

Youth is wasted on the young.

George Bernard Shaw

Lately, I have been considering whether this quote of Shaw's is consistent with a Torah viewpoint or not. Let us consider what message our classic sources teach us about youth, old age, and the nature of time.

This *Shabbat*, *Shabbat Chol Ha-Moed Sukkot*, we will be reading *Megillat Kohelet* (the Scroll of Ecclesiastes.) Most *shuls* I have attended read *Kohelet* right before the Torah reading on *Shabbat Chol-HaMoed Sukkot*, sometimes at breakneck speed, and I suspect that many congregants look at *Kohelet* as either an inconvenience or an excuse to get to *shul* later than normal (more time to catch up.) Others, who may look at *Kohelet* more carefully, may come away confused by the seemingly depressing, pessimistic tone of the work and may question *chazal's* decision to include it as part of our liturgy.

One older Lubavitcher I once spoke to opined that since *Sukkot* was *Z'man Simchatenu* (the time of our rejoicing,) *chazal* were concerned that we would rejoice too much, and instituted the reading of *Kohelet* as a balance, to bring us back down to earth. I want to take this opportunity to briefly propose an alternate explanation, with an eye to coming back to Shaw's quote at the end.

Many of you might know that I enjoy mathematics. One particularly fascinating areas of mathematics has to do with the study of fractals, which I confess I don't fully understand and cannot do justice to in one paragraph. In layman's terms, fractals are objects or processes which are self-similar at different levels or magnifications (granularities.)

That is to say, that the parts of the whole resemble the whole, and aggregate assemblies of the whole resemble the whole. Looking at objects at increasingly microscopic or macroscopic level reveals hidden complexity that is similar in nature to the object as a whole. For example, a mountain is similar to a rock from the mountain is similar to a grain of sand from the rock in the characteristic of "ruggedness," and, looked at entirely out of context, they appear identical. And a mountain range is also similar to a single mountain in that "ruggedness" factor.

I propose that one theme of *Kohelet* is that time, and our perceptions of the world around us, are fractal in nature. Consider, for example, a day, a year, and a lifetime. They are all the same in that they all have a beginning and an end, and are cyclical in nature. One analogy might be youth=spring/*Pesach*=morning, and old age=fall/*Sukkot*=evening.

Looking at time this way, one might have the same type of experience, albeit at different levels of granularity, throughout their lifetime. That is to say, we each might experience a little bit of old age as we celebrate *Sukkot*, or the feeling that we have each morning might be characterized as a "youthful" feeling

Sukkot, coming as it does at harvest time and the end of the year, is also known as *Chag He'Asif*, the festival of ingathering. Although we are commanded to be joyous,

some might find it difficult to be truly joyous – sure, the harvest was good, but now winter is setting in, and next year is uncertain. We have been *davening* together for nearly a month, and soon we will be back to our everyday lives and the *Chagim* will be only a memory. We begin to pray for rain, and realize that our success is entirely due to Hashem’s providence. Perhaps we were not so successful this year – is our lack of success a portent of even worse times to come? Being able to be truly joyous involves a certain degree of letting go of expectations for the future.

Considering all of these factors, the message of *Kohelet* is actually tremendously comforting and can help us to realize that we can let go of those expectations, because we’re not really letting go. Although we may look at *Sukkot* as the “end,” the message of *Kohelet* is that it is only an “end” when viewed at the granularity of a year. At other granularities, it is neither an end nor a beginning. We will have other opportunities, at different levels of granularity, to recapture the feeling of *Sukkot*.

This is also true of old age. True, I’m probably not ever again going to have the physical endurance and stamina that I had when I was a teenager. However, I still have plenty of opportunities in my life, at different levels of granularity, to recapture feelings of youthfulness.

Being able to be old, yet recapture feelings of youthfulness, or to be young, yet be able to empathize with and relate to the elderly, is an essential personal *middah* to work on in the interest of building communities, and ultimately, *K’lal Yisrael*. I firmly believe that Torah is a living document and that *Halacha* is a means by which we are able to reconnect with ourselves and each other in this way. I believe that *Kohelet* supports my view in the second-to-last *pasuk*, “In the end, all will be understood: Fear Hashem and keep his mitzvot, because this is the essence of humanity.” [my translation]

We have come full circle to Shaw’s quote. While witty, Shaw’s sentiments seem to run counter to a Torah viewpoint. In truth, youth is only wasted on those who choose to view time, and life, as a one-way linear process.

Chag Sameach,

Danny Geretz

<i>Chagim</i>	Holidays
<i>Chazal</i>	Our sages, of blessed memory
<i>Chol HaMoed</i>	Intermediate Days (of Sukkot or Pesach)
<i>Davening</i>	Praying (Yiddish)
<i>Klal Yisrael</i>	the community of Israel
<i>Middah</i>	personal attribute
<i>pasuk</i>	Verse
<i>Shul</i>	Synagogue (Yiddish)