Camus, Kohelet--Shadows of Doubt and Faith--by Josh Rosenfeld

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Josh Rosenfeld is a Musmakh of RIETS/YU and a Veteran of the IDF. He is the Assistant Rabbi at Lincoln Square Synagogue and on the Judaic Studies Faculty at SAR High School.)

Although he actively denied the label of existentialism, the great existentialist writer and thinker Albert Camus had a great deal to teach us about the human condition. At just 44, two years before his untimely and tragic death, Camus was cited by the Nobel committee for his work to:

“illuminate the problem of the human conscience in our time... a champion of imaginative literature as a vehicle of philosophical insight and moral truth.”

He remains the second-youngest Nobel Laureate for Literature. The French-Algerian author of unique classics like “The Plague” and “The Stranger” was obsessed with the question of why we are here, and the absurd predicament of humanity in a world of suffering and apparent meaninglessness.

Camus was not content to relegate himself to just writing. He was a dedicated lifelong activist, throwing his energies to movements he felt were doing their best to achieve equality and justice, first as a revolutionary against French Colonialism in Algeria, then as a Marxist, then as an Anarchist. Camus was a man of principle, resigning from his human rights work at some opaque group called UNESCO (perhaps you have heard of them of late), when the United Nations accepted the Dictator General Franco with open arms. There is even scholarly speculation that Camus covertly participated in the rescue and hiding of Jewish children in Chambon, France organized by the righteous Pastor, André Trocmé, in 1942.

Even when world opinion, especially in so-called polite European society began to turn against Israel in the wake of the ‘57 Suez crisis, Camus wrote publicly to affirm his support for the Jewish state, earning him the ire of his intellectual peers.

So then, at the height of his career, with many of his works beginning to gain wide interest and acceptance, Camus won the Nobel, and fell into a deep depression. Parenthetically, and most timely, Camus’ erstwhile friend Jean-Paul Sartre famously rejected the great prize, and scorned Camus for not doing the same.

Shortly after learning of the honor, Camus wrote to his mother - “Maman, I miss you now more than ever.” For him, the great recognition that the award signaled also triggered a sense that his career was somehow over, and the resulting feeling of the triviality of it all left a void which he tried to fill with activities like yoga.

In what may be the most famous words of his great literary career, Camus posed the following in the opening lines of his “Myth of Sisyphus:”

To decide whether life is worth living is to answer the fundamental question of philosophy. Everything else … is child’s play; we must first of all answer the question.

I think about Camus and this question during Sukkot, especially on Shabbat Hol Hamoed - when I recall another famous writer, one who I think also would have rejected the designation “existentialist.” Traditionally, Ashkenazim reserve today for the reading of Megillat Kohelet, the last of King Solomon’s three books of wisdom.

Our Sages relate in Midrash Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah that the evolution of each of these books can be traced to different times in the life of “*the wisest of all men*”. Shir ha-Shirim, Song of Songs, with its odes to love, passion, and desire represents the enthusiasm and potential of King Solomon’s younger years. Mishlei, Proverbs, is a product of middle age, an attempt to gather the wisdom of his experiences as King of the unified Jewish people, adorned with the glory of the Temple in Jerusalem. Finally, Kohelet, Ecclesiastes, with its anguished cries of “ *Hevel Havalim haKol Havel*” - “all is vanity” - is the work of the quill of a King reflecting upon his life with the realization that he is firmly in the twilight of it, in the valley of the shadow of death.

This King, blessed with transcendent wisdom, declares: I have tried to make sense of it all, and yet it remains beyond me; as Camus might say: Absurdity of Absurdities, what's the point of it all.

I feel comfortable comparing Camus, an avowed atheist, with the great King Solomon in this regard because of just how problematic Kohelet was for Hazal. Several sources, notably the Mishna in Yadayim (4:2), record debate amongst our Sages if this Megillah should even be considered part of the holy canon.

The martyr Rabbi Aryeh Zvi Frommer, known as the Kozhaglover Rav, crystallizes the rabbinic ambivalence toward King Solomon's final work with the following question:

"All of Sefer Kohelet is *mavhil*, denigrating, of this world and every human activity in it, and yet our Torah wrote at the very outset that God looked at this world after creation and declared: - behold, it is good. How can this be?"

In fact, due to a comment made by the Rashbam and some other commentators, there is a sense that the last verses of Kohelet represent an "addition" by Hazal to make the previous twelve chapters 'Kosher.' After all is said and done, "Fear" - more accurately, be in awe of God, and keep his commandments because that's all we've got.

We can sharpen the question further. The Torah singles out Sukkot, of all holidays, three times for a special exhortation to be joyful. This holiday even merits the formulation that we should be especially happy (*Akh Sameah*) and rejoice. So why must we read this existential, dark, and somewhat depressing Megillah at this time, harshing all of the joy of this holiday in a way even the most persistent rain cannot?

To attempt an answer, I want to turn back to Camus, and a reading of him by a special rabbi whom I quote often, Rav Shimon Gershon Rosenberg. Reading the classic "The Plague," Rav Shagar (as Rav Rosenberg is known) sees a parable of our many devices against the inevitable which waits for us all, and the ways in which some people might react - some violently, some heretically, railing against and trying desperately to break all rules and systems, denying authority as meaningless and impotent.

Rav Shagar says this is the Shadow, the *Tzel*, that hangs over all life. He affirms, with respect and sympathy, those who choose to live in that *Tzel*, denying life, happiness, and joy because after all they are walking in the valley of the shadow of death. What good is it all - *Hevel Havalim*? So let us eat, drink, and be merry.

Let us amuse ourselves to death and consume the time we have left, as the sand drains from the top of the hourglass.

Even King Solomon gives credence to this notion in one of Kohelet's most egregious passages in the eyes of Chazal: There's nothing better for a person than to eat, drink, and take pride in their material achievements. How could such a seemingly hedonistic statement be included in Tanakh?

While we could discuss these themes at great length, I want to finish with the profound and moving response of Rav Shagar, a man who himself lived life in a personal shadow of death. He was the only survivor of a blasted Israeli tank during the Yom Kippur war, dragged out of the burning wreck with only the most tenuous grip on life, as his friends perished behind him in that terrible battle.

An artist's' portrait of the Rabbi that graces the cover of one of his posthumous *derashot* depicts a man deep in study, almost entombed in dark shadows. It is from this well of suffering and pain that Rav Shagar's response arises.

He writes that there is another, parallel shadow in life, in the words of the Zohar called the shadow of *Emunah*. With *Emunah,* faith, we can sanctify and elevate the shadow of death by realizing that "*Lo Ira Ra Ki Atah Imadi*" - we do not fear, because Hashem is with us. True, it is still a shadow, but in this instance it inspires not dread, but awe and radical amazement.

To be sure, we eat, drink, and make merry on this festival of joy, but it is in the shadow of the Sukkah, a structure flimsy and transient, but built to Halakhic specifications unchanged by thousands of years of the worst that humanity has offered to our eternal people. We remember in the Sukkah the protection of God's divine glory and the actual Sukkot the nascent Israelite people built in the desert as a wandering slave nation, yet to see the fruits of their Sisyphean labors and sufferings in Egypt.

We dwell in the shade of the sukkah - Halakha requires there be shade and shadows within it, but we look up and recognize that is not the shadow of doubt, meaninglessness, and vanity, but rather the comforting embrace of God's Sukkah of Peace, signifying the tranquility and inner peace of the faithful believer.

In the Sukkah and on Sukkot - even as our Hadasim and Aravot dry out, our etrogim lose their luster and pitoms, even as our s'khakh is knocked down by wind and rain, and the colors in our children's beautiful decorations begin to run, we may reflect on how we seek refuge in the wings of faith as they envelop us with certainty, purpose, and *mission*.

Praiseworthy are those who dwell in God's presence, in the Shadows of Faith, fulfilling Mitzvot, doing acts of kindness, coming together in solidarity. Much of our High Holy Day liturgy begins with the affirmative answer *uv'khen* - "YES", we answer to Camus' question. Yes, in spite of it all, it is absolutely worth it to be here, to be alive and infused with the sense of purpose that the gift of *Emunah* grants us.

For many of us this all requires a leap, which ultimately is what Camus himself advocated in the face of the absurd, the only thing that allowed him to forge ahead into a life of action. *We* forge ahead into a life of Mitzvot and closeness with God.

Uv'khen –Yes-- this response allows us to say it is indeed good, and we can rejoice. Yes, despite all the difficult and vexing existential questions of faith and life raised by Kohelet, the absolutely integral answer and the final word for all of us here today was and always remains: "The end of the matter, all having been heard: fear God and keep His commandments; for this is the essence of human life."