

KOHELET

|10| Our skin was hot like an oven because we burn with ra'av (hunger, famine).

|11| They ravished the nashim in Tziyon, and the betulot in the towns of Yehudah.

|12| Sarim (princes) are hanged by their yad; the faces of Zekenim were not respected.

|13| They took the bochurim to grind, and the ne'arim staggered under the wood.

|14| The zekenim have ceased from the sha'ar, the bochurim from their music.

|15| The joy of our heart is gone; mekholeinu (our dance) is turned into mourning.

|16| The ateret is fallen from our head; woe unto us, for we have sinned!

|17| For this our lev is faint; because of these things our eyes are dim.

|18| Because of the Har Tziyon, which is desolate, the jackals prowl upon it.

|19| Thou, Hashem, remainest forever; Thy throne from generation to generation.

|20| Why dost Thou forget us forever, and forsake us for so long?

|21| Restore us, Hashem, to Thyself that we may return; renew yamenu (our days) as of old.

|22| Unless Thou hast utterly rejected us and Thou art angry with us beyond measure.

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T.N. The Book of Kohelet shows us that in the gruesome shadow of death, the whole life of Man is made to seem as so much empty and lonely loitering at the gates of an infinite abyss. There is a word for this emptiness in Hebrew, the word hevel which means empty, unsubstantial, a passing elusive vapor. This is what life is without a personal knowledge of G-d. The author, who calls himself Kohelet "leader of the Assembly," "Ben Dovid Melech B'Yerushalayim" finds that death has thrown a shroud of gloom and meaninglessness over every kind of work that man does "under the sun." G-d's work endures (3:14; 7:13), but man's does not. Death sees to that. And therein is the riddle of life. What can dying man gain from all his work (1:3)? What can mortal man achieve from all his labor, in view of his rapidly approaching demise (2:22)? There is a time to die (3:2), but death is life's biggest riddle. What possible gain can workers have from all their life-long toil (3:9), since death causes them in the end to toil "for the wind (5:16)?" A generation comes and goes and expires in death and is forgotten (1:4; 2:16). Death makes all toil "wearisome" and predictably futile. Also, since everything dies, everything is déjà vu (disagreeably the same). People of long ago and people yet to come will both alike be forgotten and all their labors will be forgotten because of that great leveler called Death. Death is what makes life at heart such an unhappy business, and there is nothing man can do about this crooked state of dying affairs (1:15). So this life in itself is found wanting, and death is the reason. Many who claim

to be Jewish claim that life is wonderful as it is, but these people are not Biblical Jews, any more than that Jewish man Karl Marx was a Biblical Jew with all his philosophizing about the worker's existence "under the sun." The French philosopher Pascal noticed how we habitually block out the thought of our own coming demise. We do this in order to maintain a fragile sense of mental happiness. Death is an end too incomprehensibly ominous to contemplate. Yet our thoughts keep returning to glower at its reality. And though we try to divert ourselves with continuous activity and company and "unhappy business," we know that each of us must ultimately die alone and see everything we have done unraveled into nothingness. Where can we then find pleasure in anything we do? What in the world, what under the sun, are dying men to do with their meaningless lives? The author makes a test of various activities and pursuits: wisdom, madness, folly, pleasure, laughter, wine, women, song, great building projects, great "life works," great acquisitions, possessions, treasure-collecting; and in the end he finds only emptiness and meaninglessness in all these. Whatever pleasures these things brought him were fleeting indeed. The more wisdom he acquired, the more sorrow he became aware of. The more money he acquired, the more vexation came with it. Death robs all men, because everyone goes to the grave naked and penniless. So what use is money, in the face of death? And since the sage and the fool must both go to the same