

Rabbi Noah Arnow
Kol Rinah
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They say that we are living in the golden age of television. Well, they don't say television. Of TV. With the advent of programming from the networks, ABC, NBC, CBS, Fox, cable TV channels like USA, FX, HBO and Showtime winning Emmy awards, and Amazon Prime, Netflix and Hulu creating outstanding original shows, there are so many quality shows to watch. It's rather overwhelming, in fact.

Amidst this resurgence of TV, while radio isn't exactly coming back, the recorded word is on the rebound, in the form of podcasts and recorded books. Podcasts can be found on every topic under the sun, and you can find an audio version of almost every serious book that comes out today. Whenever I'm in the car by myself, I'm listening to a book while I drive.

Our eyes and our ears are inundated with more and better material that is easier to access and more tailored each of our particular interests than perhaps ever before.

With my eyes and ears feeling full yet like I've barely scratched the surface of the options available, I found myself arrested by a few words from the book of Ecclesiastes, or Kohelet, as it's known in Hebrew, words to which I had never paid attention before.

Chapter one verse 8 reads:

קהלת פרק א

(ח) כָּל הַדְּבָרִים יִגְעִים לֹא יוּכַל אִישׁ לְדַבֵּר לֹא תִשְׁבַּע עֵין לְרֹאוֹת וְלֹא תִמְלֵא אָזֶן מִשְׁמָע:

Ecclesiastes 1:8

All such things are wearisome:
No man can ever state them;
The eye never has enough of seeing,
Nor the ear enough of hearing.

I'm less interested in the first half of the verse, and much more interested in the second couplet: *The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear enough of hearing.* That was the New Jewish Publication Society translation, but just to get the sense of the range of meanings of the Hebrew, here is how Robert Alter renders the verse: *The eye is not sated with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.*

Alter, by the way, a professor at Berkeley, was among the pioneers of the study of Bible as literature in the 1970s, and has been beautifully translating the Bible, and just has the latter prophets left to go.

The eye is not sated with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. I spoke last Shabbat also about satiety—the feeling of being full, but more as an existential and food-related issue, and how having plenty can lead to a kind of spiritual rebellion.

Kohelet is suggesting here though that while there can be moments when our stomachs might be quite full, our eyes and our ears are never satisfied, never satiated, never full. We always hunger to have seen more, to have heard more. So many of us want see every episode of the newest show, we want to see more European cities, more works of art, more classic films, more pictures of our children and grandchildren. We want to see more of the things we

haven't seen, and also want to see more of the things we love. More sunsets, more moments staring into the eyes of the person we love.

And the same with hearing—we want to hear more newscasts, more books, more thoughtful reflections and stories on *This American Life*, more laughter on *Car Talk*. And we want to hear more talking from the people who we love, whose voices we can never hear enough.

But there's another way we can read this verse, I think. It's not only that we will always want more, but there's something about merely seeing or only hearing that is inherently unsatisfying. We somehow want more. Hearing my almost-four-year-old daughter's voice is wonderful, but sometimes it's not enough. I need to feel her voice in my ear, feel the vibrations in my body as she speaks while I hold her, feel the air on my ear, the moisture of her breath.

So much of the world needs to be experienced in multisensory ways, and only seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, or touching is insufficient to meet our desires, and insufficient for us to fully appreciate and comprehend the subject. Just hearing or seeing popcorn popping is wonderful, but without smelling it, and tasting it the popcorn, the experience is woefully incomplete.

Both of these approaches are about wanting more—more experiences in number, and more all-encompassing, full-sensory experiences.

But two Jewish commentators offer what may be important correctives to our insatiable desire for more—even of these wonderful things.

First, Rashi, who comments not only on the Torah but on just about all of the Hebrew Bible. He suggests here that the kind of speech that is never satisfying refers to idle talk, talk that is not about Torah. The implication and assumption is that conversation and hearing about Torah is in some way able to satisfy, perhaps more completely or on a deeper level. We could leave his comment as simply meaning Torah, in a narrow sense, meaning just the study of Jewish text, or Torah writ large—anything conceivable that Torah might cover. But even a broad understanding of Torah writ large probably excludes most shows on Netflix, or at least would put them towards the bottom in terms of priority.

The corrective here is reminding us to make sure that we are properly prioritizing what's important to see and hear.

The weakness in Rashi's approach is that nothing in the verse or even the surrounding verses mention anything about Torah. Rashi is interested in inculcating a Torah-centered worldview, even, sometimes, at the expense of the most contextual, straightforward reading of the text.

Rabbi Yosef Kara, a medieval contemporary of Rashi's, is a much more strict *pashtan*, or straightforward and contextual interpreter of Torah, and as expected, he reads the verse in a very contextual way, paying attention to what immediately follows our verse.

Kara reads our verse as suggesting that a person can see things and hear things, and always think they are new and amazing, when in fact, as *Kohelet* goes on to say in the very next verse, *Only that shall happen which has happened, Only that occur which has occurred; there is nothing new under the sun*. So the phenomenon of being amazed at things is in some way missing a larger point, that nothing is really new. That captures the essence of the pessimism of *Ecclesiastes*, I think.

This is also a corrective to our unending hunger to see and hear more, but a corrective different than Rashi's suggestion about carefully prioritizing what we consume with our eyes and ears. Kara is saying in the end, seeing all this "stuff" doesn't really matter, and in the end is a distraction from what's really important. Amidst all Kohelet's futility and vanity, he does remind us that two are better than one, when walking, when lying together for warmth. Being together is important. And Kohelet urges people to enjoy life, as that enjoyment is often fleeting. Joy is important too.

But enjoyment is not the same as auditory and visual consumption. The mitzvot of Sukkot, of z'man simchateinu, the season of our rejoicing, is not to see and hear as much as we can. It's to be outside, to enjoy the weather, acknowledge our fragility, appreciate the created world, and enjoy the company of those with us, together with good food, and guests.

May we merit this enjoyment, this satisfying joy this Shabbat and this Sukkot.
Shabbat shalom and moadim l'simcha.