

Reading Ecclesiastes in the 21st century

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The book of Kohelet, (called Ecclesiastes by the Greeks) that we read on Succot is a strange and uniquely acidic biblical composition.

Unlike Ruth or Esther, there are no heroes and no story line. Instead, we find a man (supposedly a descendant of David, king in Jerusalem) nearing the end of his years musing on his accomplishments, and those of his fellow man. The openly lines speak of futility and emptiness – everything is ephemeral, one generation follows another, and none of the strivings and accomplishments of a lifetime make much of a difference.

These are the words (known among scholars as an example of wisdom literature) we read at the end of the summer, after the harvest has been completed, when, if we were lucky, our storehouses and stomachs are full, the olives are being turned into pungent oil, and the grapes into wine. This is a time of celebration, but Kohelet, and the rabbis who decided that we should read his words on Succot, insert a sobering dose of humility to dampen the festivities.

Kohelet presents what many commentators refer to as a pessimistic image of the human experience, but perhaps the term realistic is more applicable. In the end, the rich and successful are no better off than the poor. Improvements, particularly in human nature and politics, are illusions – everything has been tried before, and “there is nothing new under the sun.” Alongside justice and righteousness, there is inevitably evil. To believe otherwise is a dangerous deception.

For Jewish realists, who accept human nature, individual and collective, as it is, and

recall the history of utopian movements and revolutions that ended in disaster, Kohelet is an affirmation. At most, we can work to reduce suffering through cautious steps; modest expectations can bring small successes that mitigate harsh realities, without undermining our ability to survive in a dangerous world.

But what about ideological “progressives” – particularly the young Jews idealists who believe that the human race is capable of evolving toward a better future, free of wars, racism, hate and other evils? Unlike Kohelet, they attribute evil, including war, not to unchanging flaws in human nature, but rather to corrupt power brokers (generally of the capitalist variety) and reactionaries who exploit the weak, poor and defenseless.

Jewish progressives ignore the realism of Kohelet, and his observation that for every season, there is a time – a time of “throwing stones and a time of being the target,” and “a time of war and a time of peace.” In contrast to the author’s cynicism, they transform distant hopes into firmly held truths, and confuse dreams with reality. They erase or underestimate the dangers that are an inherent part of the human condition, and when disaster strikes, they are shocked and unprepared.

This misplaced Jewish idealism, often under the banner of tikkun olam (repairing the world), turns most of its energy against Israel. For this group, Israeli policies are not responses to a hostile and dangerous world, but rather the result of sinister manipulation by “war criminals” and “racists” who stand in the way of peace and harmony. Prime Minister Netanyahu is routinely depicted as the embodiment of the evil and injustice, backed by caricatured power brokers like Sheldon Adelson and Haim Saban.

Furthermore, in their zeal, and in contrast to the professed ideals of liberalism, tolerance and informed debate, the heads of Jewish progressive groups themselves become power brokers, making alliances with immoral and corrupt supporters.

In the UN, university campuses, and the media, they wage aggressive wars to silence critics, real and imagined. In this behavior, Jewish progressive NGOs themselves become power brokers, mixing the moral claims and immoral practices that also inform Kohelet's world.

In Jewish tradition, the realist description of the world, while bluntly stated, is not exceptional. From the beginning, Bereshit (the Book of Genesis) declares that human nature is inclined toward immorality, and dark animal instincts are never far below the surface. The fear, greed and distrust that lead to conflict between brothers and wars between nations are part of the political state of nature, as later political philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes understood.

The righteous founders of the Jewish people – Abraham, Moses and even the Prophetess Devora – were forced to go to war in order to insure the survival of the nation.

In a very hostile environment, they acted in ways that today would be condemned.

Idealized peace was and remains a messianic vision, which, in Judaism, is outside the options in the real world.

Today, at least 2,300 years after it was written, Kohelet remains a disturbing and challenging text, particularly when we live again as an independent people in our own land, our stomachs are full, and messianic dreams beckon. But as we face the winter months, reminders of the fragility of human nature, the political realities of war and peace, and the uncertainties of life, are necessary corrections.

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