



TEXTing

a Hartman podcast hosted by Elana Stein Hain

Episode 6

Living with Contradiction

Study Guide

Elana Stein Hain and Leora Batnitzky

How to use this guide

This resource is meant as a tool to facilitate learning grounded in the sources discussed in each episode of TEXTing. The study guide includes an opening question and “The TEXT Message,” which breaks down the texts mentioned in the episode with quotes from Elana Stein Hain’s conversation with her guests and questions for conversation. Learners can listen to the episode before or after engaging with this guide or use the guide as a stand-alone tool for learning.

Episode Description

Right now, Jews are struggling to live with conflicting feelings— loyalty and dissent, compassion and rage, fear and hope. In this episode of TEXTing, Elana Stein Hain and Leora Batnitzky turn to an ancient text—Kohelet (Ecclesiastes)—as well as rabbinic interpretations, to consider how we might live and thrive amidst contradiction.

Opening Question

In rabbinic literature, the rabbis worry the themes of Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) as unbiblical, in part, as Leora Batnitzky describes, because the book concludes that human beings do little of “enduring worth.” Yet, Ecclesiastes is included in the biblical canon.

- What does “enduring worth” mean to you? Do you think human beings offer something of “enduring worth”? If so, what is it? If not, why not?
- What do you think of the idea of a biblical text being described as “unbiblical”? In your opinion, what, exactly, makes the contents of a book biblical or not?
- In the Talmudic passage that follows, the rabbis cite the internal contradictions as part of what makes Ecclesiastes questionable. What are the theological or religious implications of a religious text that contradicts itself? Do contradictions support or hinder your attempts to find religious meaning in your life?

The TEXT Message

Part I: Torah as an Anchor

1. Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 30b

מר רב יהודה בריה דרב שמואל בר שילת משמיה דרב: בקשו חכמים לגנוז ספר קהלת מפני שדבריו סותרין זה את זה. ומפני מה לא גנוזהו? — מפני שתחילתו דברי תורה וסופו דברי תורה .

Rav Yehuda, son of Rav Shmuel bar Sheilat, said in the name of Rav: The Sages sought to suppress the book of Ecclesiastes and declare it apocryphal because its statements contradict each other. And why did they not suppress it? Because its beginning consists of matters of Torah and its end consists of matters of Torah.

תחילתו דברי תורה, דכתיב: "מה יתרון לאדם בכל עמלו שיעמול תחת השמש" — ואמרי דבי רבי ינאי תחת השמש הוא דאין לו. קודם שמש — יש לו. סופו דברי תורה, דכתיב: "סוף דבר הכל נשמע את הא-להים ירא ואת מצותיו שמור כי זה כל האדם" ...

Its beginning consists of matters of Torah, as it is written: "What profit has a person of all their labor which they labor under the sun?" (Ecclesiastes 1:3), and the Sages of the school of Rabbi Yannai said: By inference: Under the sun is where a person has no profit from their labor; however, before the sun, a person does have profit.

Its ending consists of matters of Torah, as it is written: "The end of the matter, all having been heard: Fear God, and keep God's mitzvot; for this is the sum of a human being." (Ecclesiastes 12:13)...

The problem this *sugya* (section of Talmud) describes is that Ecclesiastes is full of contradictions, but Rav Yehuda, son of Rav Shmuel bar Sheilat, resolves this by saying it is okay because it is *framed* by Torah at the beginning and end of the book, making it acceptable.

- This piece of Talmud suggests that without Torah as an anchor at the beginning and end of the book of Ecclesiastes, the rabbis would have pushed Ecclesiastes further into the margins of the Jewish canon. Can you think of other examples—Jewish or not—where something has been made more acceptable by virtue of its framing?
- Elana also uses the metaphor of an anchor to describe our need for wisdom during times of upheaval. What are some anchors that have helped steady you during challenging moments—whether global, like Covid and war, or personal?

Part II: A Time to Laugh

2. Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 30b (cont.)

ומאי דבבבבב סותרין זה את זה? "כתיב: "טוב כעס משחוק", וכתיב "לשחוק אמרתי מהולל!" כתיב "ושבחתני אני את השמחה", וכתיב "ולשמחה מה זה עושה! לא קשאי" טוב כעס משחוק: טוב כעס שפועל הקדוש ברוך הוא על הצדיקים בעולם הזה, משחוק שמשחק הקדוש ברוך הוא על הרשעים בעולם הזה. "לשחוק אמרתי מהולל" — זה שחוק שמשחק הקדוש ברוך הוא עם הצדיקים בעולם הבא.

How do verses within Kohelet contradict each other? It is written: "Vexation is better than laughter" (Ecclesiastes 7:3), and it is written: "I said of laughter: It is praiseworthy" (Ecclesiastes 2:2).

Likewise in one verse it is written: "So I commended mirth." (Ecclesiastes 8:15), and in another verse it is written: "And of mirth: What does it accomplish?" (Ecclesiastes 2:2).

This is not difficult, as the contradiction can be resolved. "Vexation is better than laughter" means: The vexation of God toward the righteous in this world is preferable to the laughter which God laughs with the wicked in this world by showering them with goodness.

"I said of laughter: It is praiseworthy," means that is the laughter which God laughs with the righteous in the World-to-Come.

"ושבחתני אני את השמחה" — שמחה של מצוה. "ולשמחה מה זה עושה" — זו שמחה שאינה של מצוה. ללמדך שאין שכינה שורה לא מתוך עצבות ולא מתוך עצלות ולא מתוך שחוק ולא מתוך קלות ראש ולא מתוך שיחה ולא מתוך דברים בטלים, אלא מתוך דבר שמחה של מצוה...

Similarly, "So I commended mirth," that is the joy of a mitzvah. "And of mirth: What does it accomplish?" that is joy that is not the joy of a mitzvah. This teaches that the Divine Presence rests upon an individual not from an atmosphere of sadness, laziness, laughter, frivolity, idle conversation, idle chatter, but rather from an atmosphere imbued with the joy of a mitzvah...

In this part of the *sugya*, the rabbis jump back and forth through passages of Ecclesiastes to support their claim that it contains contradictions. Leora agrees with the rabbis that these contradictions about anger and joy are embedded in the text, but for her, Ecclesiastes is trying to point out that there are different responses appropriate for different contexts, so, yes, sometimes anger is more appropriate than laughter and sometimes the reverse.

- Elana takes this idea and applies it to what many are feeling right now, which are competing and overwhelming emotions that are bubbling up—often in the same day or even in the same hour. Do you relate to this experience? If so, how?
- Since October 7th, many people have celebrated milestones—welcoming children, celebrating marriages, promotions, birthdays, and more—amid collective grief and fear. How have you navigated your emotional experiences in these different contexts? Have you encountered any rituals or framings that have helped you find balance?
- Ecclesiastes addresses the fact that the righteous can experience suffering and the wicked can be rewarded. In this conversation, the rabbis offer a theology to explain this by saying God causes the righteous to suffer in this world, but will laugh with them in the World to Come. Elana says the rabbis “want to tether you back to something that is going to give you a sense of hope and a sense of stability.” How do you relate to this theology of waiting to be rewarded in the World to Come?
- Leora describes the rabbis being challenged by the emphasis on joy in Ecclesiastes and how to understand joy in the context of a religious life. What role does joy play in your Judaism or Jewish life? The rabbis describe God as being present with an individual who experiences joy from fulfilling *mitzvot*. Have you ever accessed what Elana calls “meaningful joy”?

Part III: Answering the Fool

3. Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 30b (cont.)

וְאִם סֵפֶר מְשָׁלִי בִקְשׁוֹ לְגַנוֹז שֶׁהָיוּ דְבָרָיו סוֹתְרִין זֶה אֶת זֶה. וּמִפְּנֵי מָה לֹא גִנְזוּהוּ? אָמְרֵי: סֵפֶר קִהְלֵת לֹא עֵינֵינוּ וְאִשְׁכַּחֲנוּ טַעְמָא? הֲכָא נָמִי לִיעֵיין. וּמֵאֵי דְבָרָיו סוֹתְרִים זֶה אֶת זֶה? — כְּתִיב "אֵל תַּעַן כְּסִיל כְּאֻלְתּוֹ", וּכְתִיב: "עֲנֵה כְּסִיל כְּאֻלְתּוֹ". לֹא קִשְׁיָא: הָא בְּדַבְרֵי תוֹרָה, הָא בְּמִלֵּי דְעַלְמָא.

And the Sages sought to suppress the book of Proverbs as well because its statements contradict each other. And why did they not suppress it? They said: In the case of the book of Ecclesiastes, didn't we analyze it and find an explanation that its statements were not contradictory? Here too, let us analyze it. In what way do its statements contradict each other? On the one hand, it is written: "Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you also be like him" (Proverbs 26:4), and on the other hand, it is written: "Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes" (Proverbs 26:5).

This is not difficult, as this, where one should answer a fool, is referring to a case where the fool is making claims about Torah matters; whereas that, where one should not answer him, is referring to a case where the fool is making claims about mundane matters.

The contradiction raised about Proverbs (Mishlei) is different from Ecclesiastes. In Proverbs, the contradiction is in how you relate to others. The question of when and how to engage in debate—especially in the current climate of different opinions and toxicity—is essential and, as Elana notes, it “belongs in our psyche.”

- **Leora says the challenge is to ascertain when something is a Torah matter (a case where one should answer the “fool”) and when it does not count as a Torah matter (in which case one should not answer). How do you make decisions on when to engage and when to disengage from conversation with different people?**

Synthesis

Elana summarizes the conversation by highlighting these key themes:

1. Contradictions are a feature of Ecclesiastes (and the human experience), not a bug as the rabbis initially feared.
2. It is essential to have the ability to anchor oneself in something, even amidst (or because of) contradictions. Similarly, it is necessary to find meaningful joy, even amongst the difficulties of reality.
3. We need to ask ourselves the question of where we are feeling contradictions in our own emotional experiences and where we encounter contradictions when interacting with others.

Leora closes by sharing the primary contradiction she is experiencing right now, which is between despair and anger. She defines despair as feeling unable to do anything about a given situation, while anger is the sense that things *should* be otherwise and something should be done about it. She also describes Ecclesiastes as being animated by the question of how much control we have over our own lives, noting that, while Ecclesiastes teaches there is a “time for everything,” Ecclesiastes is unclear about our ability to determine the *right* time for every season.

- **Do you share Leora’s experience of being pulled between despair and anger (or somehow feeling both at once)? Are there other emotions or lenses through which you have experienced the last five months that seem contradictory? How have you navigated the dissonance? What has helped anchor you?**
- **While we may not have control over most circumstances surrounding us, Leora shares that we do have the ability to control our response. What do you do when a situation feels out of your control? Describe a way you have navigated your response in a situation where it feels out of control.**
- **Ultimately, these excerpts from Tractate Shabbat conclude that we must live with contradictions. In fact, not only is Ecclesiastes kept in the biblical canon, but it becomes a fixed part of our liturgy, read each year during Sukkot. The rabbis employ several approaches to responding to the contradictions of Ecclesiastes, including anchoring the text in Torah, articulating a specific theology, and contextualizing the contradictions. What are your strategies for living with contradictions?**

Text for further study

Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) Rabbah 7:3

טוב כְּעַס מְשֻׁחָק, אָמַר שְׁלֵמָה אֱלוֹ כְּעַס אֲבָא עַל אֲדוֹנָיָהּ קִמְעָא, טוֹב הָיָה לוֹ מְשֻׁחָק שֶׁשְׁחָקָה עָלָיו מִדַּת הַדָּיֹן, לָמָּה, כִּי בָרַע פְּנִים יֵיטֵב לָב, אֱלוֹ הָרַע לוֹ פְּנִים הִבִּיאֻ לְמוֹטָב, אֶלְא, (מלכים א א, ו) :

וְלֹא עָצְבוּ אָבוֹ מִיָּמָיו. וְכֵן אֲמָנוֹן, טוֹב הָיָה לוֹ אִם כָּעֵס דָּוִד אֲבָא עַל אֲמָנוֹן קִמְעָא, מִשְׁחֹק שְׂשֻׁחָקָה עָלָיו מִדַּת הַדִּין, וְלָמָּה, כִּי בָרַע פָּנִים יִיטֵב לֵב, אֶלְא (שְׂמוּאֵל ב יג, לב): כִּי אֲמָנוֹן לָבְדוּ מִתּוֹ. דְּבַר אַחֲרָי, טוֹב כָּעֵס מִשְׁחֹק, טוֹב הָיָה אֵלָיו כָּעֵס הַקְּדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא עַל דּוֹר הַמְּבֹוּל, מִשְׁחֹק שְׂשֻׁחָקָה עָלֵיהֶם מִדַּת הַדִּין, שְׂנַיָּאֵר (אִיּוֹב כֵּא, ח): זֶרְעָם נָכוֹן לְפָנֵיהֶם. דְּבַר אַחֲרָי, טוֹב כָּעֵס מִשְׁחֹק, טוֹב שְׂשֻׁחָקָה הַקְּדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא כּוֹעֵס עַל הַסְּדוּמִים מִשְׁחֹק שְׂשֻׁחָקָה עָלֵיהֶם מִדַּת הַדִּין, שְׂנַיָּאֵר (אִיּוֹב כֵּא, ח): בְּתֵיהֶם שְׁלוֹם מִפְּחַד וְגו'.

“Anger is better than laughter, as with a cross countenance the heart will be bettered” (Ecclesiastes 7:3).

“Anger is better than laughter.” Solomon said: Had [my] father been a little angry at Adoniya, it would have been better for him than the laughter with which the attribute of justice mocked him. Why? It is because “with a cross countenance the heart will be bettered.” Had he shown him a cross countenance, he would have caused him to better his ways. Instead, “his father had never aggrieved him” (I Kings 1:6). Likewise, regarding Amnon, had David his father been a little angry with him, it would have been better for him than the laughter with which the attribute of justice mocked him. Why? It is because “with a cross countenance the heart will be bettered.” Instead, “Amnon alone is dead” (II Samuel 13:32).

Another matter, “anger is better than laughter” – had the Holy One blessed be He been angry at the generation of the flood, it would have been better than the laughter with which the attribute of justice mocked them, as it is stated: “Their offspring are established before them” (Job 21:8). Another matter, “anger is better than laughter” – had the Holy One blessed be He been angry at the Sodomites, it would have been better than the laughter with which the attribute of justice mocked them, as it is stated: “Their houses are safe, without fear” (Job 21:9).