

Ecclesiastes and Self Help

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

A recent need for self criticism and introspection drew me back to one of my favorite biblical books: Ecclesiastes (Kohelet).

Traditionally it is attributed to King Solomon. Like all the books of the bible there is much debate about its origin, date and author. But I find it an amazing short book for lots of reasons, not least because it contains phrases that have become deeply engrained in Western culture. "Vanity of Vanities, all is vanity," says the King James translation ("Everything is just hot air" in our parlance). Folk songs have been composed to its lyrics. "There is a time for everything... a time to give birth and a time to die...a time to love and a time to hate." It has verses that challenge accepted theology:

Who knows if the souls of humans rise upwards and those of animals goes down into the earth?" (1.9).

And convention:

My son take care, of making books there is no end" (3.21) and

What has been will be, and will be done has been done, and there is nothing new under the sun" (1.9).

It opens with a very ancient and yet very modern question: "What is the point of life?" It sounds very much like the weary pot induced mental meandering of an over indulged western teenager. Or, indeed, a hormonally excited but unemployed social security addict who cannot get a date. Yet instead of answering the unanswerable question, the author responds by trying to see if there is one way, the secret, the magic bullet, the answer, THE answer to life's challenge.

He tries wisdom and then pleasure, stoicism and epicureanism and finds both inadequate. It seems there IS no single, one answer. The message superficially seems to be one of skepticism until one gets to the very end. Indeed, the rabbis of the Talmud had their doubts about whether to include this in the canon altogether. But I find it so modern, so wise. There are few certainties. There are no perfect solutions or perfect people.

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“There is no person on earth who does only good and no bad” (Ecc.7.20).

A somewhat similar “Wisdom Book” called Ben Sirah, or Ecclesiasticus, although mentioned in the Talmud was excluded and only comes down to us (apart from some quotes) via the Apocrypha. In the case of Kohelet, is only because of the last two lines, “In conclusion, having heard everything, respect God, keep His commandments for this is (the purpose of) humankind”, that Kohelet is deemed kosher. Whereas Ben Sirah is not. Though having King Solomon’s name on the publication surely helped sell it!

These last two verses are always given as the core message of the book. But It does very much sound like an afterthought, tacked on to get the approval of the authorities. I have another theory.

There is one line that is repeated, seven times, throughout Kohelet in slightly different ways. It is the most recurring theme. Occurring first in Chapter 2 verse 23. And it goes like this

אֲכֹל וְשׂוֹמֵר וְשׂוֹמֵר וְשׂוֹמֵר וְשׂוֹמֵר וְשׂוֹמֵר וְשׂוֹמֵר וְשׂוֹמֵר וְשׂוֹמֵר

“The only good for a human being is to eat and to drink and to show himself what is positive in his work.” Official translations suggest negative alternatives such as “Is it not good for a man, that he eats and drinks etc?”

But I see the message as positive. In other words, to quote Monty Python “Always look on the bright side of life.” One has to try to enjoy what one has, to appreciate the gifts of life whatever they are and whenever we are fortunate to receive them because, too often, we do not or cannot. In modern parlance one is reminded to consider the cup half full, not half empty.

Now this is great advice. Most therapists will push it. Instead of thinking of this earth as a vale of tears, as some religions do, one should try to be positive and enjoy it much as one can (without causing harm to others or breaking ones moral or religious code). And if a pill or two or more will help...well, everyone will be happy – from doctors to parents to the drug companies – because pill popping is so easy. But if one can do so simply mentally, by focusing, then so much the better.

Our societies are dominated by best selling books that peddle feel good, easy answers, the secrets to happy living, the solutions to all our problems without too much trouble, effort or obligation or losing any sleep. This is the religion of the twenty first century. A simplistic reduction of a complex religion or ideology that functions as a placebo just so long as it doesn’t make any demands. But the sad fact is that without a structured way of life, without a framework and constraints, the possibility of a considered, valuable life is all but zero. Nothing of real value can be acquired without effort.

And yet simplistic, banal versions of Kabbalah, Sufism, Buddhism all are peddled to the credulous, disturbed and dissatisfied world as answers to all problems. No one is willing to talk about discipline and self control and creating a way of life with values of constraint. It’s like slimming. How

many books, how many diets, how many new fads of prepared low calorie foods and meals come out all the time, one after another and how many people join gyms and let their memberships lapse? And we are still overwhelmingly overweight and unfit. All because everyone wants the quick and easy fix.

And the truth is that Kohelet knows that we humans are weak and limited. Because the rest of the sentence I quoted above continues:

וְעַתָּה אֵלֶיךָ יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְעַתָּה אֵלֶיךָ יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ

“But this (ability to be positive) is a gift from God.” Or, as we might say, our genes. Isn’t that true? Most of us are simply not constitutionally equipped or genetically programmed to achieve this. It is like trying to tell someone who is depressed to snap out of it. It’s like all those people who are addicted to therapists and carry on year in year out talking but not doing.

I am always amazed at how modern Kohelet is. How it speaks to us now. But I am also surprised by how so many who are drawn to the book just do not pick up on the fact that this advice is the most important and most repeated theme of the book.

And there is one more thing. The origin of this central idea in Kohelet can be found in the Torah. When, in Exodus (24.11) at Sinai, some of the Israelites “Had a vision of God and they ate and drank.” This sounds so strange. After a powerful spiritual experience to eat and drink? Unless it is a hint at the current custom of having a Kiddush after the service!

I take this to mean that their spiritual experience impacted on, and gave meaning to, the physical. And it stands in contrast to the Golden Calf episode (Exodus 32.6) where, there too, after the experience of their “god” they also ate and drank. But there it turned into an orgy. The physical side of us can be used for good and for bad. It is our choice. Because unless the spiritual modifies the physical and disciplines it, it so easily turns into gluttony, cupidity and lust.

The challenge of life is to integrate the physical and the spiritual and to find the balance so as not to be destroyed by either extreme. There is no single secret to success. Just hard work, a structured way of life and of course a little help from above and beyond.