

## Exploring Materialism, Vanity & Frivolity in Kohelet

# When All You Have Isn't Enough: *Materialism in Kohelet*

“So, what would have been so terrible if I had a small fortune?” sings Tevya in *Fiddler on the Roof*? Indeed, what would have been so terrible? If we regard this as a serious rather than rhetorical question, we might turn to Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in his *Letters to the Next Generation*. There he wrote that, “What the financial collapse should teach us is that we were becoming obsessed with money: salaries, bonuses, the cost of houses, and the expensive luxuries we could live without. *When money rules, we remember the price of things and forget the value of things.*” This may explain the important statement of Rabbi Ilui in BT *Eruvin* 65b: “A person is recognized through three things: his cup, his purse and his anger.” One of the ways we are known is by the way in which we spend money. Money can make us more generous and charitable.

But it can also surface miserly or greedy tendencies or make us overly materialistic and unhappy with what we do have. Yes, Tevya, sometimes it is terrible to have a small fortune.

The Biblical book that perhaps addresses materialism with the greatest degree of candor and honesty is Kohelet. Chapter two is an experiment in hedonism. What if one could buy anything one wanted and more? How would that change and shape one's personal identity? Kohelet engages in these questions without apology:

הגדלתי מעשי בניתי לי בתים נטעתי לי כרמים.  
*I multiplied my possessions. I built myself  
houses and I planted vineyards*  
Eccl. 2:4

He describes the status items he purchases in great detail and then arrives at a conclusion to his study:

וכל אשר שאלו עיני לא אצלתי מהם לא מנעתי



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את לבי מכל שמחה כי לבי שמה מכל עמלי וזה  
היה חלקי מכל עמלי.

*I withheld from my eyes nothing they asked  
for, and denied myself no enjoyment; rather,  
I got enjoyment out of all my wealth. And  
that was all I got out of my wealth.*

Eccl. 2:10

Kohelet indulges himself and then admits that he enjoyed himself, but his hedonism offered nothing more than temporal pleasure. It could not buy him lasting happiness. Expecting that it can is an error of judgment.

Kohelet addresses this problem directly a few chapters later in some of the most cited verses in the book:

אהב כסף לא ישבע כסף ומי אהב בהמון לא תבואה גם זה הבל. ברבות הטובה רבו אוכליה ומיה כשרון לבטלה כי אם ראות עיניו.  
*A lover of money never has his fill of money, nor a lover of wealth his fill of income. That too is futile. As his substance increases, so do those who consume it; what, then, does the success of its owner amount to but feasting his eyes?*

**Eccl. 5:9-10**

The more money one has, the more money one wants, the less satisfaction one has, the more others want. Rabbi Sacks confronts this issue as well in *Letters to the Next Generation*: “The financial collapse happened because people borrowed money they didn’t have, to buy things they didn’t need, to achieve happiness that wouldn’t last.” He goes so far as to say that consumerism is a “mechanism for creating and distributing unhappiness.” He diagnoses our unprecedented affluence as the source of our unprecedented levels of stress and depression.

Kohelet has other thoughts about the limits of materialism that appear throughout the *sefer*. While he acknowledges the role that money plays in enjoyment, he also regards the

acquisition of it as a waste of time:

ופניתני אני בכל מעשי שעשו ידי ובעמל שעמלתי לעשות ונהנה הכל הבל ורעות רוח ואין יתרון תחת השמש.  
*Then my thoughts turned to all the fortune my hands had built up, to the wealth I had acquired and won—and oh, it was all futile and pursuit of wind; there was no real value under the sun!*  
**Eccl. 2:11**

Later on in the chapter, in verses 18 and 19, Kohelet turns his attention to the foolishness of laboring and obtaining wealth to pass on to the next generation when it is unclear if a wise or a foolish descendant will be the inheritor. This same sentiment is repeated in chapter 4, verse 8.

Hoarding money, however, is also a bad idea, Kohelet confesses in 5:12-13, because then the one who earned it gets no benefit from it at all:

יש רעה אשר ראיתי תחת השמש ורבה היא על האדם. איש אשר יתן לו האלקים עשר ונכסים וקבוד ואיננו חסר לנפשו מפל אשר יתאנה ולא ישליטנו האלקים לאכל ממנו כי איש נכרי יאכלנו זה הבל וחרלי רע הוא.  
*There is an evil I have observed under the sun, and a grave one it is for man: that God sometimes grants a man riches, property, and wealth, so that he does not want for anything his appetite may crave, but God does not permit him to enjoy it; instead, a stranger will enjoy it. That is futility and a grievous ill.*

**Eccl. 6:1-2**

Kohelet neither advises financial restraint nor judges financial excesses. Instead, he reminds readers that it is

ill-advised to think money can provide meaning. Chasing profit is often a wasteful use of time and attention, and there are unintended complications when it goes unspent or lands in the wrong hands. The sobering perspective he offers, however, does not minimize its necessity. Author and economist Meir Tamari concludes in his book *With All Your Possessions: Jewish Ethics and Economic Life* that: “Judaism acknowledges the legitimate satisfaction of man’s basic needs, provided that these needs are fulfilled within the framework of morality and justice set up by religious law.” Tamari observes that, “Man’s economic desires are treated by Judaism in exactly the same way as all other basic human needs: as legitimate, permissible, and beneficial, but restricted, educated, and sanctified by observance of God’s commandments.”

One of the unusual features of the book is that Kohelet never directly advises the giving of *tzedaka* or any useful contribution money can make to ameliorate the lives of others or to engage in more spiritual pursuits. This we leave to Teyve who tells us what he would do if he had more money: “If I were rich, I’d have the time that I lack to sit in the synagogue and pray. And maybe have a seat by the Eastern wall. And I’d discuss the holy books with the learned men, several hours every day. That would be the sweetest thing of all.”



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