

## Day One Sukkot

On Sukkot, we read from a scroll composed by a world weary king, which tradition teaches us is King Solomon. Ecclesiastes is among the oddest books in the Tanakh. Many have even wondered how it made its way into the Hebrew Scriptures. The theme that Kohelet, the name we use for Solomon in this context, returns to over and over again is vanity. Most, if not all the pursuits, in our life are vanity. Fame, wealth, work, wisdom, and justice are all in vain ultimately. One of the only topics that Kohelet touches that does not fall prey to his charge of vanity is friendship. “Two are better off than one,” he writes, “...for should one fall, one can raise the other; but woe betide him who is alone and falls with no companion to raise him! Further, when two lie together they are warm, ; but how can he who is alone get warm? Also, if one attacks, two can stand up to him...” (4:9-12).

Friendship is one of those goods that even a world weary king prone to despair can affirm. This has struck home to me rather personally of late. I was watching the presidential debate earlier this week, and amidst the shock I experienced, I decided to send a text to my group of friends from college. “Are you watching this?” I asked. First one wrote back, “I am.” Then others responded sharing responses. All of the sudden the profoundly uncomfortable experience of watching the debate became bearable because I was sharing it with friends.

Friendship is not a pervasive theme of the Tanakh. The relationship of Israel to God, the importance of the mitzvot, prophetic critiques of kings' misuse of power are discussed a plenty. Yet one profound instance of friendship stands out among them all: the friendship of Jonathan and David. David you must know. He was the second king in Israel, but the first and only king from which a dynasty sprouted. Jonathan was the son of the first king, Saul. The key moment in their friendship occurs after Saul pursued David because he feared David would supplant him. David runs away to save his life. Jonathan and he meet, and Jonathan promises that he will aid David. They devise a plan whereby Jonathan will disclose to David whether or not Saul is in pursuit of him. The details of the plan are not important. What motivates the plan, however, is. The Book of Samuel I states, "Jonathan, out of his love for David, adjured him again, for he loved him as himself" (20:17).

This statement is remarkable. In one verse, the Tanakh is able to capture the essence of friendship: Jonathan "loved" David "as himself." The verse immediately conjures up one of the most important verses in the entire Torah. Leviticus 19:18 states, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

What then is the difference between these two statements? Leviticus 19:18 is a mitzvah – a commandment from God. It is an imperative we are obligated to fulfill. Samuel I 20:17 is not a mitzvah; it is a key statement within a moving

anecdote about the love of two friends for one another. The love of the friend and the love of the neighbor are described in the same way, but one is commanded and the other is not. That friendship is not commanded should not surprise us. Rather, it speaks to our own experience of friendship, a relationship that we freely enter into, a relationship that, though voluntary, is solidified by one of the strongest forces on earth, love.

Friendship is one of the great experiences of being alive. How interesting that the scroll we read on Sukkot would highlight friendship as one of the few aspects of life that even a world weary king does not weary of. Friendship is one of the forces that enables us to endure the difficult moments of life. That is why the key anecdote in the description of Jonathan and David's friendship involves an element of danger. This is the test case for the friendship. Friendship's most salient quality is loyalty, so this important anecdote about Jonathan and David must involve a test of loyalty. One of the great tests of loyalty is when someone is in dire straits and another does not abandon him. Jonathan could easily have expressed his fondness for David's company but then effectively abandoned him, knowing that being connected to someone that is being pursued by the king is not the height of prudence. The situation is compounded by Jonathan's role as successor to his father's throne. In spite of that, he refuses to see David as a threat to himself.

Friendship's nearly miraculous quality shines through here. Family is usually the arena that demands the most loyalty. The bond of blood, or genetics, makes family the space where people are firmly bonded to one another. What the Book of Samuel I introduces with the anecdote I've been discussing is a competing loyalty based not in shared genes, but in something else. We should marvel that friendship is even possible in the world at all. That seems to be why Kohelet highlights it for special praise in a book that is about vanity, not praise. Jonathan was able to overcome one of the strongest bonds of loyalty – between father and son – in the name of friendship. The bond of friendship, then, can be considered one of the strongest bonds that can exist between two people.

As we leave the isolation of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur when we are judged as individuals before God, we should seek to strengthen our friendships, and perhaps make some new friendships as well. May we be blessed to experience the kind of friendship that David and Jonathan shared.