

## Educational Perspectives in the Study of Kohelet

By Rav David Nativ

The reader of *Kohelet* is struck by the tone of despair that is prominent throughout the book. Its verses consistently voice the lack of meaning and purpose in life,<sup>[1]</sup> and contradictory phrases abound.<sup>[2]</sup> This stands in sharp contrast to all other books of *Tanakh*, where we are accustomed to an optimistic approach and life is infused with meaning through its connection to Torah values.<sup>[3]</sup>

*Chazal* took note of the difference in approach between *Kohelet* and other *sefarim* and responded in a number of ways. For example:

- “The Sages wished to hide away the book of *Kohelet* because **they found things within it that were inclined toward heresy**” (*Kohelet Rabba* 1:4).
- “The Sages wished to hide away the book of *Kohelet* because **its words contradict one another**” (*Shabbat* 30a).

In this *shiur*, I will suggest that *Kohelet* is structured as a “proof by contradiction,” and this is the key to unlocking its meaning.

### 1. Proof by Contradiction

In proof by contradiction, which is a cornerstone of mathematics, one presents two contradictory options and proves one by showing that the other is impossible. Thus, the remaining alternative is taken to be true.

The book of *Kohelet* opens with the line “The words of Kohelet, the son of David, king of Jerusalem” (1:1) and is followed by two verses:

Vanity of vanities, said Kohelet, vanity of vanities, all is vanity. What profit has a man of all his labor that he labors under the sun? (1:2-3)

These verses serve as an introduction to a long and complex discussion about the meaning human life, a discussion that ends as it began: “Vanity of vanities, said Kohelet, all is vanity” (12:8).

In a large portion of the book, this is the main topic discussed, and the book is full of internal contradictions and permeated by a sense of despair and meaninglessness. Finally, the book

comes to a concise conclusion (12:9-14), climaxing in the following declaration:

The end of the matter, all having been heard: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the entirety of man. For God shall bring all doings to judgment...whether it be good or evil. (12:13-14)

These verses represent an entirely different perspective on life. We now turn to an examination of the book’s two perspectives.<sup>[4]</sup>

### 2. Gradual Ideological Transition from the Beginning of the Book to the End

The book’s verses depict an unfolding conversation on the meaning of human life in this world. In its attempt to uncover this meaning, the book explores a number of realms, such as the cyclical patterns of nature and man’s influence on it (1:4-10), material wealth (2:1-11), and the certainty of a person that he is doing the right thing (3:1-11).

Several key phrases in the book’s language reflect the main points of the author’s thesis. These phrases weave through the verses like a scarlet thread, indicating to us the essence of the entire debate.

The expression “*hevel*,” “vanity” (or “*re’ut ruach*,” “evil spirit”) appears 47 times in the book and articulates the lack of meaning of the particular topic that *Kohelet* is examining. The phrase “*tachat ha-shemesh*,” “under the sun,” appears 32 times in the book and communicates the idea that the matter being discussed relates directly to the life of man in this world. The personal pronoun “*ani*,” “I” (used 29 times), as well as the use of speech in the first person (as in “*amarti*” [“I said”], “*libbi*” [“my heart”], “*ra’iti*” [“I saw”], appearing 117 times), reflects the author’s feeling that the world revolves around him. The word “*kol*” (or “*kulam*”), “all,” appears 78 times in the book and expresses a holistic, all-inclusive view of reality. In contrast, the word “*amal*,” “toil,” which appears 34 times, imparts a sense of worthlessness. By turning every action into a cumbersome task, *Kohelet* imparts a feeling of unease and wonderment at the trivial nature of our deeds.<sup>[5]</sup> The words “*tov*,” “good,” and “*ra*,” “bad,” are used to evaluate the reality that surrounds a person in his life (“*tov*” appears 45 times; “*ra*” appears 35 times).

If we bear these meanings in mind when approaching the text, it becomes evident that there is an ideological shift from the beginning of the book to the end. In order to prove this, I chart out below the number of times each expression appears in every chapter,<sup>[6]</sup> followed by the results and the conclusions that can be drawn from the comparison.

“vanity” and “toil” disappears. (“Vanity” appears 5 times, three of which are in the framework for possible discounted options. “Toil” is referenced only 1 time.)

The portrait of the “Breaking Man” (12:1-7) in the conclusion of the rejected path is both substantive and symbolic. Throughout the book, death is a factor that causes one to rethink matters.

### 3. Hints at the Conclusion throughout the Book

The equation designed by the book can be written in short as: **“I” + “Under the Sun” = “Vanity.”**

The fundamental question is: who stands in the center of man's existence in this world: “I” (in a shallow surface reading) or “You” (in an in-depth reading). Man's standing before God imbues his life with meaning, even in this world, in which he cannot experience “all.”

The transfer from “I” to “You,” as we saw in the previous section, is not singular and sudden, but a gradual progression. It is the result of a process leading to a dead end based on one's original assumptions, but which leads to an expanded outlook upon discovery of a new starting point.

The opening chapters emphasize the word “I” and the personalized nouns, employing them a total of 106 times. The usage stresses the perception that we want to experience everything (“all” appears 38 times) here, on earth, “under the sun” (17 times), and somehow overcome the sense of “vanity” (27 times) and the feeling of “toil” (24 times). The appearance of “good” and “bad” in these chapters has limited meaning since they appear only a few times (8+9). Thus, the start of the book introduces the situation in which man's aspirations are limited to a combination of: “I” + “all” + “under the sun,” allowing “vanity” and “toil” to dominate, and not the test of “good and evil.” The epitome of this approach to life appears in the second chapter with the discussion of material wealth. This chapter contains the most usage of the expressions “vanity,” “under the sun,” “I,” personalized nouns, “all,” and “labor.”

The middle chapters serve as a turning point. The usage of “I” is reduced from 22 to 7 times and the personal nouns from 84 to 30 times. The desire for wholeness decreases, with the use of “all” going down from 38 times to 28 times, and the feeling that everything is “toil” also decreases, going from being used 24 times to 9 times. Simultaneously, the feeling of “vanity” declines

(from 27 to 15 times). With the significant decrease, there is now room to clarify the meaning of “good and evil,” which increase in usage from 9 and 8 times to 32 and 21.

Finally, the end of the book presents a completely different outlook. The use of “I” has completely disappeared and there are only 3 personalized nouns, as opposed to the 30 found in the middle section. There is also a very pronounced drop in the attempt to experience “all” “under the sun,” [7] and the feeling of

Chapters	Opening Chapters				Su m of 1-4	Middle Chapters					Su m of 5-9	Final Chapters			Su m of 10-12	Total in the Book
	1	2	3	4		5	6	7	8	9		1	1	1		
Vanity	8	11	1	7	27	3	5	2	3	2	15	-	2	3	5	47
Under the Sun	4	7	2	4	17	2	2	-	4	6	14	1	-	-	1	32
I	3	12	2	5	22	1	-	2	3	1	7	-	-	-	-	29
First Person	1	58	9	6	84	2	2	1	7	6	30	2	-	1	3	117
All	7	13	1	6	38	4	-	6	5	1	28	2	4	6	12	78
Toil	2	15	2	5	24	5	1	-	1	2	9	1	-	-	1	34
Good	-	3	2	4	9	4	5	1	2	7	32	-	3	1	4	45
Bad	1	3	1	3	8	4	2	3	8	4	21	2	2	2	6	35

Explicit phrases interwoven in the entire length of the book indicate this transformation:

1. “This also I saw that it was from the hand of God” (2:24).
2. “He has made everything beautiful in his time...so that no man can find out the work which God has made from the beginning to the end” (3:11).
3. “I know that whatever God does, it shall be forever: nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it: and God does it so that man should fear Him” (3:14).
4. “But fear God...for one higher than the high watches, and there are yet higher ones over them” (5:6,7).
5. “God has made man upright” (7:29).

6. "He who keeps commandments shall feel no evil thing" (8:5).
7. "Even so, you know not the works of God who makes all" (11:5).
8. "But know that for all these things God will bring you to judgment" (11:9).
9. "And the spirit returns to God who gave it" (12:7).

#### 4. How to Teach *Kohelet*

Many students, especially teenagers, are initially excited by *Kohelet* because of the postmodern attitude expressed throughout the book. It is this same attitude that led our Sages to nearly set it aside, and it can create a serious educational problem. On the one hand, students are intrigued by the book's seeming cynicism, and this engages their interest. On the other hand, the book cannot be completed in one class, nor can it be properly analyzed without in-depth exploration of the issues mentioned above. This demands that we (as teachers and parents) take an unusual step. Instead of studying the book sequentially, we must address each topic that arises in the book from the perspective of both viewpoints, that which is ultimately rejected and that which is accepted.

For example, in the beginning of the book, the first issue raised is that of man's place within creation (1:4-10). Creation is represented by the four elements: earth (matter, v.4), sun (fire, v.5), wind (air, v.6), and water (liquids, v.7).

The description of the physical universe in these verses stresses the rigid cycles and the blindness of nature. This is a mechanical outlook, different from the natural inclination of man to be stirred by the harmony of creation, as depicted in *Tehillim* 104, "Barekhi Nafshi." In *Kohelet*, man stands powerless and impassive against the forces of nature. They act without influencing man and he is unable to affect them.

An alternate approach, in light of the book's conclusion, is that man is standing in the presence of nature that God created. In this world, man's actions affect God's rule over nature: "If you heed my commandments...I will give rain at its proper time on your lands..." (*Devarim* 11:13-14). Man is transformed into someone who is involved and meaningful, capable of influencing and determining.

In this way, we can demonstrate clearly the gap between the two approaches, and cause students to absorb the lessons of the book's conclusion, as explained above.

#### *Kohelet* and the Holiday of Sukkot

The reading of the five *Megillot* at different points of the year has become a central part of the synagogue service. Many congregations read the book of *Kohelet* on the holiday of Sukkot.

The connection between *Megillat Esther* and Purim and between *Eikha* and the Ninth of Av is self-evident. The connection between *Shir Ha-Shirim* and Pesach and

between *Megillat Ruth* and Shavuot is not quite as simple, but there are a number of different approaches explaining the connection. However, it seems that the most difficult connection to establish is that between *Kohelet* and Sukkot.

Based on the above, perhaps we can answer this question.

1. From the beginning of Elul until Yom Kippur, man's stance before God has received "intensive care." In a step-by-step process, our image before God has been refined, accompanied by study, self-reflection, and prayer. At the conclusion of Yom Kippur, we return to our houses with a feeling of elevation; we eat and drink and are happy. "As it says in the *midrash*: At the conclusion of Yom Kippur a heavenly voice calls out: 'Go and eat your bread with joy and drink your wine with delight, for God has already accepted your actions' (*Kohelet* 9:7)" (*Kitzur Shulchan Arukh* 133:29). The next day, we stop saying *Tachanun* until after the month of *Tishrei* concludes. We suspect that we've entered a new reality, from "rejoice while trembling" we advance to "festive joy." There is difficulty in returning to stand before God during the days of Sukkot in the same fashion as we did during the days of judgment and repentance. We must cope with this new perspective.

The book of *Kohelet*, in its unique, thought-provoking way, supplies us with this new perspective.

2. The holiday of Sukkot brings us out of our houses and into nature. We move from our synagogue to our *sukka*, which was built outside the house from vegetation. We shake the four species (*arba minim*) that also bind us to the vegetation of *Eretz Yisrael*. The holiday of Sukkot is also the holiday of gathering, signifying the conclusion of the harvest. A successful harvest can lead one to self-satisfaction, to a sense of finding here, "under the sun," "all" the meaning of man's life, through the meeting of man and nature. The holiday of Sukkot takes us out of our permanent dwellings into temporary ones and causes us to think twice about the quality of our permanent dwelling on this earth. Both our *sukka* and our life on earth are temporary, but we should not relate to them as fleeting and meaningless.

The law teaches us: "The Torah tells us to live in a *sukka* seven days just as one lives in his house the whole year...that he should bring his nice vessels and nice mats into the *sukka* and drink and learn and sleep in the *sukka*..." (*Kitzur Shulchan Arukh* 135:1).

Because of the transient nature of our lives, we may come to minimize their importance. If our lives in this world, "under the sun," are so short, maybe we shouldn't bother investing in them. *Kohelet* teaches us the path of living in the "*sukka*" of life: it may be temporary, but it should be treated as if it were permanent.

Although "I" and "under the sun" creates a sense of "toil" and "vanity," the way we conduct ourselves here is the basis for the "the end of the matter." The type of life we live on this earth needs to be molded by permanence.

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[6] I refer here to the chapters ordinarily used in citation.

[7] "Under the sun" is mentioned once and the word "all" is limited to 12 mentions, four of which are in the conclusion, which presents the alternative approach.

[1] For example: "Vanity of vanities, says Kohelet, vanity of vanities; **all** is vanity" (1:2); "What profit has a man of **all his labor** wherein he labors under the sun?" (1:3); "That that which befalls the sons of men befalls the beasts, even one thing befalls them both: as the one dies, so the other dies; they all have one breath, **so that a man has no preeminence over a beast, for all is vanity**" (3:19). There are many more examples.

[2] For example: On the one hand, we read, "And I gave my heart to seek and search out **wisdom**...it is a **sore** task" (1:13); "For in much **wisdom** is much **grief**, and he that increases **knowledge** increases **sorrow**" (1:19); and in contrast, "Then I saw that **wisdom** has **advantage** over the fools, **as far as light excels darkness**" (2:13). *Da'at Mikra* (pp. 24-33) enumerates twenty contradictions in *Kohelet*.

[3] For example: "And God saw everything that He made, and, behold, it was **very good**" (*Bereishit* 1:31); "Behold, I set before you this day a  **blessing**...if you obey the commandments of God" (*Devarim* 11:26-27); "And yet for all that, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not cast them away, nor will I abhor them, to destroy them utterly and to break my covenant with them" (*Vayikra* 26:44). The entire *Tanakh*, from Adam until the final prophets, proclaims the possibility of repentance and improvement, providing an optimistic basis for all of human history.

[4] It is possible that this is why the Sages did not, in fact, "hide" *Kohelet*. "And why didn't they hide it [*Kohelet*]? Because its beginning is a teaching of the Torah and its end is a teaching of the Torah" (*Shabbat* 30b). The book was understood later as a proof by contradiction, and the entire book thus became *divrei Torah*; its internal contradictions and its atmosphere of despair are intended to denounce the negated approach.

The grade awarded to a student who formulates a mathematical answer without the final section and with little proof will not be good, as the main point is missing. This is the error of academic scholars who view the final verse of the book as "a transplant" that serves to allow the book to become part of *Tanakh*.

[5] In this context, it is worthwhile to note the meaning of the word "*amal*" in Scripture. There are three different meanings: 1. toil; 2. sin or evil; 3. suffering. A way to remember the three meanings is: Adam was put in the Garden of Eden to "toil;" since he "sinned," the "toil" turned into "suffering" for him.