notion as not only retrospective (i.e. one can appreciate the value of something at its conclusion) but constructive (within the passage) we will have the keys to unlocking the mystery of the 28 times.

Let us begin, as Kohelet recommends, at the end. The final verse (v. 8) presents four circumstances that exist during an individual's life: *a time to love, a time to hate, a time of war and a time of peace*. I'd like to suggest that these four, coming at the "inverted" topic sentence of the poem, represent two types of circumstantial-experiential interstices at which a person finds himself during life.

The first distinction drawn is between line 13 and line 14. The opportunities to love or hate chiefly present themselves in the arena of interpersonal relationships and are, by and large, within the power of the individual to choose which path to take. Neither of these is true about the two options of line 14 - war and peace are usually situations into which a member of a clan, tribe or nation will find himself drawn, and those affected by his choices, although human, are usually not people with whom he has direct aware n e s s and familiarity. To paraphrase Martin Buber, *L o v e - H a t e* is chiefly a question of how "I" relates to "thou"; *Wa r- P e a c e* will usually determine how "I" will interact with "it." These two "title" lines are presented in inverted order to allow for the multiple inversions throughout the poem, as will be explained. In addition, this inversion itself shows how not

all choices and critical junctures in life are of one cloth ñ some allow for more free will, others impact on a greater population with greater severity.

Once we have these four options presented, the rest of the vrha is an explication of the implications of each of these forks in the road.

Since the entire poem is premised on the inverted nature of life ñ its value only recognized when it is over - it should not surprise us that the structure of the poem is a multi-layered chiasmus. Of the remaining twelve lines, the first six are "descendants" of the bottom line and the next six (#7-12) are the offshoots of the penultimate line.

Let us begin with the bottom line - a time of war, a time for peace. A time for war takes us (via a chiastic arrow) to the second half of lines 1&2 - a time to die, a time to uproot. It is the most basic reality of war that soldiers die; although there is much to recommend an allegorical interpretation of uprooting, both the stricture in the Torah against uprooting fruit trees during war (D'varim 20:19-20) and the consequent offshoots militate in favor of a plain reading. In addition to the terrible loss of life in war, there is also an uprooting of that which has been planted - flora, buildings, social order etc.

Opposite these two consequences of war are the fruits of peacetime ñ a time of birth; simply read, a time at which life can begin, flourish and replenish itself. In addition, it is *a time to plant*, a time at which we can focus our resources, financial as well as intellectual and emotional, on the building up of society.

Each of these sub-categories further divides into two. Again following a chiastic arrow, *a time to die* (the first consequence of war) translates into *a time to weep* (line 5) and *a time to mourn* (line 6). These two responses to death are not synonymous; mourning (orig. "s'fod", which, in Rabbinic Hebrew, means "eulogizing") is a communal outcry of anguish over the loss of a fellow; weeping is that internal and personal mourning which holds the potential for much greater depth as well as permanence of feeling.

The inverse is true following the opening phrase to the second half of lines 5 & 6 ñ a time to be born is both a time of laughter (that personal and internal rejoicing) and a time to dance (the communal reaction to the good news of a new life). Again, the dancing can be more boisterous and inspiring ñ but the personal and internal "laughter" carries the possibilities of a lifetime of happiness.

Line 2, which also stems from "a time of war, time of peace", operates in the same fashion. The uprooting of 2b translates into both the killing of 3a and the "breaking down" of 4a. There are various ways in which the uprooting of war plays out - there is the real uprooting of lives, and there is the breaking down of all that has been built.

The planting of 2a, symmetrically, is felt both in the healing of 3b and in the building up of 4b. We have essentially completed the analysis of lines 1-6 and line 14. We have noted that line 14 provides us with the stark alternatives - war and peace. Each path has its consequences - chiefly, the death

and destruction associated with war versus the life and construction associated with peace. Death is met with outward eulogies and internal weeping, whereas new life is greeted with public celebration and personal joy. The uprooting of war speaks more to the individual soldier - who will both kill enemy soldiers and will tear down what the enemy has built. Peace afford the possibility to act productively ñ both in healing that which has been harmed and in building up that which has not yet been dreamed of.

We now move up one line to the penultimate - *a time to love, a time to hate*. Again, we note that lines 7-12 are the direct and secondary results of these choices; and here, the choices are ours. Line 13a, working in yet another inversion, moves directly to 12b (a time to speak) and 11b (a time to mend). Love is expressed both in reaching out (which itself has two subsets as we will see) and in taking care of that which has already been entrusted. Its opposite number, a time to hate, moves symmetrically to 12a (a time to be silent) and 11a (a time to rend). If love is reaching out, then its opposite number implies a withdrawal; if love means taking care over that which has been entrusted, then hate is expressed in the destruction of that item. Again, each of these offshoots subdivides, this time moving backward in the poem.

The *time to speak* of 12b is resolved in *a time to cast away stones* of 7a and *a time to embrace* of 8a. There is the loving speech of a teacher to his students, where the stones of his wisdom are cast far and wide, and there is the loving speech of dear friends who embrace each other. Hatred is expressed in a mirrored fashion. The refusal to share ideas, to impart information, is one type of silence of hatred; the deliberate distancing from a fellow in need of support and embrace is distinct - yet both are cut from the same cloth of enmity.

The other implications of *love-hate* are mending and rending. The *mending* mentioned in 11b points "back" and "across" to 9a (a time to seek) and 10a (a time to keep). There is mending which can only be accomplished by looking for the problem, by investigating the situation (be it a fellow's welfare, a hurt neighbor etc.); without the seeking out nothing can be solved. On the other hand, there are situations where the wisest counsel is to hold on to the status quo.

If mending is sometimes proactive and sometimes conservative, the same can be said for rending. Hence, *a time to rend* of 11a moves immediately back to 9b (*a time to lose*) and 10b (*a time to cast away*). With some things - and some relationships ñ it is sufficient to let them die of their own accord, refusing to breathe any life into them. Others will not go away so easily and can only be *rended* by *casting them away.*

CONCLUSION

In this brief essay, we have attempted to provide an explanation for the odd presentation of the twenty-eight "itim" of Kohelet 3:2-8. Using two principles which are themselves the heart and soul of Kohelet's thinking - the wisdom of retrospection and the topsy-turvy nature of life - we have identified where those principles inform the structure of this elegant poem.

Since we only realize and appreciate wisdom "at the end" (in our old age), the basic principles are presented in the final verse. And, since the nature of life is to provide us with apparent blessings which we should avoid, along with seeming pitfalls which are really building blocks of our spiritual and moral backbone, the entire poem operates, forward and backward, in a "crossing pattern", a sort of double-chiasmus. This also explains the graphic "Shira-format" in which this poem is written in the T'nakh, allowing for the back-and-forth movement across sides.

Please see the two charts which are on our web page (http://www.torah.org/advanced/mikra/5762/hagim/28seasonschart1.pdf) and (http://www.torah.org/advanced/mikra/5762/hagim/28seasonschart2.pdf); the first one details the hierarchical layout of the poem and the second one elucidates the structure as presented here.
