

CHAPTER I

The words of Kohelet son of David, king in Jerusalem.

Utter futility!—said Kohelet—

Utter futility! All is futile!

What real value is there for a person
in all the gains one makes beneath the sun?

One generation goes, another comes,
but the earth remains the same forever.

The sun rises, and the sun sets—
and glides back to where it rises.

Southward blowing,
turning northward,
ever turning blows the wind;
on its rounds the wind returns.

All streams flow into the sea,
yet the sea is never full;
to the place [from] which they flow,
the streams flow back again.

All such things are wearisome:
no one can ever state them;
the eye never has enough of seeing,
nor the ear enough of hearing.

Only that shall happen which has happened;
only that shall occur which has occurred;
there is nothing new beneath the sun!
Sometimes there is a phenomenon of which they say,
“Look, this one is new!”—

it occurred long since, in ages that went by before us.
The earlier ones are not remembered; so too those that will occur later
will no more be remembered than those that will occur at the very end.

קֹהֵלֶת (קֹטְעִים נְבָחָרִים)

פרק א

דְּבַרִי קֹהֵלֶת בֶּן־דָּוִד מֶלֶךְ בִּירוּשָׁלַם:

הַבֵּל הַבָּלִים אָמַר קֹהֵלֶת

הַבֵּל הַבָּלִים הַכֹּל הַבֵּל:

מִהֲיִתְרוֹן לָאָדָם

בְּכָל־עֲמָלוֹ שִׁיעֵמַל תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ:

דָּוָר הַלֵּךְ וְדָוָר בָּא

וְהָאָרֶץ לְעוֹלָם עֹמֶדֶת:

וְזָרַח הַשָּׁמֶשׁ וּבָא הַשָּׁמֶשׁ

וְאֶל־מְקוֹמוֹ שׁוֹאֵף זֹרַח הוּא שָׁם:

הוֹלֵךְ אֶל־דְּרוֹם וְסוֹבֵב אֶל־צָפוֹן

סוֹבֵב | סָבַב הוֹלֵךְ הָרוּחַ

וְעַל־סִבִּיבֹתָיו שָׁב הָרוּחַ:

כָּל־הַנְּחָלִים הַלְּכִים אֶל־הַיָּם

וְהַיָּם אֵינְנוּ מֵלֵא

אֶל־מְקוֹם שֶׁהַנְּחָלִים הַלְּכִים

שָׁם הֵם שָׁבִים לְלֶכֶת:

כָּל־הַדְּבָרִים יִגְעִים

לֹא־יִוָּכַל אִישׁ לְדַבֵּר

לֹא־תִשְׁבַּע עֵינַי לְרָאוֹת

וְלֹא־תִמְלֵא אָזְנוֹ מִשְׁמָע:

מִהֲשִׁהִיהָ הוּא שִׁהִיהָ

וּמִהֲשִׁנְעֵשָׂה הוּא שִׁיעֵשָׂה

וְאֵין כָּל־חֲדָשׁ תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ:

יֵשׁ דְּבָר שִׁיאֲמַר רְאֵה־זֶה חֲדָשׁ הוּא

כְּבָר הִיָּה לְעֹלָמִים אֲשֶׁר הִיָּה מִלְּפָנָיו:

אֵין זְכוּרוֹן לְרֵאשׁוֹנִים וְגַם לְאַחֲרָנִים שִׁהִיו

לֹא־יִהְיֶה לָהֶם זְכוּרוֹן עִם שִׁהִיו לְאַחֲרָנָה:

THE SCROLL OF ECCLESIASTES (KOHLET). Classical commentators assume that the word *kohelet* is related to *kahal*, “assembly.” Kohelet is the one who addresses the assembly. This led to the natural association of thinking of the person as the leader of the congregation; hence its English name, Ecclesiastes. The ancient rabbis thought that Solomon was the author of the book. (In the first verse, the author describes himself as a descendant of David and a king in Jerusalem.)

The practice of reading the Scroll of Ecclesiastes on Sukkot seems to have originated in the Middle Ages. The medieval rabbis give no explicit reason for the reading of the Scroll of Ecclesiastes on Sukkot. We can only guess at the reasoning, given how surprising it is that this festival, called “the season of our joy,” should be associated with this book, since the author finds so much about which to be negative. To those of us living in a northern clime, the book might feel like the cold wind of winter, the season we are about to enter, rather than the glorious fall we are leaving.

Ecclesiastes centers on the question of how to lead a good life; certainly its ending, which concludes that the way of Torah is the best way to live, recommended the book to the ancient rabbis: “The sum of the matter, when all is said and done: Revere God and observe God’s commandments! For this applies to all humanity.” There are also passages in the book that give other positive intimations as to how to live—for instance, the importance of friendship is elaborated in an extended section in chapter 4, a chapter that also includes praise of wisdom. But the book is never single-minded in its approach, and constantly questions its own conclusions.

Perhaps the exploration of how we are to live, appropriate for this time of year, is what recommended the book. Sukkot is the culmination of the self-examination that began in the month leading up to the High Holy Days, and on which the High Holy Days themselves were so concerned.

There is much in life that we cannot change. We are subject to circumstance and the book reminds us that much like the seasons of the year—which bring

continued on next page

CHAPTER 3

A season is set for everything, a time for every experience under heaven: a time for being born and a time for dying, a time for planting and a time for uprooting the planted; a time for slaying and a time for healing, a time for tearing down and a time for building up; a time for weeping and a time for laughing, a time for wailing and a time for dancing; a time for throwing stones and a time for gathering stones, a time for embracing and a time for shunning embraces; a time for seeking and a time for losing, a time for keeping and a time for discarding; a time for ripping and a time for sewing, a time for silence and a time for speaking; a time for loving and a time for hating; a time for war and a time for peace.

CHAPTER 9

Go, eat your bread in gladness and drink your wine in joy; for your action was long ago approved by God. Let your clothes always be freshly washed and your head never lack ointment. Enjoy happiness with a woman you love all the fleeting days of life that have been granted to you under the sun—all your fleeting days. For that alone is what you can get out of life and out of the means you acquire under the sun. Whatever it is in your power to do, do with all your might—for there is no action, no reasoning, no learning, no wisdom in Sheol, where you are going.

פרק ג

לְכֹל זְמַן וְעֵת לְכָל־חַפְצֵי תַחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם:
עֵת לְלֵדָת וְעֵת לְמוֹת
עֵת לְטֹעַת וְעֵת לְעִקּוֹר נְטוּעֵ:
עֵת לְהַרוֹג וְעֵת לְרַפּוֹא
עֵת לְפָרוֹץ וְעֵת לְבָנוֹת:
עֵת לְבָכוֹת וְעֵת לְשָׂחוֹק
עֵת סְפוֹד וְעֵת רִקּוֹד:
עֵת לְהַשְׁלִיךְ אַבְנִים וְעֵת פְּנוֹס אַבְנִים
עֵת לְחַבּוֹק וְעֵת לְרַחֵק מִחֶבֶק:
עֵת לְבַקֵּשׁ וְעֵת לְאַבֵּד
עֵת לְשָׁמֹר וְעֵת לְהַשְׁלִיךְ:
עֵת לְקַרוֹעַ וְעֵת לְתַפּוֹר
עֵת לְחַשׂוֹת וְעֵת לְדַבֵּר:
עֵת לְאַהֲבֵב וְעֵת לְשֹׂא
עֵת מִלְחָמָה וְעֵת שְׁלוֹם:

continued from previous page
the weather associated with that time of year, whether we like it or not—much that happens to us is “decreed.” We can either accept our fate and live within its limitations, or we can fight it and be frustrated and feel that all is “futile.” The good life involves the discernment of that over which we have control of and that over which we do not. The rabbis taught that after the end of prophecy all we have is human reason. The Scroll of Ecclesiastes invites us to see that what we need to live a “good life” is an ongoing process of discernment, for which there are no easy answers.

The translation is taken from the Jewish Publication Society’s *Tanakh* (with slight adaptations to match the style of this volume).

YOUR ACTION WAS LONG AGO APPROVED BY GOD
כִּי כָבַר רָצָה הָאֱלֹהִים אֶת־מַעֲשֵׂיךָ. Two interpretations are possible: God wants us to live out our lives in all the fullness that is possible for us; or God already knows all that we might do and all that we are capable of.

IN SHEOL בְּשֵׂאוֹל. The netherworld, in ancient Israel. Israelites believed that all the dead went down to Sheol.

פרק ט

לֶךְ אֲכַל בִּשְׂמֵחָה לַחֲמֶיךָ וּשְׂתֵה בְלִב־טוֹב יַיִנְךָ כִּי כָבַר רָצָה הָאֱלֹהִים אֶת־מַעֲשֵׂיךָ: בְּכָל־עֵת יִהְיֶה בְּגִדֶיךָ לְבָנִים וְשִׁמֹן עַל־רֵאשׁוֹךְ אֶל־יַחְסָר: רְאֵה חַיִּים עִם־אִשָּׁה אֲשֶׁר־אַהַבְתָּ בְּלִימֵי חַיֵּי הַבָּלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר נָתַן־לְךָ תַחַת הַשָּׁמַשׁ כֹּל יְמֵי הַבָּלֶךְ כִּי הוּא חֶלְקְךָ בַחַיִּים וּבַעֲמֻלָּךְ אֲשֶׁר־אַתָּה עֹמֵל תַחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ: כֹּל אֲשֶׁר תַּמְצֵא יָדְךָ לַעֲשׂוֹת בְּכַחַךְ עֲשֵׂה כִּי אֵין מַעֲשֵׂה וְחֶשְׁבוֹן וְדַעַת וְחִכְמָה בְּשֵׂאוֹל אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה הֹלֵךְ שָׁמָּה:

I have further observed under the sun that
the race is not won by the swift,
nor the battle by the valiant;
nor is bread won by the wise,
nor wealth by the intelligent,
nor favor by the learned.

For the time of mischance comes to all and one cannot even know one's
time. As fishes are enmeshed in a fatal net, and as birds are trapped in a
snare, so one is caught at the time of calamity, when it comes upon you
without warning.

This thing too I observed under the sun about wisdom, and it affected
me profoundly. There was a little city, with a few people in it; and to it
came a great king, who invested it and built mighty siege works against
it. Present in the city was a poor wise man who might have saved it with
his wisdom, but nobody thought of that poor man. So I observed:

Wisdom is better than valor;
but a poor man's wisdom is scorned,
and his words are not heeded.

Words spoken softly by the wise are heeded sooner than those shouted
by a lord in folly.

Wisdom is more valuable than weapons of war, but a single error
destroys much of value.

CHAPTER 12

A further word: Against them, my child, be warned!

The making of many books is without limit, and much study is
wearying of the flesh.

The sum of the matter, when all is said and done:

Revere God and observe God's commandments!

For this applies to all humanity:

that God will call every creature to account for everything unknown,
be it good or bad.

*According to the tradition of chanting, the verse before the last is repeated, in order not
to end on the word "bad."*

Revere God and observe God's commandments!

For this applies to all humanity.

שְׁבִתִּי וְרָאָה תַּחַת־הַשָּׁמֶשׁ כִּי
לֹא לִקְלִים הַמְרוֹץ
וְלֹא לַגְּבוּרִים הַמְלַחֵמָה
וְגַם לֹא לַחֲכָמִים לֶחֶם
וְגַם לֹא לַלְּבָנִים עֵשֶׂר
וְגַם לֹא לַיְדְעִים חַן
כִּי־עֵת וּפְגַע יִקְרָה אֶת־כָּל־אֶדְמָה:

כִּי גַם לֹא־יָדַע הָאָדָם אֶת־עֵתוֹ כַּדְּגִים שֶׁנֶּאֱחָזִים
בַּמַּצּוּדָה רָעָה וְכַצְּפִרִּים הָאֲחֻזּוֹת בַּפֶּח כִּהֵם יוֹקְשִׁים
בְּנֵי הָאָדָם לַעֲת רָעָה כְּשֶׁתְּפֹל עֲלֵיהֶם פְּתָאִים:
גַּם־זֶה רְאִיתִי חֲכָמָה תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ וּגְדוּלָה הִיא אֵלַי:
עִיר קִטְנָה וְאֲנָשִׁים בָּהּ מְעַט וּבִאֲ־אֵלֶיהָ מֶלֶךְ גָּדוֹל וְסָבֵב
אֹתָהּ: וּבִנְיָה עֲלֶיהָ מְצוּדִים גְּדֹלִים: וּמִצָּא בָּהּ אִישׁ מְסֻבֵּן
חֶכֶם וּמְלֻט־הוּא אֶת־הָעִיר בְּחֲכָמָתוֹ וְאָדָם לֹא זָכַר אֶת־
הָאִישׁ הַמְּסֻבֵּן הַהוּא: וְאָמַרְתִּי אֲנִי טוֹבָה חֲכָמָה מִגְּבוּרָה
וְחֲכָמַת הַמְּסֻבֵּן בְּזוּיָהּ וּדְבָרָיו אֵינָם נִשְׁמָעִים:
דְּבָרֵי חֲכָמִים בְּנִחַת נִשְׁמָעִים מִזְעָקַת מוֹשֵׁל בְּכִסְיָלִים:
טוֹבָה חֲכָמָה מִכְּלֵי קָרֵב וְחוּטָא אֶחָד יֵאָבֵד טוֹבָה הַרְּבָה:

פרק יב

וְיִתֵּר מִהֶמָּה בְּנֵי הַזֵּהָר
עֲשׂוֹת סִפְרִים הַרְּבָה אֵין קֶץ
וְלֵהֵג הַרְּבָה יִגְעַת בְּשָׂר:
סוּף דְּבַר הַכֹּל נִשְׁמָע

אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים יִרְא וְאֶת־מְצוּתָיו שְׁמֹר
כִּי־זֶה כָּל־הָאָדָם: כִּי אֶת־כָּל־מַעֲשֵׂה הָאֱלֹהִים
יָבֵא בְּמִשְׁפָּט עַל כָּל־נַעֲלָם אִם־טוֹב וְאִם־רָע:

*According to the tradition of chanting, the verse before the last is repeated, in
order not to end on the word רָע ("bad").*

סוּף דְּבַר הַכֹּל נִשְׁמָע אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים יִרְא
וְאֶת־מְצוּתָיו שְׁמֹר כִּי־זֶה כָּל־הָאָדָם:

FOR THE TIME OF MIS-
CHANCE COMES TO ALL
כִּי־עֵת וּפְגַע יִקְרָה אֶת־כָּל־אֶדְמָה.
A euphemism for death—
that is, the limited duration
of life renders all successes
illusory.

AT THE TIME OF CALAM-
ITY לַעֲת רָעָה. Similarly, a
euphemism for death.

WORDS SPOKEN SOFTLY
בְּנִחַת נִשְׁמָעִים. Here we
see Ecclesiastes going back
and forth on the worth of
wisdom: "the poor man's
wisdom is scorned," but
"words spoken softly by
the wise are heeded." It is
as if the author is trying
to clarify for himself some
direction for life, aspects
of which prove true some
times but not others, but in
fact no direction holds true
for all of life. Wisdom lies in
knowing when and where
to apply this truth or that,
for "there is a season for
everything."