

Becoming Religiously Antifragile

Shabbat Chol ha-Moed Sukkot 5779

I.

RABBI SHMUEL B. MEIR, the 11th-century French Tosafist better known by his acronym Rashbam, is easily the most daring traditional biblical commentator. Following in the footsteps of his grandfather Rashi, Rashbam seeks to explain *peshuto shel mikra*, the literal meaning of the text. But the difference is that, unlike Rashi who favors the Jewish interpretation of a given verse, Rashbam is happy to argue that Biblical verses don't teach what we take them to mean – with his most famous example being the verses we see as commanding *tefillin*. For Rashbam, though men are biblically obligated in wearing tefillin, the verses themselves do not actually intend for us to wear them.

And it's comments like this that have led some in the Orthodox world to the following formulation: while Rashi is *kulo emet*, everything that he writes is true, and Ramban is *rubo emet*, most of what he writes is true; Ibn Ezra is *rubo sheker*, mostly false, and Rashbam is *kulo sheker* – not a single word of his commentary is correct. But I disagree. There is tremendous insight to Rashbam's commentary.

Which brings us to his commentary on Kohelet, the megillah we will read in just a few moments. As I mentioned last year, Kohelet is one of the most controversial biblical works: that it encourages the reader to *וְהִלֵּךְ בְּדַרְכֵי לִבְךָ* “follow the desires of your heart” (11:9) in full awareness that this is against the will of God, delights in the pursuit of pleasure, and is suffused with nihilism, makes it a questionable sefer to include in the canon. Indeed, the *gemara* in *Masekhet Shabbat* (30b) records *Chazal's* concern with canonizing Kohelet:

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

In other words, Kohelet is *rubo sheker*, mostly false – mostly devoid of *divrei torah*, teachings that we should internalize – but because of its beginning and end, which are *divrei torah* because they declare beliefs in consonance with other biblical books, Kohelet is religiously valuable.

And, as you read through Kohelet you'll understand *Chazal's* concern – there are many pieces of questionable advice. That is right until the end, where the *megillah* declares (12:13):

סוף דבר הכל נשמע את האלהים ירא ואת מצותיו שמור...

Regardless of all else, at the end of the day one must revere God and observe His commandments!

This verse redeems the whole sefer! Ignore the stuff before – just follow God and observe his mitzvot! But, as Rashbam comments just a few verses earlier in verse 8, pre-empting the views of modern biblical scholars:

עכשיו נשלם הספר, ואותן אשר סדרוהו אמרו מיכאן ולהבא.

Now the book is completed. Those who edited it speak from now on.

Those redeeming verses – they’re not original to Kohelet. Kohelet was edited – and several verses were included at the end and also, crucially, as Rashbam argues in another comment, at the beginning. In other words, the very verses that *Chazal* believe redeem Kohelet are the very verses not original to it! We should see it as *kulo sheker!* As full of falsehood! We should (after Shabbat) rip it out of the *chumash!* Burn it! It goes against our religious values! And, at the same time, we should lament editorial overreach: that an editor added to the text to blunt its message is a sad example of censorship.

How can we, in good conscience, sit here and read a false work that was edited? That had its provocative message blunted?

II.

I have quoted in the past the Atlantic article by Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt entitled *The Coddling of the American Mind*. And being a big *chassid* of Haidt, I was excited when they recently released a book of the same name expanding their arguments from the original article.

Their thesis is simple: there are currently three false ideas, or, as they call them, “untruths,” resting at the heart of many in America, that are particularly pernicious on the extremes of the political spectrum and are most notably changing the intellectual landscape of college campuses:

1. The Untruth of Fragility: or, What doesn’t kill you makes you weaker.
2. The Untruth of Emotional Reasoning: or, Always trust your feelings.
3. The Untruth of Us Versus Them: or, Life is a battle between good people and evil people.

And it is the first, the notion of fragility, that what doesn’t kill us makes us weaker, that I want to highlight. Perhaps the most famous example of fragility in action is the rise of peanut allergies. What was once rare – in the mid-1990s affecting only 4 in every 1,000 children under 8 – had, by 2008, tripled. The cause, strikingly, was the conscious choice by parents to stop their kids from eating peanuts. (As an aside, Israel still has very few children with peanut allergies due to their obsession with Bamba.) Ruthy can explain this better than me, given her background in the immune system, but, by not exposing children to nuts, the body cannot develop an appropriate immune response.

But we do not need to expose just our physical selves to threats to develop an immune response, we also need to expose our minds to ideas that contradict our own. Only by doing so do we become stronger. Yet, as Lukianoff and Haidt argue, society today resists ideas that challenge its own. On campuses, any idea that threatens students' values may be deemed psychologically unhealthy to teach, while in politics, any fact that does not fit our chosen narrative is deemed false or fake. We have become fragile: believing that any contradictory belief will shatter us. What we need, instead, is to become "antifragile" – a term popularized by the polymath and NYU professor Nassim Taleb. (As an aside, Taleb was friends with the late YU Rosh Yeshiva Ozer Glickman, even tweeting to his over 300,000 followers the details of the funeral and *shiva*.) Antifragility means that we grow stronger, not weaker, when challenged. Our minds require stressors and challenges so that we can learn, adapt, and grow.

It is just as true in our religious lives. I have quoted too many times and encouraged you to read Rav Kook's *Pangs of Cleansing*, which makes a similar point: only by challenging our Jewish beliefs does our Judaism become stronger.

III.

But this is not to throw out the baby with the bathwater. There is little value to simple confrontation with challenging ideas. While it is problematic to refuse to assign racist literature in class for fear of exposing students to objectionable and loathsome ideas, it is inappropriate to present it as an equally valid understanding of the world. Students should be exposed to *Mein Kampf* to understand just how abhorrent it is – but that is not to say it should be placed next to the Constitution as an alternative view on how society should function.

In other words, we should be exposed to challenging ideas, but they should be framed correctly. It is the responsibility of teachers, parents, and society to ensure that, as we expose ourselves and others to challenging ideas, we situate them appropriately. Just as our bodies need exposure to food, bacteria, and disease to develop appropriate responses, so too do our minds require exposure to different views, incorrect views, and loathsome ones – and we need to be able to teach the difference.

IV.

This is Kohelet. It is, predominantly, an exposure to a different way of thinking – some of it different, much of it wrong. It contradicts our Jewish values, but therein lies its holiness! We need an opportunity, particularly when we are so fresh from the *Yamim Noraim*, to confront views different to our own.

But the beginning and end, the editor's additions as noted by Rashbam, are not censorship, they're framing. They afford us the opportunity to read Kohelet while understanding that its ideas are alien to us.

סוף דְבַר הַכֹּל נִשְׁמַע אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים יִרְאֵ וְאֶת־מִצְוֹתָיו שְׂמֹר...

Regardless of all else, at the end of the day one must revere God and observe His commandments!

Kohelet is here to make us religiously antifragile.