

Commentary of Dubner Maggid on Koheles 1:1-3

דְּבָרֵי קֹהֵלֶת בֶּן דָּוִד מֶלֶךְ בִּירוּשָׁלַם: הַבָּל הַבָּלִים אָמַר קֹהֵלֶת הַבָּל הַבָּלִים הַכֹּל הַכֹּל: מֶה יִתְרוֹן
לְאָדָם בְּכָל עֲמָלוֹ שְׂיַעֲמַל תַּחַת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ:

The words of Koheles son of David, king in Jerusalem. Futility of futilities, said Koheles. Futility of futilities – all is futile. What gain does a man achieve from all his labor that he will labor beneath the sun?

All is Futile

Two points in this passage call for explanation. First, why specifically in this book, in contrast with his other books, does King Solomon use the name *Koheles*? Second, what is the point of the phrase “that he will labor”? The phrase seems totally superfluous. Moreover, if Solomon wished to include such a phrase, we would expect him to write “that he labored.” But instead he writes “that he *will* labor.” What message is Solomon trying to convey?

It appears that Solomon’s intent is to point out the basis for his declaration that all worldly pursuits are empty. On the surface, the statement seems too outlandish to swallow. After all, everyone craves worldly success and pleasure. But, in actuality, Solomon’s statement is one whose truth can be appreciated by one and all. Indeed, when a man devotes his life to a worldly pursuit, in the end he invariably looks back with regret. He laments that he wasted his time and energy on empty nonsense.

The difference between Solomon’s perspective and that of other men is merely one of scope. As we know, people have different inclinations: what one opts for, another rejects. Consider a man who is driven by a love of physical gratification, and devotes his life to eating, drinking, and other physical pleasures. When he reaches the end of his days, he will see the error of his ways and regret how he spent his life. He will admit that delicacies really provide no more benefit than simple bread. Yet he will not come to regard *all* worldly pursuits as empty, for he did not try them all. Rather, he will say that if he had his life to live over again, he would choose a different pursuit and thereby attain true success. Next, consider a man who is driven by a love of money and devotes his life to his business, striving to make a fortune. He, too, in the end, will admit that his efforts were futile: he will realize that he will not be able to take his wealth with him when he dies. And then he will conclude that he would have been better off devoting his life to something else. Similarly, a man who devotes his life to battle will ultimately realize that his efforts were futile, and will regret that he did not choose another path.

This is how it is with everyone. As a person reaches the end of his life, he spurns his own chosen life pursuit, realizing that it is ignoble and futile. But other pursuits look good to him. He says to himself that if he were young again, he would choose a different pursuit, and then he would benefit from his efforts. The reason people think this way is as follows. The typical person cannot try out every worldly pursuit. He thus cannot determine from direct experience that all worldly pursuits are futile. He also cannot reach this conclusion by reasoning. Hence he believes that he could have done better with a different pursuit than the one he chose. But with King Solomon, the wisest of all men, it was different. He tried out the full gamut of worldly pursuits, examining each one through his wisdom. Having done so, he could testify that all worldly pursuits are fruitless.

And thus Solomon declares (Ecclesiastes 12:13): “The matter has ended, all has been heard. Fear God and keep His commandments, for that is all that makes a man.” Solomon is saying that a person should not think that he is the only one who chose a foolish path, while everyone else chose a fruitful one. Rather, fearing God and keeping His commandments is all that makes a man. Only this will bring him true benefit. All worldly pursuits are equally futile: they all leave a person holding nothing but air.

In addressing men who devoted themselves to a worldly pursuit, Solomon did not need to tell them that they wasted their lives. They could figure this out for themselves, once they reached the end of their lives and saw that they achieved no real gain from all their labor. And therefore Solomon does not write: “What gain does a man achieve from all his labor that he labored beneath the sun?” Rather, he writes: “What gain does a man achieve from all his labor that he *will* labor beneath the sun?” The term *futility* pertains not only

to the labor that a person actually did, but also to the labor that he eventually wishes he would have done. Solomon uses the name *Koheles* to signify that he assembled (*kiheil*) all the specific forms of regret in the spectrum of human experience, and placed them all into a single category: emptiness.

We can bring out the idea further with an allegory. A man was passing through the marketplace, and he saw a group of blind men whose guide had left them. He decided to play a joke on these blind men. He approached one of them and said: "Here is a bag of coins. Take them and divide them among your companions." In fact, he did not give the blind man anything. But each member of the group thought that everyone had gotten a share of the money except him. They all began to fight, and the sound of screaming filled the air.

In the same way, within the group of men who spent their lives on worldly pursuits, each one thinks that all the others achieved success and only he was left empty-handed. Cries of regret and jealousy fill the air. In response, Solomon declares that they all are mistaken, for *all* is futile.

Stages of Life

The Midrash remarks (*Koheles Rabbah* 1:1):

The seven futilities that Solomon mentions¹ correspond to the seven phases of life that a person experiences.² At the age of one, he is like a king: he is placed in a carriage, and everyone hugs and kisses him. At the ages of two and three, he is like a pig: he ferrets in the sewers. At the age of ten, he skips like a young goat. At the age of twenty he is like a neighing horse; he grooms himself to seek a wife. When he marries, he is like a donkey [slaving for a living]. When he bears children, he becomes brazen like a dog in his efforts to provide for them. In old age, he is like a monkey.³ This is what is said of a common man. But in regard to men of Torah it is written (I Kings 1:1): "King David was old." Although he was old, he was [still] a king.

This Midrash provides a way to digest Solomon's teaching that all is futile. It is hard for a person to accept the notion that he has chosen the wrong path: that the pursuit he cherishes is ignoble. If we baldly tell him so, he will not listen. The way to open his mind to the message is to point to his own experience: that pursuits that he once cherished and valued highly, he himself later found to be detestable. He can then say to himself that just as he was mistaken about his previous pursuits, he is mistaken about his current one: it seems attractive, but in fact it is vile.

The seven phases of life that the Midrash lists are archetypes for this principle. When a person is born, all he wants to do is suckle. But later, after he gets used to eating regular food, he comes to find suckling disgusting. At this stage, he is drawn to toddler's games, such as sitting on a stick and pretending he is riding a horse. Obviously these games are silly, but, as a young child, he finds them worthwhile. As he grows a bit older, though, he loses interest in these games, and becomes interested instead in nicely-made toys. Later, as he grows still older, he casts away these toys as well, and develops a desire for honor and glory, artificial though it may be. Pride swells within him, causing a burgeoning of empty fantasies. And so on.

Now imagine yourself reflecting on the activities you used to relish, but now can hardly bear to watch. Obviously you will conclude that you were a fool to have been drawn to such nonsense. And later, when you mature still further, you will then realize that even those pursuits that you considered to be of some value are also sheer nonsense, and you will renounce them as well. This pattern is reflected in the saying "futility of futilities." Solomon is indicating that that each cry of "Futility!" over some pursuit is *the product* of a similar cry of "Futility!" over a previous one. When a person casts away one empty pursuit for a new, more "advanced" one, he will be prepared to recognize that his new pursuit is also empty.

¹ *Futility* (1) of *futilities* (2, 3), said *Koheles*. *Futility* (4) of *futilities* (5, 6) – *all is futile* (7). The plural term *futilities* counts as two instances.

² Literally, *the seven worlds that a person sees*.

³ That is, his appearance changes and he becomes bent over (*Eitz Yosef, Matnos Kehunah*). Alternatively, he loses his mental faculties (*Rashash*).

It is worthwhile to analyze why God implanted into the heart of a young man an affinity for empty pursuits. A young man harbors various desires in his heart. He is gladdened when a desire is fulfilled, and pained when a desire is unfulfilled. He loves those who give to him, and hates those who take from him. In addition, he is imbued with various emotional forces and drives: anger, will, pain, pleasure, pity, cruelty, and so on. And all these forces and drives are stimulated by inanities. Why did God make people this way?

We can answer as follows. God imbued man with various character traits in order to use them to serve Him. But these traits must first be developed. A person must exercise them in his youth to become proficient in their use. Then, when he reaches the age of understanding, he will be able to deploy them properly in serving God.

Let us bring out the point with an analogy. A gem dealer travels to a distant land and buys some precious gems. He is worried about losing them, for they are small, yet each one is very valuable. He therefore sets them into a wooden panel to keep them safe during the trip home. When he gets home, he takes the gems out of the panel and sets each one into an appropriate gold or silver setting.

This is how we act in regard to our character traits. These traits are generated within each person when he is in his mother's womb. And not one of them is for naught. Each trait is needed for serving God with devotion and awe. Love is for loving God and His Torah. Hate is for hating what God considers evil. Likewise, every offshoot of the emotions of love and hate has its role in the service of God.

But the time for using our traits for their proper purpose is not during our youth. Rather, it is when our minds mature, and we can understand how to use each trait as it is meant to be used. In the meantime, though, the traits must be exercised. The span of time between birth and maturity is lengthy. If a person would not exercise these traits during this period, they would gradually wither away to nothing. Therefore, God put into a child's heart a tendency to be stirred by empty things: to love some and hate others. In this way, a person is led to exercise his character traits, so that they are ready to be used for serving God when the time is ripe.

Now, when a person matures, he should cast away all the inanities of his youth, and use his character traits only for their true purpose: to serve God. In our analogy of the gem dealer, the wooden panel was only a temporary setting for the gems, to keep them from getting lost on the way. Once the dealer got home, he immediately took the gems out of this temporary setting and set each one in its proper permanent setting. If the dealer left the gems in the wooden panel, it would be laughable.

In this vein, Solomon asks (Proverbs 1:22): "Until when, you fools, will you love folly?" He does not ask: "Why, you fools, do you love folly?" To this, a person could answer that he loves foolish pursuits because God created him with this tendency. Hence, Solomon instead asks: "Until when?" Solomon is telling the fools that the time has come for them to abandon their folly, and to use their inborn tendencies for the proper purpose.

Remnants of Blessing

Solomon declares: "What gain does a man achieve from all his labor that he will labor beneath the sun?" Let us bring out another facet of this verse.

The Gemara teaches (*Sanhedrin* 92a, paraphrased):

One who fails to use his assets to benefit Torah scholars never sees a sign of blessing. As it is written (Job 20:21): "There was no remnant left over after he ate; therefore he will not attain good."⁴ The term "remnant" alludes to Torah scholars, as it is written (Joel 3:5): "And among the remnants whom the Lord summons."⁵

We use our verse to bring out the meaning of this teaching.

⁴ This verse appears in a passage about the wicked. *Rashi* explains that a wicked man takes all his food for himself, without leaving anything over for the needy.

⁵ The verse in full reads as follows: *And it will be that all those who call in the Name of the Lord will escape, for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem their will be refuge as the Lord said, and among the remnants whom the Lord summons.*

In this world of ours, there are many different types of workers with many different levels of income. The worst of all is the one who earns only enough to feed himself, with nothing left to bring home. Of what interest is his home to him,⁶ if his wages are spent the moment his workday has ended?

In our verse, Solomon likens the wicked man to a worker of this type. He declares: "What gain does a man achieve from all his labor that he will labor beneath the sun?" Solomon is saying: "What gain does the wicked man achieve? He labors merely for the food and drink he consumes during his life "beneath the sun," in this world. When his worldly life comes to an end, all is gone; nothing is left to sustain his soul after his death."⁷

This is the idea behind the Gemara's teaching. A person who does not use his assets to benefit Torah scholars is left with no remnant from all his labors, for he labored only to feed himself. If, however, he *did* benefit Torah scholars, then he *is* left with a remnant. For whenever a Torah scholar performs some act or partakes of some worldly benefit, he always leaves behind a blessing.

⁶ Cf. Job 21:21.

⁷ Note that the Hebrew word יתרון for *gain* has the connotation of *left over*: the Hebrew verb להותיר means *to leave over*. See, for example, Deuteronomy 28:54.