

ECCLESIASTES, FLEETING AND TIMELESS

PART II

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The reading of *hevel* as "vanity" is not only misleading, but in some cases it makes the text impossible to read. Perhaps the most striking example can be found in the book's ninth chapter, where Kohelet discusses the value of love in one's life. *View life with a woman you have come to love – all the days of your transitory life [kol yemei hayei hevlecha] which he has gifted you under the sun – every fleeting day. For this is your share in life . . . (9:9).* Read the traditional way, the verse is difficult to parse. It would sound something like, *Live joyfully . . . all the days of your vain life.* Life is vanity, so enjoy love? The verse makes far better sense if *hevel* is translated as "fleeting," focusing on life's brevity: Cherish your time together, for life is fleeting, and therefore precious. Then is your love that much more meaningful.

Understanding *hevel* in this sense is also crucial to understanding the passage, in the book's eighth chapter, which deals with the concept of injustice in the world. Read the traditional way, Kohelet explains, *Then I saw the wicked buried, who had come and gone from the place of holiness, and they were forgotten in the city where they had so done.* This, he concludes, is *vanity* (8:10). Again, this is a difficult read: Why is it considered vanity if evildoers are forgotten? The verse makes far more sense if we understand it to relate to the illusory, temporary nature of evil's success: Kohelet reassures us that setbacks to justice are transient, and that evil will not prevail in the final round: *It is of the fleeting nature of the world, that some righteous receive what befits the acts of evildoers, while some evildoers receive what befits the righteous; this too, I say, is only temporary* (8:14).

It is only through the corrected reading of *hevel* as "transience" rather than "vanity" that we may understand the structure of the book of Ecclesiastes, and thereby learn its message. For Ecclesiastes does not offer a single, static

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teaching from beginning to end, but a thematic progression, one that follows Kohelet's own discovery of meaning.

The book can be seen as consisting of three parts. The initial stage, covering the first five chapters of the book (starting at 1:12), is characterized by frustration with the transience of life: Kohelet bemoans the fact that all achievements are short-lived. He is bitter about the transience of human contentment (2:1-3), riches (2:4-11), physical existence (3:18-21), and corrective social remedies (Chapter 4). Stylistically, this stage is characterized by the juxtapositions of the term *hevel* with words of despair and tragedy. Though not all references to transience, even at this early stage, are decidedly negative, most are. It is in this first part that we learn why Kohelet "hated life," for he has discovered that all one's worldly achievements are, like man himself, in the end but dust and ashes: *For what has a man for all his work, and for his mind's notions, which he works at under the sun?* (2:22).

It is this bitter discovery of mortality that propels Kohelet on his quest for meaning. We are reminded of Franz Rosenzweig's words that "All cognition of the All originates in death, in the fear of death."¹ Or of the story of the young Siddhartha, the first Buddha, who lived in India just a few centuries after Solomon. His privileged upbringing, comparable to Solomon's own, shielded him from the reality of the outside world; Siddhartha embarked on his spectacular spiritual journey "to find the real meaning of life and death"² only after his first confrontation with age, illness, and mortality. Kohelet's quest, as well, is triggered by the traumatic realization of human transience – that the greatest efforts of the wisest king cannot stop the flow of time, nor can they eliminate suffering and injustice from the world.

Dejection soon gives way to acceptance, however, as the book enters its second stage, starting at 6:4 and running through Chapter 7, in which Kohelet begins to view the ephemeral nature of reality more philosophically.³ Combined phrases such as *transient and grievous* (4:8) are completely abandoned in this section, less than halfway through the book. The neutrality of the six appearances of *hevel* in this stage is typified by the example of temporary flattery: *The cheers of the ignorant, we read, are like the crackling thorns under a pot; all so temporary, too* (7:6). Kohelet loses no sleep over the fickle nature of fools' praise and fleeting popularity. Having resigned

himself to transience, he has come to recognize that it may not be inherently bad after all. This is expressed most vividly in the verses describing the stillborn child:

If a man fathers a hundred children and lives many years, so that the days of his years are many, but gains no pleasure from his riches, nor proper burial for himself, I say that a stillborn child is better off than he – for in transience it comes [behevel], in oblivion it departs, in the dark a lid is cast over its name. Though it has not seen or known of the sun, it has more peace than that man. Even if he lives a thousand years twice – but has not seen goodness. Do not all go to one place? (6:3-6).

Again we see that the word *hevel* holds the key to interpreting the passage. For if the stillborn child comes in "futility" or "vanity," how could his situation in any way be described as better off? If, however, we understand *behevel* to mean "in transience," the passage instead becomes a somber acceptance of the objective fact of mortality. Kohelet teaches that, indeed, temporal existence is not an end in itself. The attitude of this stage is in some sense reminiscent of the afterlife-centered attitudes of Christianity and Eastern thought: A long, successful existence in the world, without merit, is worse than no physical life at all.

Support for this interpretation can be found in the rabbinic literature, in a midrash that relates this passage directly to the story of Cain and Abel: "If a man fathers a hundred children' -- this refers to Cain, who had a hundred sons but gained no satisfaction from his wealth or the goodness of the world . . . 'A stillborn is better'-- this refers to his brother Abel."⁴ For the stillborn is born in *hevel*. In Kohelet's view, man is disparaged not because fleeting life is itself unworthy, but because he has made it so by virtue of his actions. It is better, then, to have the most transient existence of Abel, whose life was short but exemplary, than the misery of Cain, whose long life became a curse.

The third stage covers the last four chapters of the book. By this point, *hevel* has lost any trace of the negativity which it carried in the early chapters. It is never tied to a second word – never "transience and . . ." together with something distasteful. On the contrary, in these final chapters, all uses of *hevel* are associated, directly or indirectly, with joy, or *simha*.

The examples are too pervasive to ignore. In one case, as we have seen, Kohelet refers to the transience of injustice: While evildoers may succeed, their success is only temporary. This knowledge, however, is linked directly with Kohelet's own happiness at the fact: *Therefore*, he concludes, *I prized joy* [hasimha]. The same holds true in his statements about the transience of youth. *Youth and virility are fleeting*, he famously declares, yet only after admonishing his reader to "rejoice [semah]." A similar point is made in the context of fleeting love: *Live with a woman you love all the fleeting days of your life*, he suggests but only immediately after having told his reader to *Go, eat your bread with joy* [besimha] (8:15, 11:9-12, 9:7-9). Indeed, only a few verses before the end of the book, the link between transience and joy becomes explicit, even emphatic: *Even if one lives many long years, he should rejoice* [yismah] *in them all, heeding the days of darkness, for they shall be many; all that transpires is fleeting* [hevel] (11:8).

From the first stage, then, in which *hevel* was but a small step from tragedy and evil, it is now never far from happiness. Thus the third stage represents a surprising turn. In it we find exuberant affirmations of life, and the joy and wisdom that it can bring. Kohelet has now learned, and seeks to teach, the deeper lesson of *hevel*: Transience as inspiration.

This lesson is later echoed in other systems of thought. Nowhere is it clearer, perhaps, than in the words of the Buddha: "This existence of ours is as transient as autumn clouds. To watch the birth and death of beings is like looking at the movements of a dance. A lifetime is a flash of lightning in the sky. Rushing by like a torrent down a steep mountain." This insight, according to the Buddha's last sermon, has the most profound impact on our lives. "By always thinking about the transience of your life, you will be able to resist greed and anger, and will be able to avoid all evils."⁵

In our own text, the wisest of Israel's kings realizes that not only good fortune and success, but also sorrow, power, jealousy, and oppression are all, in the end, fleeting. It is this realization that opens the doors to redemption. The true spirit of this third stage is crystalized in the following passage:

Go, eat your bread with joy, drink your wine with a content mind; for God has already graced your deeds Whatever you find in your power to do, do it. For there are no deeds, no contriving, no knowledge, and no wisdom in the abyss you are bound for (9:7-10).

Like fleeting cherry blossoms, almost sacredly ephemeral, the transience of *hevel* inspires Kohelet's existential transformation. It encapsulates the beauty of sunsets, autumn leaves, or the Impressionist's fascination with fleeting light. For it is precisely the transience of these things that moves us. By understanding the fleeting nature of life as a whole, Kohelet is no longer paralyzed by the burden of death. Life's transience is dynamically transformed into a powerful motivational force: An urgency to live, to experience joy, to take action, and above all, to learn. The key to embracing transience, Kohelet discovers, is not to build monuments or expand empires, but to find the truth and inner understanding that flows from the eye-opening insight into the fleeting nature of it all.

Kohelet thus ends his quest by affirming the absolute value of mortal existence. In this way he resolves the existential frustration that tormented him at the beginning of the book: While Jewish tradition undoubtedly accepts the idea of an afterlife, it is never to be allowed to take over our consciousness. To the end, life itself must remain the focus of man's existence.

An appreciation for joy grows steadily out of such an understanding. In truth, Judaism has long recognized its spiritual value. For example, the Talmud teaches that Divine inspiration cannot be attained in a state of sadness, for it dwells only in a mind that has trained itself in joy.⁶ Many centuries later, the Hasidic sage Rabbi Nahman of Breslav taught that it is a great thing always to be in a state of joy. As Kohelet writes: *Rejoice, O lad, in your childhood, let your mind elevate you in the days of your youth . . . clear your mind of grievance and relieve your body of harm . . .* (11:9-10). To Kohelet, joy is not a consolation prize, or an elixir for life's pains. Neither is it related to the promise of a life to come. Rather, joy is a value in and of itself; it is what it means to be truly alive.⁷

Yet even joy, it seems, is not the final destination for Kohelet. Ultimately, if there is an underlying message in the Book of Ecclesiastes, it is this: That only in understanding the transience of life do we attain the beginning of wisdom; and in turn, only through the wisdom derived from our experience of life may we in some way take part in that which is eternal. The importance of wisdom is mentioned repeatedly in Ecclesiastes: *Wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness* (2:13); *Wisdom preserves the lives of its possessors*

(7:12); *Wisdom empowers the wise* (7:19); *A man's wisdom illuminates his face, and its power is transformed* (8:1). Moreover, Kohelet refers to man's judgment before God when one inevitably leaves this world. It is in this context that he provides his most important conclusion regarding the nature of wisdom: *I say, dwell upon the King's commandment, and discourse of God's covenant He who follows the commands will avoid misconceptions; come the hour of judgment, he will know a wise mind* (8:2-5).⁸ Kohelet realizes that true wisdom is the one thing that is not dependent on transient circumstances. Yet all of the transient circumstances in this world serve as the means of acquiring it. This was the meaning of Abel's life, which served as the inspiration for the Book of Ecclesiastes.⁹

This ultimate lesson – fleeting life yielding eternal truth – touches on the very core of the Bible's imagery. It is found in the Book of Exodus, at the very point where Moses begins his own spiritual path. A shepherd like his forefathers, he is tending his flock when he comes across an amazing revelation: *And the Angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire from the midst of a bush. So he looked, and behold, the bush was burning with fire, but the bush was not consumed. Then Moses said, 'I will now turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush does not burn . . . '* (Ex. 3:2-3). In the burning bush, Moses perceived the powerful image of ephemeral, physical existence sustaining in it a fire of the eternal, two realities which seemingly cannot coexist but in truth are inseparable. Moses would himself come to resemble this image, when, having heard the word of God on Mount Sinai, descending from the mountain, now his own temporal, fleeting body radiating the eternal light.¹⁰ Indeed, the Zohar affirms this connection when it states that Moses was a reincarnation of Abel.¹¹ This parable linking Abel with the greatest biblical prophet validates the hidden promise of *hevel*, which, as we have seen, is Ecclesiastes' central innovation. *Fleeting transience*, concludes Kohelet, *fleeting transience, it is all thin air*. Yet at the core of such thorny transience, we find a timeless flame.

Everything but wisdom is transient, teaches the king, and history has proven him right. Neither Solomon's riches, nor his power, nor even his monumental Temple in Jerusalem survived under the sun. What has indeed lasted, however, is the legacy of his wisdom, embodied in the Book of Ecclesiastes. This belief in knowledge as the highest form of spirituality has

served as the Jewish torch throughout the ages. And no small measure of that light is reflected in the understanding that only ideas can defy time, transforming the world.

NOTES

1. Franz Rosenzweig, *Star of Redemption*, trans. William Hallo (Notre Dame: Notre Dame, 1985) p. 3.
2. See "The Legend of the Buddha Shakyamuni," in *Buddhist Scriptures* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1959) pp. 39-40.
3. Here Kohelet also begins to discuss the relativity of theories of knowledge (Ecclesiastes 6:8-12).
4. Kohelet Rabba 6:3.
5. As quoted by Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche; "The Last Teaching of the Buddha," in *The Teaching of the Buddha*, 128th revised edition (Tokyo: Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai, 1986) accessed via trang.quoc.org/TheTeachingOfBuddha.htm.10.
6. "The Divine Presence does not rest among men in their sadness . . . but in their joy of the following of the commandments," Shabbat 30b; and "The Holy Spirit dwells only in a heart filled with gladness," Yerushalmi Succah 5:1.
7. This is reminiscent, as well, of Aristotle's "perfect condition" (cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book X).
8. Although the concept of *davar* or *lev* lie beyond the scope of this essay, the translation of these verses relies on an understanding of the terms as *consistent* references to "teaching" (or "saying") and "mind," respectively. These terms highlight Ecclesiastes' advanced epistemology in verses such as 1:8,10, 5:1-2, 6:10-11, 8:1, and 12:13' cf. Genesis 11:1.
9. It is interesting to note that the two biblical books attributed to Solomon, Proverbs and the Song of Songs, also have as a central focus the affirmation of youthful love and joy, and of wisdom, respectively.
10. Exodus 34:30-35.
11. Zohar 3:106a. This parable also draws on a sense of morality. Unlike Cain, and for that matter Adam, who toil on inanimate soil, Abel was the first to pursue an inter-subjective vocation, which tended to other living beings. Furthermore, through his death humanity learned, for the first time, of man's moral obligation toward his fellow. This was a central element of Abel's spirituality, and it is also manifest in Moses' extraordinary care for the weakest of his lambs, which according to the Midrash, resulted in God's entrusting Moses with his own flock, the people of Israel.