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# The Pursuit of Meaning: from Song of Songs to Ecclesiastes

Mishnah Yadayim 3:5 translation by Josh Kulp

All the Holy Scriptures defile the hands. The Song of Songs and Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) defile the hands. Rabbi Judah says: the Song of Songs defiles the hands, but there is a dispute about Kohelet. Rabbi Yose says: Kohelet does not defile the hands, but there is a dispute about the Song of Songs. Rabbi Shimon says: [the ruling about] Kohelet is one of the leniencies of Bet Shammai and one of the stringencies of Bet Hillel. Rabbi Shimon ben Azzai said: I have received a tradition from the seventy-two elders on the day when they appointed Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah head of the academy that the Song of Songs and Kohelet defile the hands. Rabbi Akiba said: Far be it! No man in Israel disputed that the Song of Songs [saying] that it does not defile the hands. For the whole world is not as worthy as the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel; for all the writings are holy but the Song of Songs is the holy of holies. If they had a dispute, they had a dispute only about Kohelet. Rabbi Yohanan ben Joshua the son of the father-in-law of Rabbi Akiva said in accordance with the words of Ben Azzai: so they disputed and so they reached a decision.

בַּל כַּתָבֵי הַקּדֵשׁ מְטַמָּאָין אֵת הַיַּדַיִם. שִׁיר השירים וַקֹהֶלֶת מָטמָאין אֶת היַדים. רבּי יָהוּדָה אוֹמֶר, שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים מְטַמֵּא אֶת הַיַּדִים, וָקֹהֶלֶת מַחַלֹּקָת. רַבִּי יוֹסֵי אוֹמֶר, קהלת אינו מטמא את הידים ושיר ָהַשִּׁירִים מַחַלֹּקָת. רַבִּי שַׁמְעוֹן אוֹמֵר, קהֶלֶת מַקּלֵי בִית שַמַאי וּמַחָמָרִי בִית הָלֶל. אַמַר רַבִּי שִׁמִעוֹן בֵּן עַזַּאי, מִקְבַּל אַנִי מַפִּי שַׁבְעִים וּשָׁנַיָם זַקּן, בַּיּוֹם שָׁהוֹשִׁיבוּ אֶת רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן עֲזַרְיָה בַּיִשִׁיבַה, שַשִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים וְקֹהֶלֶת מָטמָאים אָת היַדים. אַמר רבּי עַקיבַא, חַס וְשָׁלוֹם, לֹא נֶחֱלַק אָדָם מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל עַל שיר השירים שלא תטמא את היַדים, שָׁאין כַּל הַעוֹלָם כַּלּוֹ כָדאי כּיּוֹם שֵׁנּתּן בּוֹ שיר השירים לִישְׂרָאל, שֶׁכַּל הכָּתוּבים קֹדֵשׁים. וְאָם קֹדֵשׁ קַדָשִׁים. וְאָם נָחָלְקוּ, לֹא נָחָלְקוּ אֶלָּא עַל קֹהֶלֶת. אָמַר רַבּי יוֹחַנַן בֶּן יִהוֹשִׁעַ בֵּן חַמִיו שֵׁל רַבִּי עַקִיבָא, כִּדְבָרֵי בֵן עַזַּאי, כַּדְ נַחְלְקוּ וְכַךְ

Song of Songs 1

1. The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's.	א אָעִיר הַשִּׁירָים אֲשָׁר לִשְׁלֹמְה:
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#### **Ecclesiastes 1**

1. The words of Koheleth, son of David, King in Jerusalem.

### **Song of Songs 3**

1. On my bed nightly, I have sought the beloved of my soul. I sought him and did not find him.

- 2. Let me rise now to make rounds of the city, in the streets and in the squares I will seek the beloved of my soul. I sought him and did not find him.
- 3. The guards who make rounds of the city found me -
- "The beloved of my soul have you seen him?"
- 4. Just after I passed from them,
  I found the beloved of my soul.
  I caught him and I would not relax
  Until I had brought him to the house of my
  mother, to the room of she who had been
  pregnant with me.
- 5. I place you under oath, Daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or does of the field, Do not rouse and do not awaken love until it wishes.

א על־משכבי בּלִילוֹת בּלֶּשָׁתִי אָת שֵׁאַהָבה נפִשִׁי בקשׁתִּיו וַלָּא מְצַאתִיו: ב אָלְוּמָה נְּא וַאֲסְוֹבְבָה בַעִּיר בשוקים וברחבות אַבַקשָּׁה אָת שֵׁאָהַבָה נַפִּשִׁי בָקַשָׁתָּיו וַלָּא מָצַאתִיו: ג מַצַאוּנִי הַשִּׁמִרִים הַסְּבִבִים בַּעַיר אַת שַׁאַהַבָה נַפִּשִׁי רָאיתָם: ד כַּמִעַט שֵׁעַבַרְתִּי מֵהֶם ַעַד שֶׁמְּבָּאתִי אָת שֶׁאָהַבָה נַפִּשִׁי אַחַזִתִּיוֹ וְלָא אַרְפָּׁנּוּ עַד־שָׁהַבֶּיאתִיוֹ אֱל־בֵּית אָמִּי וְאֶל־חֲדֵר ה הִשְׁבַּעִתִּי אֵתְכֵׁם בִּנִוֹת יִרִוּשַׁלֵּם ה בּצְבַאוֹת אַוֹ בָּאיָלוֹת השֹׁדָה אָם־תַּעִירוּ ו וָאָם־תִּעִוֹרְרֵוּ צֶת־הָאַהַבָּה עַד שֶׁמֶּחָפָּץ:

### Song of Songs 5

6. I opened, I did, to my love
But my love had turned and passed on
My soul went out with his word
I sought him but did not find him

I called him but he did not answer me.

7. The guards found me,
Those who make rounds of the city
They hit me and they bruised me
They took my wrap off me,
The guards of the walls.
8. I place you under oath,
Daughters of Jerusalem,
If you find my love,
What will you tell him?
That I am sick with love.

בְּקַשְׁהָּיהוּ וְלָא מְצָאתִּיהוּ קְרָאתָיו וְלָא עָנְנִי: הַסְּבְּכִים בָּעִיר הַכְּוּנִי פְצָעוּנִי שְׁמְלֵי הַחְמְוֹת: הִשְׁבִּנְיתִי אֶתְכֶם הִהיִמְצְאוּ אֶת־דּוֹדִי מָה־תַּגְידוּ לְוֹ שֶׁחוֹלַת אַהָבָה אֵנִי:

#### **Ecclesiastes 1**

12. I am Koheleth I was King Over Israel in Jerusalem.

to spy out wisdom, About all that is done under the heavens. It is an evil matter which Elohim has given to mortals to humiliate/occupy them.

13. And I gave my heart to inquire after and

יב אָנִי לּהֶּלֶת הָיִיתִי מֶלֶה עַל־יִשְׂרָאֵל בִּירְוּשֶׁלֶם: יג וְנָתַתִּי אֶת־לִבִּי לִדְרְוֹשׁ וְלָתוּר בַּחָכְמָה עַל כָּל־אֲשֶׁר נִעֲשָׂה תַּחַת הַשְּׁמֵיִם הָוּא ו עִנְיַן רָע נָתַן אֱלֹהְים לִבְנִי הָאָדָם לַעֲנָוֹת בָּוֹ:

#### **Ecclesiastes 7**

24. That which is is distant, and deep, deep. Who can find it?

25. I made the rounds, I and my heart, to know and to spy out, seeking wisdom and a reckoning - to know evil, stupidity, madness, and folly.

26. And I find more bitter than death woman - she is snares, and her heart is nets, and her hands are fetters. He who is good before the

כּד רָחָוֹק מַה־שֶׁהָיֶה וְעָמָׂק וּ עָמָׂק מִי יִמְצָאֶנּוּ: כּה סַבּּוֹתִי אֲנִי וְלִבִּי לָרַעַת וְלָתׁוּר וּבַקּשׁ חָלְבָּעת רָשַׁע בָּסֶל וְהַסִּכְלִּוּת הְוֹלֵלְוֹת: כּוּ וּמוֹצֶּא אֲנִי מַר מִפְּׁנֶת אֶת־הָאִשְׁהֹ אֲשֶׁר־הִּיא מְצוֹדִים וְחֲרָמֵים לְבָּה אֲסוּרִים אֲשֶׁר־הִּיא מְצוֹדִים וְחֲרָמֵים לְבָּה אֲסוּרִים Elohim will escape from her and the sinner will be caught by her.

- 27. See, this I found, says Koheleth, one by one to find a reckoning.
- 28. That which my soul still seeks and has not found, I found one human among one thousand, but a woman among all these I have not found.
- 29. Only this, see, I have found that which the Elohim makes the human upright and they seek many reckonings.

יֶדֵיהָ טוֹב לִפְנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים ׁ יִמְּלֵט מִמֶּנָּה וְחוֹטֵא יִלָּכֶד בָּה:

כז רְאֵהֹ זֶהַ מְצָּׁאתִי אָמְרָה קֹהֶלֶת אַחַת לַאחת למִצִּא חֵשְׁבִּוֹן:

כּתּ אֲשֶׁר עוֹד־בִּקְשָׁה נַפְשִׁי וְלָא מָצֵאתִי אָדֶׁם אָחָד מֵאֶּלֶף מָצְּאתִי וְאִשָּׁה בְּכָל־אֵלֶּה לָא מָצֵאתִי:

בש לְבַדֹּ רְאֵה־זֶה מָצָּאתִי אֲשֶּׁר עָשָׂה הָאֱלֹהָים אֶת־הָאָדָם יָשֶׁר וְהַמָּה בִקְשִׁוּ חִשְּׁבֹנָוֹת רַבִּים:

#### **Ecclesiastes 8**

- 15. And I praise joy for there is nothing better for a human under the sun than to eat and to drink and to be joyful...
- 17. I have seen all the work of the Elohim, that a human is not able to find out the work which is done under the sun, which a human will toil to seek and he will not find. And even if a wise one should say that he knows it, he will not be able to find it.

טּוּ וְשִׁבַּחְתִּי אֲנִי אֶת־הַשִּׂמְחָה אֲשֶׁר אֵין־טְוֹב לָאָדָם תַּחַת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ כָּי אִם־לֶאֶכָל וְלִשְׁתָּוֹת וְלִשְׁמֵוֹחַ...

יז ְּוְרָאִיתִי אֶת־בָּל־מִעְעֵיה הָאֵלהִים בִּי לֹא יוּכַל הָאָדָם לִמְצוֹא אֱת־הַמַּעְשֶׁה אֲשֶׁר נְעֲשָׂה תַחַת־הַשֶּׁמָשׁ בְּשֶׁל אֲשֶׁר יִעֲמְל הָאָדֶם לְבַקֵּשׁ וְלָא יִמְצָא וְגַּם אִם־יֹאמַר הַחַכַּם לַלֵּעַת לָא יוּכַל לִמִצְא:

## Deuteronomy 4

29. And from that place you will seek YHWH your Elohim, and you will find, when you seek him with all your heart and with all your soul.

כם וּבִקּשְׁתָּם מִשָּׁם אֶת־יְהָנָה אֱלֹהֶיךּ וּמָצָאת כִּי תִדְרְשֶׁנּוּ בְּכָל־לְבָבְךָּ וּבְכָל־נַפְשָׁךְ: