

"MEN OF MEANS AND MEN OF ENDS"

Havel havalim, amar Kohelet, havel havalim, ha-kol hevel.

"Vanity of vanities, said Koheleth, vanity of vanities, all is vanity." On this note of brooding pessimism does King Solomon begin his great work, which we read this morning in the synagogue. It is not the kind of statement that is meant to offer solace to troubled spirits and to provide peace of mind for those who seek it. On the contrary, it is meant to challenge our smug and confident preconceptions.

The Rabbis of the Talmud (B.B. 100b) saw in this sage and sad comment on all of human endeavor a source for a particular Jewish custom. They counted the number of times the idea of hevel, "vanity," appears in the verse we quoted. The word hevel itself counts for one, and the word havalim counts for two, since the minimum of plural is two. The total number in the verse, therefore, is seven. It is because of this, they averred, that Jews follow the practice of sheva maamadot, of "the seven stops." When a person dies and the coffin is brought to its last resting place, the pall-bearers execute seven stops while carrying the body to the grave. We thus symbolize, at the last journey that a human being takes, that after all is said and done, "vanity of vanities, said Koheleth, vanity of

vanities, all is vanity." Death is that inevitable occasion in life, when all our pretences are punctured, when all our illusions are laid bare, and all that we have thought is so terribly important now appears in the blue and dismal light of havel havalim, the vanity of vanities.

The Rabbis of the Midrash went a step further, and maintained that both the seven stops and the seven vanities are parallel k'negged sheva olamot she'adam roeh be'hayyav, to the seven stages of a man's life. You recall that Shakespeare, in his "As You Like It," spoke of "the seven ages of man." Long long before the English bard, the Rabbis of the Midrash spoke of the seven stages of man.

When a child is a year old, they said, he is domeh le'hazir she'poshet yado be'bibin, like a wild barnyard animal whose curiosity leads him to destructiveness. When he is ten years old, the third stage, kofetz ki'gedi -- he springs about like a deer or kid, free and untrammelled; no wonder that we refer, in colloquial English, to a youngster as a "kid." The fourth stage of man finds him nohem ke'sus u-va'i iteta, neighing and restless as a steed, anxious to get on with the business of living, looking for a wife and ready to set up a home. Once he is married he proceeds to the fifth stage, harei hu ka'hamor:

his new responsibilities as a married man weigh heavily upon him, making of him a beast of burden; they limit his freedom, discipline him, and demand of him that he discharge his duties properly. Then, when he has children, and his responsibilities are increased manifold, he reaches the sixth stage: me'iz panav ke'kelev, le'havi lehem u-mazonot, he takes his career or business or ambition with much greater and deadly seriousness, sometimes with ruthlessness. He develops canine avarice, becomes daring, develops hutzpah, and he is ready to swallow the world because he knows that he must provide for a wife and children. In this sixth stage, which lasts for so much of life, a man sometimes allows his animal instincts, his bestiality, to show; in his struggle to make a living, he sometimes is sorely lacking in ethics and descends to the level of "dog eat dog." And then, when this active part of his life has ended, and he turns old, he reaches the seventh and last stage: harei hu ke'kof -- he is like a monkey, an ape, only an imitation of a real man, his former self. Or, to borrow Shakespeare's description of the seventh stage, he is

"In second childishness, and mere oblivion,
"Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything."

Note that the seven stages represent not a progression but a retrogression: from king to monkey! Man, the king of creation, many modern scientists assert, comes from a common ancestor with the monkey; man, the Rabbis of the Midrash assert, often begins

as a king -- and evolves into a monkey!

These, then, are the seven stages of man -- and they certainly do not present a pretty picture! On the contrary, it is in respect of this kind of life that Solomon proclaimed life to be havel havalim, "vanity of vanities," a vast progression of emptiness which we acknowledge at the end of life's journey by means of the sheva maamadot, the seven stops on the way to the very end.

King Solomon, however, would not want us to believe that the picture he has drawn in Koheleth is the whole picture. This description of life as an exercise in futility is only a partial truth at best. Many people may begin on a high level and thereafter degenerate. But many other people, in our own experience, begin low and rise and develop and mature beautifully and age gracefully and wisely. That is why the Rabbis were troubled by this book, and why some of them wanted to exclude it from the Bible. It is only because Koheleth ends on a much happier and more optimistic note that the Rabbis finally permitted it to be included in the Tanakh.

What Solomon tells us is this: there are two kinds of people. **T**here is the man whose entire ambition in life is to be "a man of means," who is driven by his acquisitiveness to do nothing more than grasp and acquire and hoard. Such a person

has no ends in mind, no purpose for which he strives, no benefits that he wishes to share with others. And then there is the "man of ends," one who goes through life with a purpose, with an aim, with a goal. He does not want to forego the pleasures, but neither does he want these pleasures and luxuries to dominate him. He wants to use his wealth, and not have his wealth use him. While the man of means seeks to be better off, the man of ends -- seeks to be better. The man of means strives to be self-made; the man of ends strives to remake himself. The former has what to live with; the latter -- also what to live for. The man of means, the one who looks upon all of life as merely a succession of material triumphs and endless acquisitions, may think he is being religious, but he never really succeeds in being spiritual. He recites the twenty-third Psalm and he says, ha-Shem ro'i, "the Lord is my Shepherd," lo ehsar, "I shall not want" -- Lord, take care of me, be my Shepherd, see to it that I never want, that I never lack, that I am always provided with whatever I want. That is how the man of means reads the twenty-third Psalm. How differently is it interpreted by the man of ends! He recites the same words, but understands them as did the great Hasidic teacher, the Rabbi of Neshchyz. Ha-Shem ro'i, "the Lord is my Shepherd" -- what a profound commitment of faith! God, nothing I have really belongs to me; I am like a sheep which is lost and abandoned and helpless without its Shepherd. All I have comes from You. And now,

I pray You, lo ehsar, "I shall not want" -- may I never be found wanting in that high level of faith, may I never lack the spiritual grace always to pray to reach that level of understanding that ha-Shem ro'i, "the Lord is my Shepherd!" In other words, the man of ends prays that he should never be blinded by his means and lose sight of his ends! For a life without ends must come to an end that is ~~in~~^s an ignominious and shameful as a monkey dressed like a human being, but remaining sub-human nevertheless!

In the first verse of Koheleth, Solomon was speaking only about one certain kind of human being -- the man of means, who knows no ends, or, alternatively, about that one aspect of every human being. The havel havalim, the vain succession of stage after stage from king to ape, is the story of constant and uninterrupted acquisitiveness. He begins as a king who receives affection, as a wild animal who must be free to destroy whatever he touches, to a kid who must be able to jump wherever he likes, to a restless steed anxious to fulfill his own desires, to a beast of burden who must carry his treasures on his back, and, worst of all, to a snarling and cruel competitor in the struggle to make a living; hence, having lived as an animal, he must end as an animal: ke'kof, nothing but an imitation of a human being, bereft of his tzellem Elokim, robbed of his intrinsic dignity.

How different is "the man of ends" -- he never rejects worldly goods, for there is nothing wrong with enjoying the material pleasures of life if it is done legitimately. But he uses them, as a means to higher ends -- which is what the word "means" should mean! And because he looks upon his possessions and his riches as a means to make his family happy, to give them an education, to strengthen the society and the community in which he lives, to share his ^{bene} ~~beneficence~~ with others -- the life of this kind of man certainly is not havel havalim!

Koheleth, King Solomon, who had such harsh and piercing things to say about mere possessions, was no stranger to affluence. He was no "batlan," no sarcastic and envious poor man who beheld^d the wealth of his neighbors and cried "sour grapes!" He was a man of unparalleled wealth and all but limitless means. His message, therefore, has particular relevance to us. We are ^{an} ~~the~~ affluent society; we live in an economy of abundance and even of opulence. The greatest majority of us are tested not by poverty but by plenty. This, ^{is} ~~the~~ what Solomon has to say to us: ~~t~~ the misconception of the role of material goods ultimately leads to dreadful emptiness in life. At the end, after all is said and all is done, man makes his lonely way to his grave, and takes nothing along with him; as the Yiddish proverb puts it, "shrouds have no pockets."

Havel havalim -- that, unfortunately, is what life often is. But life need not necessarily be like this; life can be different. We can shape our life with great goals. We can give our existence meaning and direction and purpose. And then, without losing the pleasures of possession, we can be blessed with the privilege of purpose.

This, indeed, is the tremendous significance of the historic ^{present} legislation ~~the~~ Congress has produced. It is the use of this country's enormous wealth for the enhancement of life, old age, health, and the war against poverty, that are making ours a truly "Great Society."

The same holds true for us as individuals, as Jews. When we know that what we acquire we will use for the education of children, for making happy those who are in need, for helping the poor and the hungry and the impoverished, for spreading the learning of Torah amongst ever larger numbers of our fellow Jews, for helping to build up the national homeland, for leaving abiding monuments of spiritual generosity -- then our means, having been attached to great ends, will leave us happy as well as wealthy, fulfilled as well as satiated.

This is what was meant by that charming saint of Hasidism, R. Meir'l Premishlaner, who one day turned to God in prayer and said: let no one tell You, Father in Heaven, that Jews are vulgar and crass when they strive to make money. After all, what do you

think they want money for? -- for sekhar limmud, giving their children a Jewish education; for health the better to serve God; for support of old parents; for making the Sabbath and Holidays days of delight; for a contribution to a worthy cause, bread for a hungry beggar, assistance for a poor bride. All the money they ask for is only a means to mitzvot and maasim tovim!

Solomon began his book with a brooding pessimism about the vanity of a life of means only. He concludes it with a rousing optimism about the value of a life of ends: Sof davar, "the end of the matter," -- or perhaps: "this is the matter of the end or ends" -- when a life has been lived with dedication to great ends and purposes, faith in the Almighty, love of Israel, and generosity to all men, then ha-kol nishma, all has been heard: then one has tasted of the pleasures of this world, without sacrificing his soul in the process; then one is both better and better off. Et ha-Elokim vera v'et mitzvotav shemor: by fearing God and observing His commandments, the true ends of the good, meaningful life, ki zeh kol ha-adom -- we can become whole men, integrated people. And then all of life becomes, as this particular festival of Sukkot is known, a zeman simhatenu -- a time of joy and happiness.

May God grant all of us a year of happiness by giving us the means which we may learn to dedicate to His ends. For that, indeed, is the end that shapes our destiny.