

# Koheleth: Looking Too Far Ahead

Rabbi Norman Lamm

*Chancellor and Rosh HaYeshiva, Yeshiva University*

Koheleth is considered part of the "wisdom literature" of the Bible. Like Proverbs, Job, and the Proverbs of Solomon of the Apocrypha, it is considered a book of hokhmah. This is appropriate for Koheleth, because tradition identifies him with King Solomon, who was the wisest of all men, the greatest hakham on earth.

Now, it has long been held by wise men of many ages and many climates that wisdom is a means to happiness. Socrates maintained that if people only knew what is right they would do it, and their lives would change. This theme was continued by his student Plato, and was elaborated, in turn, by his student Aristotle, who said that in the pursuit of wisdom lies the highest and happiest life. In a more down-to-earth sense, modern man believes, as an unspoken tenet of his faith, that knowledge is redemptive, that wisdom, especially in its scientific and technological expression, can solve all problems, that hokhmah can make everyone happy. In truth, this certainly seems to be the case: knowledge, intelligence, good sense, talent, wisdom - what else do we possess that can help us be happy?

Yet, when we turn to Koheleth, the book of hokhmah, what a disappointment! *Havel havelim*, Koheleth cries out, "vanity of vanities," all is weariness, all is nonsense, nothing is of value. Koheleth is disillusioned with all those things that man usually cherishes: wealth, pleasure, the company of women, good food, even ethical living — and even hokhmah itself! At the end of chapter 1, he informs us that with much wisdom there comes much vexation, and "he who increases knowledge increases pain." There are dozens of such statements in Koheleth, and they add up to a quite depressing view.

Actually, this picture is a bit unfair. It is true that modern man is charmingly naive when he believes that if only the scientists would desist from armaments research and the space race and concentrate on medicine, or what is quaintly called "the science of man," they would make us all happy both physically and mentally. It is true that education is no guarantee that man will not succumb to bigotry. It is true that science and technology have brought in their wake many problems. But it is overwhelmingly truer that wisdom in its various contemporary aspects has brought us health and hygiene and longevity and convenience and sophistication. How many of us would be willing to give up these benefits of science and wisdom? On the contrary, I would say with Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle - and with the far less sophisticated modern - that wisdom does make life more pleasant, the hokhmah does lead to happiness.

Why then does Koheleth despair? How do we account for the fact that hokhmah which usually occasions optimism, is for Koheleth a source of bitter pessimism?

The answer is that Koheleth is not a work of hokhmah alone. It has one added ingredient that makes all the difference: nevuah, prophecy — not in the classical Biblical sense of summoning the people to God and repentance, but more in the laymen's sense of clairvoyance, of predicting and foretelling the future. And it is this which corrodes Koheleth's cheer and accounts for the gloom and dejection in the book. The Aramaic translator, the Targum, appreciated this added element and included mention of it in his paraphrase at the very beginning of the book: *Kad haza Shelomo malka de'Yisrael*, when Solomon, King of Israel, saw, *be'ruah nevuah*, by means of the spirit of prophecy, that his great kingdom would be split in the civil war following his death, that the Temple that he had built and the city of Jerusalem would be devastated, and that his people Israel would languish in exile, he cried out *havel havalim*, "vanity of vanities": *kol man de'Torhit ana ve'david abba kula havalu*, all that I and my father David labored for and struggled for, all is empty and wasted and vain!

Had Koheleth restricted himself to his great hokhmah alone, he would have emerged with a happy and sanguine and cheerful book, prudent perhaps, like his Book of Proverbs - but not as gloomy and even cynical as "Koheleth." But the note of nevuah, looking too far ahead into the future, undid him. It made him see the fatuousness of even wisdom itself. Thus, Koheleth, the wisest of all men, cries out: I thought to myself, *ke'mikreh ha-kesil gam ani yikreni*, what will happen to the fool will happen to me as well, the same common grave will swallow both of us, and therefore *ve'lamah hakhamti ani az yoter* - to give that an Anglo-Yiddish translation: "Does it pay to be smart?" (2:15). In an even more frightening vein, Koheleth dourly exclaims in the verse following: "for no memory remains of the wise man or the fool forever: *be'she'kevar ha-yamim ha-ba'im ha-kol nishkah*, for as the days grow into years and the years into centuries, all is forgotten, and so does the wise man die together with the fool." Think of it - what a frightening, unthinkable thought: in two hundred years, who will know us, who will remember us? Even our descendants, even those who may bear our very own names: will they ever know we existed, will they ever recall our passions, our loves, our hates, our wants, our fears? What are we proud of today - family, status, wealth, power? In the face of the eternity that will swallow all of us, it is *havel havalim*, utterly meaningless.

So this capacity for nevuah, for looking too far ahead, is unnerving and catastrophic. It undermines every shred of self-confidence. The knowledge of ultimate failure, of death and oblivion, blocks all progress, undercuts all aspiration, verily disembowels our lives of all significance. This dismal prophetic glimpse turns the optimism of wisdom into bitter gall, the joys of pleasure into wormwood, the triumph of money and power into dust and ashes, the pleasure of a good reputation into a mockery. Nothing lasts, nothing endures. Hokhmah itself is an illusion, wisdom — an empty boast. And in that case, *kol mah de'torhit ana ve'david abba*, all that we have built, all that the past generations and we have forged and created and constructed - *kula havalu*, it is all a joke, a cruel and senseless exercise in futility.

This, then, is the difference between pure wisdom and wisdom touched by and controlled by prophecy. Wisdom approaches facts as they are, in the here-and-now: circumscribed, objective,

limited, maybe anticipating developments a step or two ahead — but all within the purview of mind and intellect and analysis. And wisdom, using its celebrated judgment, can settle things, make them work, establish harmony, produce efficiency. The mind gazes on the world, takes its measure, and decides that it can overcome it. Wisdom is a problem-solver, and therefore hokhmah leads one to happiness and to optimism.

Prophecy, however, looking far beyond the present, beyond even death, sees only endless oblivion, an infinite blank for all eternity. The prophetic intuition perceives the ultimate futility of all as the grave itself disintegrates, as the whole solar system comes to an end in the blazing flames of cosmic implosion or whimpers to its death in unspeakably cold wastes. Prophecy, therefore, is dreadfully pessimistic.

In that case, why did tradition assign Koheleth to be read on so happy a holiday as Sukkoth? Who needed it? Why not some other, pleasant, wise book?

The answer comes in the closing verses of the book, which Bible critics have dismissed as a later appendage, but in which they are sadly mistaken - for this is the whole of Koheleth and its very heart and essence, *sof davar*, the end of the matter, after all is heard and all the evidence has been gathered, is: "fear God, and *et mitzvotav shemor*, observe His commandments, *ki zeh kol ha-adam* - for this is the whole of man. Over every act shall God pass judgment, for every forgotten thing shall He remember, whether good or bad."

What does this mean? Permit me to use a felicitous phraseology suggested by a writer in a recent issue of Fortune Magazine. This writer tells us that once upon a time America was guilty of a "bright perception" of excessive cheerfulness and optimism, as it swept its incipient, ugly problems under the national carpet. Nowadays, we have veered to the other extreme. We are guilty of a "dark perception," we see only gloom, we consider ourselves hopelessly trapped. Neither of these, we are told, is correct. What we need is a "clear perception."

In these terms, we may say that wisdom alone is not enough, that by itself it offers us only a one-sided "bright perception." Wisdom looks down, deeply, too much down and too deep; but it is blind to the anguish of death and frustration, and to the anxiety of approaching nothingness. Prophecy alone is also inadequate; it gives us an equally one-sided view, the "dark perception." It looks too far ahead, and is so obsessed with the beyond that it fails to see the here-and-now; so taken up with the forest that it cannot see the trees on the landscape of life. What we require is a spiritually "clear perception": *et mitzvotav shemar*, the fear of God and the observance of Torah and mitzvot! For here is something that transcends and includes both wisdom and prophecy - *ki zeh kol ha-adam* it is the whole of man – and corrects the faults of each.

Torah, unlike wisdom, does not look down; and unlike prophecy, does not look ahead. Rather, to continue the metaphor of direction, it looks up. Torah requires an upward glance: *Torah min ha-Shamayim*, Torah comes from heaven - or, as hasidim taught, Torah itself is *shamayim*! Torah encompasses both wisdom and prophecy, and much more. It tells us that both the bright perception of wisdom and the dark perception of prophecy are illusions, because man is not caught inextricably in nature itself. Man can have a connection with God, he can be raised above

the natural law, he need not be trapped in the endless cycle of life and death, there is something in man that allows him to be plucked out of the maelstrom of the world and elevated to such heights that wisdom cannot fully understand him and prophecy cannot fully predict him.

It does this by telling us two things. Firstly, that God knows and cares, and that He knows all and considers all, meaning that nothing that happens to us is forgotten, that everything, no matter how minor - *al kol ne'elam* - remains with God forever, even after the Earth and Sun have been burnt into cinders of nuclear ash.

But that is not enough. For God to remember does not yet grace our lives with meaning. Therefore the second point: in order for us to derive significance for our lives both here and now and forever, in order for us to be able to use and enjoy our wisdom and pleasure and money and love and influence, and escape the threat of oblivion and obscurity, we have got to respond to God's care, we have got to incorporate His concern into our actual lives, we have got to elevate ourselves above world and nature and the web of illusions and frustrations that threatens to ensnare us.

When man performs a mitzvah, he in effect raises himself and his environment to the order of eternal significance in God's eyes, to a level which lasts forever, he incorporates himself into Torah which is both from Heaven and is Heaven, and which therefore cannot be ravaged by temporal disintegration.

For instance, take the beauties of nature. Wisdom tells us: how gorgeous, how complex, how useful, how interrelated is the whole natural world - live it fully! Science investigates it, philosophy exclaims upon its aesthetics. Prophecy responds coldly: so what? - All passeth away... The endless cycles mean that it is all meaningless. It is sham. It is illusion. Torah responds: you both are wrong. Man should enjoy beauty and nature, but not as an automatic activity. It requires the act of being mekadesh, sanctifying beauty, and then its significance will endure even after the physical objects which we treasure rot and decay. Thus, when man takes the arba minnim, the cluster of species on Sukkot, and cherishes their quality of hadar, beauty, that beauty lasts forever, and every appreciation of beauty in his life is exalted thereby, to endure endlessly.

Or take the consolation of wealth — and what a consolation wealth can be! Wisdom says: use it, enjoy it, build with it, invest it, multiply it, live comfortably. Prophecy offers its rejoinder with a cynical smile: *havel havalim*, how empty, how vain, how foolish. Torah answers: you are both mistaken. Wealth should be used and enjoyed — but first: sanctified! This is done by giving tzedakah, by being generous to others, by imparting of your substance to those who need it. In that manner, such money that one gives lasts forever; indeed, the money that one gives away is the only money that one really possesses forever. In the eyes of the eternal God, such money is never spent. Even if a man who gives tzedakah should lose his fortune tomorrow or die the day after, his act of generosity survives forever.

Or take love, of wife or child or parents or friends. Wisdom approves: it is psychologically healthy and socially necessary. Prophecy is skeptical: love itself is ephemeral and transient, and cannot last beyond the lives of the lovers. Torah disagrees with both. Love must be turned into mitzvah, it must be graced with kedushah, sanctity, and thus made to endure forever. Love

deeply and well and selflessly, and it becomes a thing of beauty and holiness for all time, defeating death and surviving the grave. Such love survives even after the lovers have perished.

Or take pleasure. Interestingly, wisdom and prophecy draw opposite conclusions from the same premises. Wisdom, echoing the Greek philosopher Epicurus, says that the fact of death should lead us to indulge in pleasure: eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow you die. Prophecy draws the exactly opposite conclusion: our eventual death makes all our pleasures and joys not only temporary and farcical, but even uninteresting. Torah rejects both. Of course we must enjoy life and its pleasures. The Jerusalem Talmud says that we shall have to answer in the other world for all the legitimate pleasures we failed to enjoy in this world. But - it must come through the context of mitzvah, and this sacred framework will sharpen our pleasures, make them fuller and more perfect and more meaningful. On this holiday of Sukkot we emphasize the ideal of pleasure and happiness, of simhah. The Torah tells us: *ve'samahta*, you shall be happy. But, as the Rabbis added, we can be happy ourselves only if we read that word also as *ve'simahta*, you shall make happy. You must give happiness to God's four wards, the *ger, levi, yatom, almanah*, the stranger and Levite and orphan and widow, and then God will grant happiness to your four wards, *binkha, bitkha, avdekha, va-amatkha*, your children and your household. Doing that, such simhah truly endures, even if it is merely the pleasure of *basar ve'yayyin, dagim ve'khol mat'amim*, of physical indulgence. Never mind sickness and death; such dedicated and consecrated simhah outlasts the world itself — because it is *ve'samahta lifnei ha-Shem Elokekha*, happiness "before the Lord thy God," happiness that remains eternally with the Eternal.

So that we have an "O. Henry ending" for Solomon's Koheleth. Koheleth looks ahead, too far ahead, and his combined wisdom and prophecy declare: *havel havalim* -- what a waste! There is no real sense of achievement: *kol mah de'torhit ana ve'david abba kula havalu*. All the rest of the book is a spelling-out of the implications of the very beginning in a dirge of disillusionment, of painful disappointment with wealth and wisdom and power and love and pleasure. The bright perception of wisdom turns into the dark perception of prophecy. But at the very end, *sof davar*, after all has been heard, wisdom and prophecy are overcome in the fullness of man created in the image of God, and the clear perception emerges: *et mitzvotav shemor*, incorporating into our lives the will of God.

Solomon, then, need not fall into the doldrums because of civil war and the destruction and the exile of his people, not only because of their ultimate redemption, but because a life of mitzvah is in itself well spent, because God remembers all and cares about all — it is this knowledge that looks deeper than wisdom and farther than prophecy by looking up - to our Father in Heaven.