

Lessons from Kohelet: If There Is Nothing New Under the Sun, How Do We Solve Our Gigantic Contemporary Problems?



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Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) is read during Sukkot, and at this moment I'm finding it to be precisely the wisdom I need. When I feel worried about the many crises we face, the idea that there is nothing new under the sun can be comforting. To me it means we have what we need to address the problem. We need to have humility and consider the tools God has given us and those humans have developed over time. Our main task is to find the right formula. Though breakthrough discoveries and new inventions exist, often what we seek is the right old tool in the proper configuration. It is a question of titration.

When confronted with challenges I ask: When did this last happen? What did people do then, and what could we learn from it? We ask this in the Division of Religious Leadership and in the JTS Hendel Center for Ethics and Justice. We stand on the shoulders of those who did our jobs before us. They spotted trends, observed demographic shifts, and responded to the times in light of the past. Were those times so different from ours? I suspect the details are different, but the underlying melody is often the same.

History frequently feels like it follows the swing of a pendulum. We go to an extreme, and just when we think we have witnessed or participated in enormous change, the pendulum starts swinging the other way. There is nothing new under the sun. **וְאֵין כֵּל-חֲדָשׁ תַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם:**

This is true in rabbinical and cantorial education. It is true in multifaith and justice work. It is true in war and peace. It is true about race relations in the US. It is true about women's rights in the US. As our colleague Hazzan Natasha Hirschhorn says, these times are unprecedented, here we go again.

The Broadway musical *Suffs*, about the suffragists who worked for women in the US to have the right to vote, is an interesting

juxtaposition to Kohelet. The main character, Alice Paul, sings about a march she is imagining into reality in Washington, DC, right before President Wilson's inauguration. She sings, "How do we do what's never been done, how will we find a way, find a way?"

On the one hand, marches were not a new invention. On the other, the right size, scale, and timing for the march was essential. It was titration. They needed the right formula.

In the show, women try different strategies to achieve the vote. Some suppressed their inner rage and made themselves palatable for the men in power. Others took to the streets, understanding that no amount of self-contortion would move the men to share power. They acted radically and did not conform. Some tried to minimize the size of the request and ask women of color to wait their turn. Others said we all get the vote, or nobody does.

Though they took different positions, the women could all feel they played a role in achieving the amendment granting women the right to vote. It was probably a combination of the harsh and the gentle tactics. Each person had to figure out which role they could best play, but they were all necessary.

In the seasons of our own lives, we feel pulled toward some types of work rather than others. During my career there were periods when I felt called to multifaith work. I worked at a Presbyterian seminary, Auburn Theological Seminary, during rabbinical school. I felt we could be better Jews if we were in close relationship with people who worshiped and believed differently from us. It helped give me perspective and appreciation for my own tradition.

Then I had a period of justice work primarily in the Jewish community. Expanding our practice to include justice work as a religious expression on par with other halakhic obligations felt essential. I came to JTS for that reason: to help shape us for this moment of justice work in the world, as observant Jews.

Suddenly, or not suddenly—a war in Israel and Gaza has interrupted everything else.

Does the wisdom of Kohelet speak to us today? Kohelet teaches that there is a time for fighting and a time for peacemaking. Thematically, reading Kohelet on Sukkot, when things are fragile, can remind us that however we feel now will not be permanent. The time for whatever we are doing now will pass. We will have to “find a way, find a way,” in the words of Alice Paul.

“A season is set for everything, a time for every experience under heaven: A time for being born and a time for dying, A time for planting and a time for uprooting the planted; A time for slaying and a time for healing, A time for tearing down and a time for building up; A time for weeping and a time for laughing, A time for wailing and a time for dancing; A time for throwing stones and a time for gathering stones, A time for embracing and a time for shunning embraces; A time for seeking and a time for losing, A time for keeping and a time for discarding; A time for ripping and a time for sewing, A time for silence and a time for speaking; A time for loving and a time for hating; A time for war and a time for peace.” (3:1-8)

To my surprise this has again seemed like a time for multifaith work. The Jewish people alone are small and insignificant in number compared to the number of people in the world. Perhaps this is the time to be catalyzers of coming together.

This moment is calling me to try to warm up relationships across faith lines. It is inspiring me to seek out colleagues in the seminaries and schools with which we share Morningside Heights. Covid and then the start of the war chilled old relationships. People changed jobs. Suddenly it felt like we didn't have people to call on at the precise moment when we needed each other.

In Jewish tradition, reaching back to the Kabbalists in the 16th century we have had the custom to invite people into our sukkah as guests, *ushpizin* in Aramaic. This year, the *ushpizin* we are inviting to the JTS sukkah are multifaith and civic leaders. We are reaching out and connecting. This past year (and its many curses) was filled with small and large acts of protest, fighting, and aggression. The war has not ended. Most people have changed some. For many of us, we have done it in isolation from our multifaith partners. All of us who are alive are wounded in some way. We are ready to reassess our tools and choose a different one than we have been using recently. But which one? The one I am grasping is reaching across the streets and welcoming people into our temporary dwelling. Looking for ways to mend or build relationships. We are not pretending this is a blank slate. We are saying that being together and creating new bonds is essential to building peace.

There is truly nothing new under the sun. Since Abraham, Jews have been welcoming strangers into their tents, practicing the mitzvah of *hakhnasat orhim*. Now is the time for each of us to take a step and reach out, particularly if we are nervous about doing so.

Having just marked the first anniversary of October 7 and now approaching Shemini Atzeret and Simhat Torah, there is much to despair. We never thought we would reach this terrible anniversary.

And so, like the characters in *Suffs*, we continue working on the same issues as our predecessors; we extend them grace for the paths they took, and we note that our children and grandchildren will scrutinize how we managed and judge us, and then pick up the mantle and lead.

This is a time to look deeply at our history and determine which of the tools our people have used throughout our history might suit today's world.

Whichever tool you think it is now time to pick up, please do not tarry. As we learn from the writer Grace Paley, “The only recognizable feature of hope is action.”