



Living with Contradiction

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March 25, 2024

I. The Rabbis Discuss Kohelet (Ecclesiastes)	1
1. Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 30b	1
II. The Rabbis Discuss Mishlei (Proverbs)	2
2. Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 30b (cont.)	2
III. Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) Rabbah	2
3. Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) Rabbah 7:3	2

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I. The Rabbis Discuss Kohelet (Ecclesiastes)

1. Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 30b

אמר רב יהודה בריה דרב שמואל בר שילת משמיה דרב: בקשו חכמים לגנוז ספר קהלת מפני שדבריו סותרין זה את זה. ומפני מה לא גזוהו? — 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 האלהים 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)...

ומאי "דבריו סותרין זה את זה"? כתיב: "טוב פעם משחוק", וכתיב "לשחוק אמרתי מהולל"! כתיב "ושבחתי אני את השמחה", וכתיב "ולשמחה מה זה עושה! לא קשיא "טוב פעם משחוק": טוב פעם שפועל הקדוש ברוך הוא על הצדיקים בעולם הזה, משחוק שמשחק הקדוש ברוך הוא על הרשעים בעולם הזה. ו"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.

"וְשִׂבְחִי אֲנִי אֶת הַשְּׂמֵחָה" — שְׂמֵחָה שֶׁל מִצְוָה. "וְלִשְׂמֵחָה מָה זֶה עוֹשֶׂה" — זוֹ שְׂמֵחָה שֶׁאֵינָה שֶׁל מִצְוָה. לְלַמֵּד שֶׁאֵין שְׂכִינָה שׁוֹרָה לֹא מִתּוֹךְ עֲצוּבוֹת וְלֹא מִתּוֹךְ עֲצָלוֹת וְלֹא מִתּוֹךְ שִׁחּוֹק וְלֹא מִתּוֹךְ קְלוּת רֹאשׁ וְלֹא מִתּוֹךְ שִׂיחָה וְלֹא מִתּוֹךְ דְּבָרִים בְּטִלִּים, אֲלָא מִתּוֹךְ דְּבַר שְׂמֵחָה שֶׁל מִצְוָה ...

Similarly, "So I commended mirth," that is the joy of a mitzva. "And of mirth: What does it accomplish?" that is joy that is not the joy of a mitzva. 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 mitzva...

II. The Rabbis Discuss Mishlei (Proverbs)

2. Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 30b (cont.)

וְאִם סֵפֶר מְשָׁלִי בְקִשׁוֹ לְגַנוּז שֶׁהָיוּ דְּבָרָיו סוֹתְרִין זֶה אֶת זֶה. וּמִפְּנֵי מָה לֹא גִנְזוּהוּ? אָמְרֵי: סֵפֶר קְהָלֶת לֹא עֵינֵינוּ וְאִשְׁפָּחִינוּ טַעֲמָא? הֲכֹא נָמִי לִיעֵינִין. וּמֵאֵי דְּבָרָיו סוֹתְרִים זֶה אֶת זֶה? — כְּתִיב "אַל תַּעַן כְּסִיל כְּאוֹלְתוֹ", וּכְתִיב: "עֲנֵה כְּסִיל כְּאוֹלְתוֹ". לֹא קִשְׁיָא: הֲאֵל בְּדַבְרֵי תוֹרָה, הֲאֵל בְּמִילֵי דְעֻלְמָא.

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.

III. Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) Rabbah

3. Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) Rabbah 7:3

טוֹב כְּעַס מְשִׁחּוֹק, אָמַר שְׁלֹמֹה אֱלוֹ כְּעַס אֲבָא עַל אֲדוֹנֵיהּ קַמְעָא, טוֹב הִיָּה לוֹ מְשִׁחּוֹק שֶׁשְׂחָקָה עָלָיו מִדַּת הַדִּין, לָמָּה, כִּי בָרַע פְּנִים יֵיטֵב לָב, אֱלוֹ הֲרַע לוֹ פְּנִים הֵבִיאוּ לְמוֹטָב, אֲלָא, (מַלְכִים א א, ו): וְלֹא עֲצָבוּ אָבִיו מִיָּמָיו. וְכֹן אֲמַנּוּ, טוֹב הִיָּה לוֹ אִם כְּעַס דְּוֹד אֲבָא עַל אֲמָנוֹן קַמְעָא, מְשִׁחּוֹק שֶׁשְׂחָקָה עָלָיו מִדַּת הַדִּין, וְלָמָּה, כִּי בָרַע פְּנִים יֵיטֵב לָב, אֲלָא (שְׁמוּאֵל ב יג, לב): כִּי אֲמָנוֹן לְבַדּוֹ מֵת. דְּבַר אַחֵר, טוֹב כְּעַס מְשִׁחּוֹק, טוֹב הִיָּה אֱלוֹ כְּעַס הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ

הוא על דור המבול, משחוק ששחקה עליהם מדת הדין, שפנאמר (איוב כא, ח) : זרעם נכון לפניהם. דבר אחר, טוב כעס משחוק, טוב שהיה הקדוש ברוך הוא כועס על הסדומים משחוק ששחקה עליהם מדת הדין, שפנאמר (איוב כא, ח) : בתיהם שלום מפחד וגו'.

“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).