

"A SLIGHTLY SARCASTIC SERMON"

I

This is a slightly sermon about, and inspired by, that gently sarcastic and even somewhat cynical work, Kohelet, which the Jewish tradition attributes to King Solomon.

I wish to make it clear that in these remarks I do not intend, Heaven forbid, any individual, and certainly not my congregation as a whole. But if any listener should feel uncomfortable by my words, I beg him or her to appreciate that I join them in this discomfort. I have always been troubled by Kohelet and I am myself annoyed by my own sarcastic conclusions from it.

II

Kohelet represents an aspect of the Jewish tradition that is quite disturbing. It is a critic on urban life -- and if Solomon is negative on city life in his days, how much more so on contemporary man's complex technopolitan culture. His criticism is thus a form of atavism, a return to primitive conditions.

And that, of course, is just day-dreaming. Because we, as moderns, know -- that you can't turn the clock back...

At the first of several examples of Solomon's romantic primitivism, note his attitude to happiness -- or joy, or fun, to what he calls simnah. Clearly, Kohelet is way off the track. He is dour, a kill-joy, not a "fun-person." He tells us how great it is to enjoy things, to live it up -- and suddenly he cuts the ground from under himself and under us, his readers:

וְהָיָה כִּי יִשְׂמַח אִישׁ בְּיָמָיו
אֵלֶּיךָ יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְנִשְׂמַח

"And so I praised happiness, for there is no good thing for man under the sun but to eat, drink, and be merry."

אִתִּי הָיָה גֵּם הַחֵן ... וְהָיָה כִּי יִשְׂמַח אִישׁ בְּיָמָיו

"But that too is vanity, emptiness... and what am I so happy about?"

What is wrong with Solomon? Did he not understand that "Enjoy, enjoy" is the clarion call of modern man? Had he no conception of the fact that fun is clean, there is nothing wrong with it? Could he not foresee that the "pursuit of happiness" is the God-given right -- nay, duty -- of every red-blooded American, claimed for him in the Declaration of Independence and unquestionably confirmed by the Constitution?

True, it sometimes becomes difficult to lose yourself in simkha. There are minor flaws in the total picture, such as Vietnam, poverty, Attica, the Middle East, atom bombs. Life may sometimes seem too serious and too short for this simkha-fun ideology. True, only a small sector of our population can afford to "eat, drink, and be merry." The others, the combination of deprived minorities, sometimes rebel.

But surely we cannot allow something as trivial as the tragic dimension of life ^{to} interfere in our hedonistic pursuit of fun. That just would not be modern. So, we must conclude: Kohelet was just not relevant...

III

The most exasperating thing in Kohelet's primitiveness is his attitude to money and success. He is utterly unrealistic and impractical,

certainly in terms of modern economy and society. And on top of it all, he is a traitor to his class. Listen to him:

[illegible]

"I did great busines, I built all kinds of homes, with gardens and orchards and swimming pools, with nightly cocktail parties, with servants galore, with plenty of gold and silver both in bank and on display."

Nevertheless: ופניתי אני, בשר אלץ ... ויהיה הכל הבשר
והאלץ רוח.

"But then I looked about me, at all my possessions... and behold, it is all an emptiness and a striving after wind."

Of course, Kohelet can afford to sound philosophical and even cynical about wealth and possessions. But he should realize that for most of us, this is precisely what life is all about: make a living, save a little for the future, spend a bit, enjoy luxury and leisure, and be proud of what I have accomplished and accumulated throughout my life. The charge of snobbism directed against me if I try to display my wealth -- is besides the point. I have worked hard for what I have; so what if I allow myself occasionally a bit of feeling of superiority?

What is troublesome is that the Jewish tradition as a whole seems to have accepted Kohelet's cynical attitude to the accumulation of wealth for its own sake, or for lavish ostentation, or for conspicuous consumption. Thus, Jewish communities throughout Europe for most of the great periods of Jewish history tried to limit spending by Jews in a conspicuous fashion. One of the reasons was, in order not to arouse the

govim, who might use Jewish ostentation of wealth as an excuse for anti-Semitic excesses. Well, that was understandable in their time, when they were surrounded by anti-Semitism. Today, of course, that is an irrelevant excuse because living in the sophisticated, democratic world in the 1970's, anti-Semitism is a thing of the past, a mere relic.

But the other reasons they gave are deeply disturbing, principally:

is like in R"as life, not to embarrass the poor man who

cannot participate in this display of wealth, and who may be tempted to do so and thereby injure his own family. The rabbis tried to minimize the social differences between economic classes. Terribly undemocratic! Certainly, a man should be allowed to spend his money as he pleases. And isn't Judaism, after all, nothing but democracy dressed up as religion? So what if I spend lavishly and ostentatiously on things that I never can use, never will use, gradually converting every luxury to a necessity, while my neighbor suffers from privation and disadvantage? After all, it probably is his fault anyway. In this "land of opportunity," in this "society of affluence," whoever does not succeed is a failure, whether of the shlumiel variety, an incompetent, or the shlemazel pursued by misfortune and bad luck. And I, a successful man, should not be penalized because of his failures.

Yet, Jewish law has done just that! For instance, 600 years ago the Jewish communities in Italy and the Rhineland legislated the curtailment of lavish clothing and jewelry by both men and women. They limited the exchange of gifts between the affianced bride and groom in order not to pauperize the families of the young couple. In Krakow,

Poland, in 1595, a communal tekanah declared that the amount any Jew could spend on the wedding of his daughter was limited by his annual income as determined by his tax returns.

In Modina, Italy, in 1781, the menu of every Bar Mitzvah party was clearly fixed as follows: one kind of liquor, one kind of wine, tea, coffee, chocolate, rose water, and only one kind of biscuit. There was to be no outdoing one's neighbor.

The famous Vaad Arba Haaratzot was even worse. They set the following maximum figure of guests who could be invited to a party: for a Bar Mitzvah, ten; for a circumcision, 25; for a wedding, 30. This number is in addition to all relatives up to and including first cousins, but not beyond, and the officiants, such as a rabbi, cantor, and sexton. In addition, the number had to include at least one poor man for every ten invited guests!

In the German communities of Frankfurt, Altona, Hamburg, Wansbach, communal decrees limited the amount one could give to bride and groom, to protect a poor man from embarrassment. The orchestra band was limited to a maximum of 4 instrumentalists, and then too there was to be no overtime -- they must stop playing by mid-night.

And this same, restrictive, un-American, reactionary, anti-Capitalist tendency is noticeable even today. A year or two ago a number of pious families in Bnai Brak, sick and disgusted by the exorbitant demands by potential sons-in-law for a large naddan, and lavish wedding, petitioned the Rabbinate to place limits on the amount of dowery one may pay!

Clearly, this is an attitude which is primitive and unworthy of the modern temper. What does a man save for all his life if not to spend it as he wishes, despite -- or because^{of} -- his neighbors? So what if I deny my child a better and higher Jewish education so that I can blow it all on one big wedding or Bar Mitzvah? If this Kohelet-tendency in modern life gets out of hand, we might yet find some reactionary, ultra-Orthodox Rabbi, a true fanatic, suggest the passing of a new religious law: that five or ten percent of every wedding or Bar Mitzvah must be given as a gift to the UJA so as to secure Israel's military future and social survival; or give it to Yeshiva University; or distribute it to the yeshivot and thus help alleviate the scandal of allowing profoundly scholarly teachers of Torah to live at below-poverty-level; or use it to buy several packages of \$160 each to help a Russian Jew manage to survive between the time he applies for a visa to Israel, losing his job, and actually arriving in the Holy Land.

But the whole attitude is wrong. I would say it is even un-Jewish. What American Jew has not heard of the famous passage in the Jerusalem Talmud that he who does not take advantage of every legitimate pleasure must give an accounting before God? And there are times when American Jews become exceedingly pious and are afraid of having to account before God for pleasures they did not enjoy...

IV

Or, consider Solomon's peculiar attitude to education --- "wisdom," as he calls it. He, reputed to be the wisest of all men, certainly appreciated the value of hokhmah (חכמה), yet he yields to his

weakness and becomes over-critical. Thus,

אמרתי אלו בלבי, כמקרה הכנסת גם אני יקרני, ואלה
חנתי אתי את יאלי.

"I said in my heart, what happens to the fool will happen to me too, so in what way am I any wiser than he?"

Did not Solomon know that wisdom and education, which today mean science and technology, cannot be halted, that you cannot stop progress? Science marches on! Of course, we should not have expected that Kohelet would know that the "good things" in life are provided by DuPont; that what is good for General Motors is good for the country; that wisdom consists of flying to the moon "because it is there"; that not the Messiah but Research and Development shall redeem us.

Without the wisdom of science and technology, could we travel 650 miles per hour -- or even at 1 or 2 mach -- from here to there? So what if we are not sure where "there" is, or why we are going from here to there, or what we plan to do with the time thus saved?

No, Kohelet must be updated, and with it the rest of the Jewish tradition too must be made to be more in consonance with modern times. Today we know the real value of hokhmah, because we possess it -- and our academic degrees prove it. Let us be realistic: the Jewish tradition was pre-scientific and therefore primitive, while we are sophisticated. For instance, look at their simple mathematics: in Solomon's days, a 16-story building would have had all 16-stories. In the building which I live, the 16-story building has only 15 stories -- because we have cleverly eliminated the 13th floor by calling it the 14th... Or, to

take a more recent example of how modern hokhmah is able to effect short-cuts in educational technology. In Solomon's day, the teaching of Torah and wisdom was probably a long, drawn-out, difficult affair, in which each individual student was examined and looked into by his teacher. But we are much more sophisticated. Only yesterday or the day before the President of the Board of Education of New York City, probably the largest school system in the whole world, announced that he was in favor of placing students according to astrology, by the Zodiac sign under which they were born. This is wisdom! This is progress! Shame on you, old-fashioned Solomon!

Kohelet is embarrassing; he is not even a good Jewish parent when he explains:

אֵל טוֹב הוּא הַיּוֹם וְהַיּוֹמָה וְהַיּוֹמָה וְהַיּוֹמָה וְהַיּוֹמָה וְהַיּוֹמָה וְהַיּוֹמָה וְהַיּוֹמָה וְהַיּוֹמָה וְהַיּוֹמָה

"This too is a striving after wind, because with much wisdom comes anger and discomfort."

Hokhmah today, for modern man, means a college degree and entree into a prestigious profession. But what else can we give to our children? And what else gives ^aparents "nachas" if not having his child rise in a profession of repute? It is true, campus is turbulent these days, with students complaining about the irrelevance of their studies, social-climbing as displacing humanitarian interests in the choice of prestige professions, forcing academic education upon those who would rather work with their hands, and the result is -- rage and anger, טוֹב . But -- that is kid stuff; they will outgrow it, they will reconcile themselves to our ethics.

V

And finally, the conclusion of Kohelet is certainly all wrong and irrelevant. Listen to his conventional piety, all without imagination:

וְהַיְתָא אֵלֶיךָ יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְנִשְׁמָע בְּקוֹלְךָ וְנִשְׁמָר בְּצִוְיֶיךָ
וְנִשְׁמָר בְּמִצְוֹתֶיךָ וְנִשְׁמָר בְּשִׁבְעַת הַיְּמִינוֹת

"The end of the matter, after you have heard it all, is this: Fear God and observe His commandments, for that is all there is to Man."

Of course, we know better than that. We are modern. Religion should not be a matter of fear -- whether of God or man. After all, we don't want to use God or religion to frighten our children!

As to mitzvot, ritual observances -- surely not at the end of the 20th century! Religion is -- in the heart, not in obsessive rituals; that is only for the old-fashioned folks, or for young fanatics who are regressive.

It is more important that Judaism in modern days should express itself in its continued advocacy of the new Liberal dispensation, especially in its greatest contribution to world history: fighting for the separation of Church and State. So what if we enrage our Christian neighbors when they see our heroic liberalism as anti-religious, anti-Christian -- when, indeed, it is equally anti-Jewish, a way of bringing to an end Jewish education and religious sentiment amongst our young people? But we are moderns, and we have nothing to fear -- as I have said, neither God nor man.

To think otherwise, to turn back to a religion of rituals, that is narrow-minded. You do that only if you have blind faith, which is being just like the Catholics...

VI

No Solomon you won't do. Your sarcasm about wisdom and work and money and success are all misplaced. For these are the good things of life.

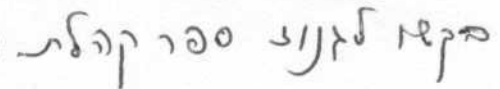
Why, even the Jewish tradition really agrees with me, not with you. Jewish legend (quoted by Alshekh in the beginning of his commentary of Kohelet) tells us that Ashmedai, Captain of the devils and the dark legions, plucked Solomon off his throne, and threw him אלוהים ואלוהים, almost a thousand miles to the outer fringes of his kingdom. There Kohelet went from door to door, announcing himself אני המלך, "I am Kohelet, the King" -- but no one believed that he was the King. And so he was reduced to become a אדם רשע, a beggar who goes from door to door. Comparing his new experiences with the glory that was his in Jerusalem, he sat down to write the book of Kohelet.


So there you have it: Solomon was a beggar! A failure. And a failure, certainly, has nothing to teach us, successful American Jews from Midtown and Scarsdale and Harrison, from Skokie and Beverly Hills.

No, we need not pay attention to that solitary voice from the wilderness of an ancient past trying to remind us of such intangibles as faith and Torah and mitzvot; of the wisdom that transcends shrewdness or sheepskin; of the joy that is beyond mere fun or even happiness; of the fulfillment that surpasses what can be bought for mere money; of the success that sometimes is disguised amongst men as failure, rather than the inner failure that people often confuse with outer success.

VII


So, to bring these slightly sarcastic remarks to a conclusion:

'twere best to do away with Kohelet altogether. Indeed, some of the Sages, we are told, tried to do just that:  they wanted to sequester the Book, to exlude it from the Canon. A pity that they did not succeed! But if not that, at least we can arrange for its public reading early enough in the service so that hardly anyone is present when we read it.

For Kohelet is too sarcastic and too cynical with his annoying refrain:  "Everything is empty, vain, fatuous, futile, full of wind and air" -- words that disturb and both and irritate.

Let us better talk about Judaism than be critical and sarcastic and cynical and skeptical. Rabbis should be positive, not negative. Life is hard enough as it is.

VIII

The only thing that bothers me is maybe Kohelet was right in one thing, when he said  "The words of the wise must be like sharp goads, like nails driven home." Maybe that is what true wisdom is all about. Maybe the words of the wise ought to be like nails, like goads, irritants -- dripping with sarcasm and cynicism, with skepticism and criticism.

At least, maybe that is something to think about.

Or at the very least, it is worth re-reading Kohelet this afternoon. You can never tell but that Solomon, who has been called the "gentile cynic," may have had a point after all -- a hard, sharp, piercing

point that drives home like a nail, deep into the heart and mind --
opening them, bringing with it a purging and cleansing that may give
me a different perspective, and even a new grasp on destiny itself.