

International Day of Study

Leader's Guide: Talmud

The importance of Talmud

More than any other book, the Talmud has shaped who we are as Jews, the ways in which we see the world and how we act in it. Since the time of its editing around the year 500 CE, it has been the primary source of Jewish law, literature, theology, and ethics. While more Jews know the Bible than the Talmud, the Judaism of the 21st century is based more on the Talmud than on the Bible. For many, many centuries, we have practiced “rabbinic” Judaism rather than “biblical” Judaism.

What is the Talmud?

The Talmud consists of two parts: the *Mishnah* and the *Gemara*. The oldest code of Jewish law, the *Mishnah*, was edited in Israel by Rabbi *Yehudah ha-Nasi* (Rabbi Judah the Prince) around 220 CE. Rabbi *Yehudah ha-Nasi* compiled materials that had been orally transmitted for at least 200 years, organizing them into 63 thematic units called tractates, which are in turn collected into six orders, or *sedarim*. The *Mishnah* is written in concise Hebrew, and records not only the final decision but also the disagreements between different rabbis. The rabbis of the *Mishnaic* period are called *tannaim* (sing. *tanna*), which means teachers. Other teachings of the rabbis of the *Mishnah* are preserved in a separate work known as the *Tosefta*.

The *Gemara* is a much larger work. It contains discussions on the *Mishnah*, some of it in the names of rabbis of the period, and some of it anonymous. The sages of the period of the *Gemara* are called *amoraim* (sing. *amora*), which means interpreters. Most discussions in the *Gemara* are written in Aramaic, the everyday language of most of the ancient Middle East, with some legal terms and statements by earlier rabbis quoted in Hebrew.

The *Mishnah* and *Gemara* together make up the Talmud. When we speak of the *Talmud*, we are referring to the Talmud of Babylonia. There is also a Talmud of the land of Israel, called the Jerusalem Talmud, which was edited some time earlier than the Babylonian Talmud.

There are two main types of discourse in the Talmud: *halakhah* and *aggadah*. *Halakhah* is the term used for Jewish law. It is from the root which means to go or to walk. *Halakhah* deals with what Jews are commanded to do, and how we should go about doing it. The word *aggadah* comes from the same root as *haggadah* (as in the book we read at the Passover seder), and means the telling. In the Talmud, *aggadah* consists of stories about just about anything - regular people, the rabbis, biblical characters, imps and demons, animals, and God. The legal material and the story material enrich each other. Some sections of *aggadah* might be just for fun, but most have a point and come to teach us something, usually a why that goes with the what and the how of *halakhah*.

The Talmud is printed in multiple volumes and contains more than 5,400 pages and more than two and a half million words. Many people study one page of Talmud every day and it takes them more than seven years to complete it all!

The Talmud was a “hypertext” long before the invention of the Internet. It is a self-referential text, that is, discussions in different parts of the Talmud refer to others, and each page assumes that the student knows every other page. Commentaries composed over the last fifteen hundred years examine specific talmudic words or phrases and explain their meaning in context or in implication. Later commentators comment on the works of their predecessors. So to understand one unit of text, the student may have to refer to a similar discussion in another volume, and/or to a commentator who cites an earlier commentator, and in turn is challenged by a later one.

Talmud means learning. In traditional Jewish education, students study the Talmud text in pairs called *havruta*, and then meet with a teacher. Today, more and more Talmud teaching is being done via virtual *havrutas* over the Internet. This allows for an unprecedented richness in learning communities as students from all walks of life and all over the world meet together to study Talmud.

Kohelet

The book of *Kohelet* is one of the five *megillot* (scrolls) found in the *Ketuvim*, or writings section of the Hebrew Bible. The others are *Song of Songs*, *Ruth*, *Lamentations*, and *Esther*. *Kohelet* is traditionally read during the festival of *Sukkot*, about which see more below.

Who was *Kohelet*, and when did he live? The word *Kohelet* means something like “One who calls people together.” This is also the meaning of the Greek term *Ecclesiastes*, by which *Kohelet* is known in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Bible). This has led some to identify *Kohelet* as a teacher or preacher in Jerusalem. In 1:12 the author describes himself as “king in Jerusalem,” and in the book’s heading he is called “*Kohelet son of David, king in Jerusalem*.” Traditionally, therefore, he is identified with Solomon. But today, scholars agree that linguistic evidence proves that King Solomon cannot have been the author of *Kohelet*, who remains unknown. His powerful words are believed to have been written during the Babylonian exile, around 300-200 BCE.

The Rabbis and *Kohelet*

For the rabbis, King Solomon is the author of *Song of Songs*, *Proverbs* and *Kohelet*. They attribute *Song of Songs*, which speaks of passionate love, to the time of his youth; *Proverbs*, which speaks of worldly wisdom and gives practical advice, to his vigorous middle age; and *Kohelet*, which is somewhat cynical and worldly in a tired, disillusioned way, to his old age.

Despite its attribution to King Solomon, the rabbis were disturbed by *Kohelet*’s view of life as a recurring cycle. From the beginning of creation in *Genesis*, the Hebrew Bible introduces a more linear view of time: First, there was nothing, and then God created the world, and then God created people, etc. Scholars now agree that the very first and last sentences of the book of *Kohelet* are later additions. It is possible that these words were inserted by the rabbis themselves, and that their insertion assured *Kohelet*’s place in the canon. We see the following story in the Babylonian Talmud:

Rav Yehudah the son of Rav Shmuel bar Shilat said in the name of Rav: The sages wanted to hide the scroll of *Kohelet* [and not include it in the Hebrew Bible] because they saw that his words contradict each other. And why did they not conceal it? Because its beginning is words of Torah and its ending is words of Torah (*Tractate Shabbat*, page 30b).

LEADER'S GUIDE

Objectives:

- Students will become familiar with two different approaches to time and to life: that of *Kohelet* and that of the talmudic rabbis.
- They will be exposed to talmudic *aggadah*, and see some of the ways in which it functions to reinforce the views of the rabbis.
- Students will study texts examining the relationship between time and *mitzvot*, and the role that time plays in women's lives.
- Students will study texts about the ritual connection between *Kohelet* and *Sukkot*.

The Nature of Time

Leader: The nature of time is one of the fundamental questions that every individual and every community must address. We will examine two texts, one from *Kohelet* and one from the Talmud, and compare their different opinions on the nature of time.

Our first text is the most famous passage of *Kohelet*. It talks about the nature of time and the experiences of the individual and community within time. Many of us are familiar with it from the song "Turn, Turn, Turn" written by Pete Seeger and sung by the Byrds.

Kohelet chapter 3

1. A season is set for everything, a time for every experience under heaven:
2. A time for being born and a time for dying,
A time for planting and a time for uprooting the planted;
3. A time for slaying and a time for healing,
A time for tearing down and a time for building up;
4. A time for weeping and a time for laughing,
A time for mourning and a time for dancing;
5. A time for throwing stones and a time for gathering stones,
A time for embracing and a time for shunning embraces;
6. A time for seeking and a time for losing,
A time for keeping and a time for discarding;
7. A time for ripping and a time for sewing,
A time for silence and a time for speaking;
8. A time for loving and a time for hating,
A time for war and a time for peace.
9. What value, then, can people of affairs get from what they earn?
10. I have observed the business that God gave man to be concerned with:
11. God brings everything to pass precisely at its time; God also puts eternity in their mind, but without people ever guessing, from first to last, all the things that God brings to pass.
12. Thus I realized that the only worthwhile thing there is for them is to enjoy themselves and do what is good in their lifetime;
13. also, that whenever a person eats and drinks and gets enjoyment out of all his wealth, it is a gift of God.
14. I realized, too, that whatever God has brought to pass will recur evermore:
Nothing can be added to it.

And nothing taken from it-
and God has brought to pass that people revere God.
15. What is occurring occurred long since,
And what is to occur occurred long since: and God seeks the pursued.
16. And, indeed, I have observed under the sun:
Alongside justice there is wickedness,
Alongside righteousness there is wickedness.
17. I mused: "God will doom both righteous and wicked, for there is a time for
experience and for every happening."
18. So I decided, as regards men, to dissociate them from the divine beings and
to face the fact that they are beasts,
19. For in respect of the fate of man and the fate of beast, they have one and
the same fate: as the one dies so does the other, and both come from dust and
return to dust.
20. All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again.
21. Who knows if a human being's life breath does rise upward and if a beast's
breath does sink down into the earth?
22. I saw that there is nothing better for human beings than to enjoy their
possessions, since that is their portion. For who can enable them to see what
will happen afterward?

Questions:

- *What does Kohelet think about time?*

Time is circular, no sense of progressing toward a goal (verses 14 & 15).

- *According to Kohelet, what is the best way to spend our time on earth?*

Enjoy what we have (vs. 12 & 22).

"Do what is good in their lifetime" (vs. 12): Given the tone of *Kohelet*, most traditional commentators read this as good in the sense of "enjoyable," not in the sense of "proper" or "righteous."

- *What is the emotional tone of Kohelet?*

Fatalistic, resigned, skeptical.

Frustration: Lots of unanswered questions (vs. 21, 22).

- *What is the relationship between God and human beings in Kohelet?*

Source of frustration: God has given us parts of the picture, but not enough to understand the whole (vs.11).

Good things are "gift of God" (vs.13).

God has *made* people revere God (vs.14).

God controls *everything*; things will recur no matter what people do (vs. 14-17).

God judges people after death (vs. 17), but makes no promise about an afterlife, or any experience after death that would distinguish people and beasts (vs. 18-21).

In general, human life is as futile as that of beasts. Neither will change the inexorable, repeating circle of time.

Honi the Circle-Maker

Background:

The First Temple was built by King Solomon. It was destroyed in 586 BCE. The Jews were exiled from the land of Israel and returned from Babylonia around 70 years later, in 516-515 BCE. They built the Second Temple which was in turn destroyed in 70 CE. That began the long exile that did not truly end until the creation of the State of Israel in 1948.

Although the original stories of Honi the Circle-Maker may have very early origins, our story is recorded in the Babylonian Talmud, which was edited some 500 years after the destruction of the Second Temple. While evoking memories of the first return from exile, the story teaches a lesson to those Jews who are still waiting for the second return.

Honi's story begins with his puzzlement over the verse from Psalm 126 that begins the *birkat ha-mazon*, or blessing over the meal, that we recite on *Shabbat* and festivals: *Shir ha-ma-a-lot. B'shuv Adonai et shivat Tzion hayinu k'cholmim* (A song of ascents. When the Lord will bring back the captives to Zion, we will be like dreamers).

Leader: The stories about Honi *ha-Ma'agal*, Honi the Circle-Maker, are some of the most well-known and loved stories in the Babylonian Talmud. *Honi* is not a rabbi, but a kind of miracle-worker, and there are many tales about his ability to convince God to bring rain in times of drought. This story gives us some of Honi's personal history, including lessons learned along the way, and the remarkable event that leads to his death. While not the tale of a rabbi, it is a tale told by rabbis, and the attitudes and values it expresses are decidedly rabbinic.

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Ta'anit, 23a Rabbi Yohanan said: All that righteous man's days, he was troubled by this verse: "A song of ascents. When the Lord will bring back the captives to Zion, we will be like dreamers." Honi said to himself: Is it possible for a person to dream continuously for 70 years? One day, he was going along the road, and he saw a man planting a carob tree. Honi said to him: How many years does it take for this tree to bear fruit? The man replied: Seventy years. Honi asked him: Is it clear to you that you will live another seventy years? The man replied: I found carob trees in the world; as my ancestors planted for me, so too, I plant them for my descendants.

Honi sat down to have a meal, drowsiness overcame him and he fell asleep. An outcropping of rock rose around him and hid him from sight. And he slept for 70 years. When he woke up, he saw that same man gathering the fruit of the carob tree. Honi asked him: Are you the man who planted it?! He replied: I am his son's son. Honi said: It is clear to me then, that I have slept for 70 years! He saw his donkey, which had given birth to several generations of offspring.

Honi went to his house. He asked them: Is the son of Honi the Circle-Maker still alive? They replied to him: His son is not, but his son's son is. He said to them: I am Honi the Circle-Maker! They did not believe him. Honi went to the study hall. He heard the rabbis saying: Our traditions are as clear to us as in the days of Honi the Circle-Maker. For whenever he used to enter the study hall, he would resolve for the rabbis any difficulty that they had. Honi said to them: I am he! They didn't believe him, and they didn't Honi give him the

honor due to him. This distressed him, and he prayed for death and died. Rava said: This is why people say: “Companionship or death.”

Questions:

- *What does the story say about time?*

Time moves forward, it does not just circle endlessly.

- *According to the story, what is the best way to spend our time on earth?*

Prepare for the future: Honi plants a tree from which he will never benefit.

With purpose: Honi leaves his mark on the world, both by planting a tree and mating his donkey, and by learning in the study house.

- *What is the emotional tone of the story?*

Mixed. Sad, in that Honi isn't recognized when he returns; the world has moved on in his absence. Happy, in that Honi's life has changed the world: His children have children, his tree bears fruit, and his ideas are discussed in the study house.

- *What is the relationship between God and human beings?*

God and people are partners: In his lifetime, Honi was a good caretaker of God's world, both the natural world and the world of study. He helped God's world progress.

God answers prayers: Honi prays for death and dies (last paragraph).

- *Honi's story represents the views of the rabbis. Do they agree or disagree with Kohelet about the nature of time?*

Disagree. Rabbis have the “bicycle” view of time: seasons and festivals circle, while time progresses linearly.

After 70 years, things have changed in the world Honi left behind.

- *Compare the ending lines of the two texts:*

Kohelet: “The sum of the matter, when all is said and done: Revere God and observe God's commandments. For this applies to all humankind: that God will call every creature to account for everything unknown, be it good or bad” (12:13-14).

Honi the Circle-Maker: “Companionship or death!”

Kohelet: The purpose of life is to avoid getting a bad judgment after death.

Honi: God and the world are not enough; he needs human companionship to make his experience worthwhile. Not focused on what will happen after death.

- *Compare the relationship of God and human beings in the texts. Is God remote and forbidding? Close and interacting?*

Kohelet: God is remote and forbidding. God judges people, but never tells people their purpose on earth, and makes no promises that after death their fate will differ from the fate of beasts.

Honi: God is close and interacting. The story begins with the assertion that “...the Lord will bring back the captives to Zion.” It ends with Honi praying for death, and being answered. Apparently, Honi is not afraid of judgment after death.

Kohelet and Women

Background:

In the biblical book of *Proverbs*, both wisdom and its opposite are personified as women. Because of that, some scholars believe that *Kohelet*'s statements about women in chapter 7 are meant metaphorically, and that he speaks of wisdom and folly rather than about real, human women.

These selections from the Talmud are necessarily limited. Many more can be found that express both positive and negative attitudes toward women and marriage. These are not metaphorical statements.

Objectives

- Students will become familiar with *Kohelet*'s few comments about women and with a representative sample of rabbinic statements.
- In addition to responding to the material itself, they will begin to consider who wrote these texts and for whom.

Leader: By comparing *Kohelet*'s comments about women with a selection of rabbinic comments, we begin to see clearly both who wrote these texts and for whom. Consider then, the authors and the intended audiences of the following, and what the answers to these questions mean to us today.

Kohelet 7:26 Now, I find woman more bitter than death; she is all traps, her hands are fetters and her heart is snares. He who is pleasing to God escapes her, and he who is displeasing is caught by her.

Kohelet 7:28 As for what I sought further but did not find, I found only one human being in a thousand, and the one I found among so many was never a woman.

Kohelet 9:9 Enjoy happiness with a woman you love all the fleeting days of life that have been granted to you under the sun – all your fleeting days. For that alone is what you can get out of life and out of the means you acquire under the sun.”

Mishnah Avot (Pirkei Avot) 1:5 Yose ben Yohanan of Jerusalem said: Let your house be wide open, and let the needy be members of your household, and do not engage in too much conversation with a woman. They said this of a man's own wife, how much more so of his fellow's wife. From here the sages said: Whoever engages in too much conversation with a woman brings evil upon himself, and neglects the study of Torah, and ultimately will inherit Gehinom.

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Megillah, 27a Come and hear, for Rabbi Yohanan said in the name of Rabbi Meir: One may only sell a Torah scroll in order to learn Torah or to betroth a woman. We learn from this that a Torah for a Torah is permissible.

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Yevamot, 61b Rav Nahman said in the name of Shmuel, who said: Even though a man has several children, it is prohibited for him to remain without a wife, as it says: “It is not good for man to be alone” (Genesis 2:1).

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Yevamot, 62b Rabbi Tanhum said in the name of Rabbi Hanilai: Any man who does not have a wife lives without happiness, without blessing, without goodness.

Jerusalem Talmud, Tractate Berakhot, 9:1 It is impossible for a man [to live] without a woman, and it is impossible for a woman [to live] without a man, and it is impossible for both of them [to live] without the Shekhinah.

Questions:

- *What is the purpose of marriage for Kohelet and the rabbis? Is there holiness in marriage?*

Kohelet: Marriage is for love and enjoyment; this kind of happiness is the only thing one can get out of life. No particular sense of holiness, because Kohelet’s God is remote, and would not be involved in the daily affairs of a marriage.

Rabbis: Also happiness, but marriage is not the only happiness in life.

Definite sense of holiness in marriage.

- *What is the relative status of a woman for Kohelet and the rabbis? (See especially Tractate Megillah 27a, in which a wife is compared to a Torah scroll.)*

Kohelet: Women can be vexing and worthless, yet true happiness is found with a woman you love.

Rabbis: Don’t overdo the happiness of being with your wife such that you ignore your studies (which bring you closer to God). On the other hand, marriage is so important, that one can sell a Torah scroll in order to betroth a wife.

- *Go back to our questions about the nature of time. Do these statements about women shed light on the attitudes of Kohelet and the rabbis? (Rabbis focus on children and future, Kohelet does not.)*

Rabbis focus on children and future, Kohelet focuses on the happiness that a woman can provide during one’s lifetime.

- *From these statements, what can you say about who wrote these texts and for whom?*

We can’t know for sure, but it seems that Kohelet described what he saw and did not try to change the world or anyone in it. It feels as if he is talking to himself, writing down his own musings.

The rabbis described what they saw and tried to improve it, to change it into what they thought would be a better world and way of life. Their writing is more prescriptive.

Women, Time and Mitzvot

The following unit is based on Judith Hauptman's book Rereading the Rabbis: A Woman's Voice, pages 224-238. Appendix of leader's guide.

Background:

It is impossible to think about women and time without consideration of the rabbinic exemption of women from the obligation to perform "positive time-bound commandments," or *mitzvot aseh sheh'ha-zman grahmah*. A positive time-bound commandment is one whose fulfillment depends on a certain time of the day or season of the year. Here are examples of the four kinds of commandments, or *mitzvot*:

- Positive time-bound, such as wearing *tefillin* or dwelling in the *sukkah*.
- Positive not time-bound, such as returning a lost object to its owner.
- Negative time-bound, such as not leaving anything of the Passover sacrifice over until morning.
- Negative not time-bound, such as not committing murder, adultery, etc.

The issue of women's obligation to perform positive time-bound commandments is very much at the center of the debate about the permissibility of women clergy in Judaism. In order to fulfill a ritual obligation for someone else, a person must herself be obligated to perform that ritual. If a woman is exempt from positive time-bound *mitzvot*, such as praying, there is a question about whether she can serve as the prayer leader, or *shaliach tzibbur*, whose prayer exempts others from their obligation. Hauptman finds the root of the exemption in women's subordinate social position in Talmudic times.

Question: *Why are women exempt from performing positive time-bound commandments?* [This might generate a lot of discussion.]

Some answers might include:

- Performing these commandments would impede a woman's ability to care for her children. (This is the most commonly stated reason.)
- It is based on the false assumption that the positive time-bound *mitzvot* occur in a very narrow window of time.

Leader: The second answer does not make sense given what we know about life in Talmudic times. In a household that could afford servants, a woman could free up some of her time between 6:00 a.m. and 10:00 a.m. to pray.

In a household that could not afford servants, everyone was busy, making it nearly as difficult for a man to free up time as it was for a woman. Since some of the positive commandments, such as the commandment to light *Hanukkah* candles, take almost no time and can be done at home, what would prevent a woman from fulfilling them?

Hauptman asserts that the reason the rabbis exempt women from positive time-bound commandments is that when a woman is married, her time is controlled by her husband. Her primary obligation is to him, and he would have to concur with her desire to perform certain *mitzvot*.

For the rabbis, the performance of certain *mitzvot*, such as wearing *tefillin*, is the mark of a free and independent person. This was a level of independence that could not be granted to a married

woman, and so she could not independently be obligated to perform certain *mitzvot*.

Notice that the language here speaks of exemption, not prohibition.

The question of a woman's control over her time is articulated in the texts that follow. While the *Mishnah* hints at the issue, the *Tosefta* states it clearly.

Mishnah Kiddushin 1:7

All obligations that a father must fulfill for his son, men [fathers] are obligated but women [mothers] are not.

And all obligations that a son [child] must fulfill for his father [parent], both men and women [i.e., all children] are obligated.

And all positive commandments that are time-bound, men are obligated but women are exempt. And all positive commandments that are not time-bound, the same holds for men and for women, they are [both] obligated.

And all negative commandments, whether or not time-bound, the same holds for men and for women, they are obligated...

Mishnah Berakhot 3:3 Women, slaves and minors are exempt from reciting the *Sh'mah* and from laying *tefillin*, but they are obligated for the *Amidah*, for *mezuzah* and for the blessing after meals.

Tosefta Kiddushin 1:11 What is the obligation that a son must fulfill for his father? He must feed him, give him drink, dress him, cloak him, take him out and in, and wash his face, hands, and feet. The same applies to both men and women, except that a man has the means *at his disposal* whereas a woman does not because *she is under the control of others*.

Questions:

•*What do you think happens to a woman's obligations to her parents if she becomes divorced or widowed?*

Talmud says that she is fully obligated, because she now controls her own time and her own assets. While married, her husband controls her time, and to a large extent, her assets..

•*How are women today affected by the question of control over our own time?*

Demands of work, family, etc.

•*Does your marital status affect your ability to perform ritual mitzvot?*

This is judgment free: Life is a balance, and we all choose to balance differently.

•*Do you think that women and men experience time differently?*

Some say that women are more sensitive to the passing of time, because of monthly cycles, fertility questions, etc.

Kohelet and Sukkot

Background

The first textual witness we have to the reading of *Kohelet* during *Sukkot* is *Machzor Vitry*, published around 1100 CE. Some scholars believe that the custom is far older. What concerns us here is the connection between *Kohelet* and *Sukkot*.

Question: *Why do we read the book of Kohelet on Sukkot? What is the connection between the joyous festival of the harvest, and the sometimes-cynical musings of Kohelet?*

In rabbinic literature, *Sukkot* is called *the* festival, and in the Bible it is called *zman simchateinu*, the season or time of our rejoicing. Why bring in *Kohelet*'s voice saying "Utter futility! Utter futility! All is futile!" (1:2)?

Answers might include:

- Tradition gives us two explanations. One is that the melancholy tone of *Kohelet* fits the mood of the autumn season, and the other is that verse 11:2 "Distribute portions to 7 or even to 8..." refers to the 7-8 day pattern of *Sukkot* and *Shmini Atzeret*.
- *Sukkot* is joyous, and *Kohelet* is the only biblical voice that recommends indulging in that which pleases us for the sake of experiencing pleasure.
- *Kohelet* is read during *Sukkot* to dampen the joy a little so that the celebration doesn't get out of hand.
- *Sukkot* commemorates our vulnerability in the liminal time of our desert wanderings, the time between the slavery of Egypt and the freedom of the Promised Land. One can see *Kohelet* as a vulnerable old man, with his sense of weariness, and his ultimate conclusion that "*The sum of the matter, when all is said and done: Revere God and observe God's commandments. For this applies to all mankind.*"
- During *Sukkot* we live in temporary shelters, away from the security of our homes and reassuring material possessions. It is a time in which we understand anew that true security is not found in houses and possessions, but in faith and community.
- *Kohelet* speaks to this: "*I multiplied my possessions. I built houses and planted vineyards...I withheld from my eyes nothing they asked for, and denied myself no enjoyment; rather, I got enjoyment out of all my wealth. And that was all that I got out of my wealth.*" (2:4-10) The transitory pleasures of wealth are enjoyable, but not satisfying.

Leader: Here are the thoughts of Arthur Waskow, from *Seasons of Our Joy*, page 72:

It [*Kohelet*] is a wintry book, the summing up of a cycle of life that has revolved its way through joy and sorrow, war and peace, merry-making and boredom.

Whoever keeps watch on the wild will never sow seed; whoever scans the clouds will never reap...Sow your seed in the morning, and don't hold back your hand in the evening, since you don't know which is going to succeed, the one or the other, or if both are equally good.

[*Kohelet*] is the book of detachment, of accepting whatever you get, of learning to enjoy not only the peaks but also the chasms of an involved life – and then learning to float beyond those very hills and valleys. It is the book that says: In light of my approaching death, how disastrous is this disgrace? How wonderful this triumph?

A suggestion for your *Sukkah*

Beginning with the kabbalists of Safed, Jews have practiced the custom of inviting *ushpizin*, symbolic guests, into the *sukkah*. Traditionally, one guest is invited each day. The guests are Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aaron and David. Recently, the custom has expanded to include other biblical figures, as well as other men and women who have been meaningful in the lives of the participants.

Consider inviting *Kohelet* and Honi into your *sukkah*. Discuss what you know about each character, and then ask one of your real guests to speak for each of them. Honi and *Kohelet* can converse with each other, and with you and your real guests as well. You can talk about the nature of time, about what is and is not a worthwhile pursuit in this world, about lessons learned, etc. Have fun!

Question: *What has our study of Kohelet contributed to our understanding of time?*

Some answers might include:

- We all live in time.
- We are aware of time passing, of the cyclical time of nature with its passing seasons.
- We are aware of the centrality of time with Jewish ritual, with its lifecycle events and recurring festivals. Yet unlike *Kohelet*, the rabbis maintain their faith in the future, their stance that while life is in many ways experienced as a cycle, that this cycle is ever moving toward a goal.
- For the rabbis, cyclical time exists within linear time. Time is like a bicycle – it cycles round and round as it continues to move toward its destination.

Leader concludes: One of the main things that *Kohelet* teaches is that every person lives with feelings and desires which often contradict each other and seem to challenge faith. The joy of the Talmud is in discovering that the rabbis are able to live with these contradictions. It is proper behavior that they desire, and their overall goal is to figure out the way in which God wants human beings to live in God's world. They are not pluralistic in today's sense of the world, in that they do not condone deviation from their views of proper behavior. But they certainly recognize that there is more than one truth when it comes to the internal experience of the individual, and that like *Kohelet*, each person lives with contradictions and unanswered questions.

Everything changes with time, including Judaism. While the rabbis look to the future with hope, they are able to encompass *Kohelet*'s ideas into their canon without compromising their faith.