

Shemini Atzeret: Fair is Fair

Rabbi Joshua Rabin, Astoria Center of Israel, Astoria, New York¹

1. Kohelet

Kohelet 1:2-11

הַבֵּל הַבָּלִים אָמַר קֹהֶלֶת הַבֵּל הַבָּלִים הַכֹּל הַבֵּל:
מִה־יִתְרוֹן לְאָדָם בְּכָל־עֲמָלוֹ שְׂיַעֲמַל תַּחַת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ: דּוֹר
הָלַךְ וְדוֹר בָּא וְהָאָרֶץ לְעוֹלָם עֹמֶדֶת: וְזָרַח הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ וַבָּא
הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ וְאֶל־מְקוֹמוֹ שׁוֹאֵף זֶרֶחַ הוּא שָׁם: אֶל־דָּרוֹם
וְסוּבָב אֶל־צָפוֹן סוּבָב אֶל־הַלָּךְ הָרוּחַ וְעַל־סְבִיבוֹתָיו
שָׁב הָרוּחַ: כָּל־הַנְּחָלִים הַלֹּכִים אֶל־הַיָּם וְהַיָּם אֵינָנו מֵלֵא
אֶל־מְקוֹם שֶׁהַנְּחָלִים הַלֹּכִים שָׁם הֵם שָׁבִים לָלֶכֶת:
כָּל־הַדְּבָרִים יִגְעִים לֹא־יִוָּכַל אִישׁ לִדְבֹר לֹא־תִשְׁבַּע עֵיִן
לִרְאוֹת וְלֹא־תִמָּלֵא אָזֶן מִשְׁמָע: מִה־שִּׁהִיָּה הוּא שִׁהִיָּה
וּמִה־שִּׁנְעִשָּׂה הוּא שִׁנְעִשָּׂה וְאִין כָּל־חֲדָשׁ תַּחַת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ:
יֵשׁ דְּבַר שִׁיֵּאמַר רָאִה־זֶה חֲדָשׁ הוּא כְּבָר הָיָה לְעֹלָמִים
אֲשֶׁר הָיָה מִלְּפָנֶינוּ: אִין זָכְרוֹן לְרָאשִׁינִים וְגַם לְאַחֲרֵינִים
שִׁהִיָּה לֹא־יִהְיֶה לָהֶם זָכְרוֹן עִם שִׁהִיָּה לְאַחֲרֵנָה:

Utter futility!—said Kohelet—Utter futility! All is futile!
What real value is there for humankind in all the gains
they make beneath the sun? One generation goes,
another comes, but the earth remains the same forever.
The sun rises, and the sun sets—And glides back to
where it rises. Southward blowing, turning northward,
ever turning blows the wind; On its rounds the wind
returns. All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is
never full; to the place [from] which they flow the
streams flow back again. All such things are
wearisome: no one can ever state them; The eye never
has enough of seeing, nor the ear enough of hearing.
Only that shall happen that has happened, only that
occur that has occurred; There is nothing new beneath
the sun! Sometimes there is a phenomenon of which
they say, “Look, this one is new!”—it occurred long
since, in ages that went by before us.

James Kugel, *The Great Shift: Encountering God in Biblical Times*, 275

...the most striking element in the book is that Kohelet the man...is...a doubter of wisdom's clichés about God.
There really doesn't seem to him to be any great ordering hand in the world; taking the long view, life seems to this
author to consist of a series of actions and opposite actions, so that everything cancels itself out...

2. Job

Job 21:7-22

מִדּוּעַ רְשָׁעִים יֹחִי עֹתֵקוֹ גַּם־גָּבְרוּ חֵיל: זָרַעַם נָכוֹן
לְפָנֵיהֶם עִמָּם וְצִאצְאֵיהֶם לְעֵינֵיהֶם: בְּתֵיבָהּם שְׁלוֹם מִפְּחָד
וְלֹא שִׁבְט אֱלֹהִים עֲלֵיהֶם: שׁוֹרָם עֹבֵר וְלֹא יִגְעַל תַּפְלִט
פָּרְתוֹ וְלֹא תִשְׁכַּל: יִשְׁלַח בָּצָאן עֲוִילֵיהֶם וְיִלְדֵיהֶם יִרְקְדּוּ:
יִשְׂאוּ כְתָף וְכִנּוֹר וְיִשְׁמְחוּ לְקוֹל עוֹגֵב: (יְבִלּוּ) [יִכְלּוּ] בְּטוֹב
יְמֵיהֶם וְיִבְרָגַע שְׂאֹל יִחַתוּ: וַיֵּאמְרוּ לֹאֵל סוֹר מִמֶּנּוּ וְרַעַת
דָּרְכֵיךָ לֹא חָפְצָנוּ: מִה־שִׂדִּי כִי־נִעְבְּדָנוּ וּמִה־נִּזְוָעִיל כִּי
נִפְגַּע־בּוֹ: הֵן לֹא בִיָּדָם טוֹבָם עֲצַת רָשָׁעִים רַחֲקָה מִנִּי:

Why do the wicked live on, prosper, and grow wealthy?
Their children are with them always, and they see their
children's children. Their homes are secure, without
fear; They do not feel the rod of God. Their bull breeds
and does not fail; Their cow calves and never
miscarries; They let their infants run loose like sheep,
And their children skip about. They sing to the music of
hand-drum and lute, And revel to the tune of the pipe;
They spend their days in happiness, And go down to
Sheol in peace. They say to God, “Leave us alone, We
do not want to learn Your ways; What is Shaddai that

¹ All translations are from Sefaria, unless otherwise noted prosper, and.

<p>כמה נִרְשָׁעִים יִדְעָה וַיָּבֹא עֲלֵימוּ אִידָם חֲבָלִים יַחֲלַק בָּאָפוֹ: יִהְיוּ כְתֻבָּן לִפְנֵי-רוּחַ זְכֻמָּץ גִּנְבָתוֹ: סוּפָה: אֱלוֹהַּ יִצְפֹּן-לִבְנָיו אוֹנוֹ יִשְׁלֹם אֱלֹיוֹ וַיִּדַּע: יִרְאוּ עֵינָיו כִּידּוֹ וּמַחֲמַת שִׂדֵּי יִשְׁתָּה: כִּי מִה-חֲפָצוֹ בְּבֵיתוֹ אַחֲרָיו וּמִסְפַּר חֲדָשָׁיו חֲצָצוֹ: הֲלֹאֵל יִלְמַד-דָּעַת וְהוּא רָמִים יִשְׁפּוּט:</p>	<p>we should render service? What will we gain by offering prayer?" Their happiness is not their own doing. (The thoughts of the wicked are beyond me!) How seldom does the lamp of the wicked fail, Does the calamity they deserve befall them, Are their lots apportioned in anger! Let them become like straw in the wind, Like chaff carried off by a storm. [You say,] "God is reserving his punishment for his children"; Let it be paid back to him that he may feel it, Let his eyes see his ruin, And let him drink the wrath of Shaddai! For what does he care about the fate of his family, When his number of months runs out? Can God be instructed in knowledge, The One who judges from such heights?</p>
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James Kugel, *The Great Shift: Encountering God in Biblical Times*, 272

Modern readers sometimes mistake Job's theological skepticism. He has no doubt about God's existence...[in fact, he stresses] how much he feels God's heavy presence breathing down on him. But it is the notion that God is fair that he can no longer abide.

3. Joseph

Bereishit 45:4-8	
<p>וַיֹּאמֶר יוֹסֵף אֶל-אֶחָיו גִּשְׁוּ-נָא אֵלַי וַיִּגָּשׁוּ וַיֹּאמֶר אָנִי יוֹסֵף אֲחֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר-מָכַרְתֶּם אֹתִי מִצְרַיִמָּה: וְעַתָּה אֶל-תַּעֲצֹבוּ וְאֶל-יַחֲרֹב עֵינֵיכֶם כִּי-מָכַרְתֶּם אֹתִי הִנֵּה כִּי לְמַחִיָּה שָׁלַחְנִי אֱלֹהִים לְפָנֶיכֶם: כִּי-זֶה שְׁנָתִים הָרָעָב בְּקֶרֶב הָאָרֶץ וְעוֹד חֲמֵשׁ שָׁנִים אֲשֶׁר אֵין-חֵרִישׁ וְקָצִיר: וַיִּשְׁלַחְנִי אֱלֹהִים לְפָנֶיכֶם לְשׁוּם לָכֶם שְׂאִירִית בְּאָרֶץ וְלִהְיוֹת לָכֶם לְפִלִּיטָה גְדֹלָה: וְעַתָּה לֹא-אַתֶּם שָׁלַחְתֶּם אֹתִי הִנֵּה כִּי הָאֱלֹהִים וַיְשִׁימֵנִי לְאֵב לְפָרְעָה וּלְאֶדוֹן לְכָל-בֵּיתוֹ וּמִשְׁלַל בְּכָל-אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם:</p>	<p>Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come forward to me." And when they came forward, he said, "I am your brother Joseph, he whom you sold into Egypt. Now, do not be distressed or reproach yourselves because you sold me hither; it was to save life that God sent me ahead of you. It is now two years that there has been famine in the land, and there are still five years to come in which there shall be no yield from tilling. God has sent me ahead of you to ensure your survival on earth, and to save your lives in an extraordinary deliverance. So, it was not you who sent me here, but God—who has made me a father to Pharaoh, lord of all his household, and ruler over the whole land of Egypt.</p>

James Kugel, *The Great Shift: Encountering God in Biblical Times*, 140

Would it be possible for someone to believe in God who doesn't hear people's prayers? It certainly would. One only has to look back at the story of Joseph to see a deity who is not prayed to (the hero, Joseph, never asks God for help, not even in the direst of straits). Instead, the God of this narrative is...the great long-range planner who has everything plotted out in advance. In such an arrangement, prayer by definition can have no role, since nothing can change what has already been decided.

4. Is God Fair?

James Kugel, <i>The Great Shift: Encountering God in Biblical Times</i> , 270	
<p>Both books [Kohelet and Job] take issue with the notion that God's supreme control of reality guarantees that life is basically fair, that righteousness is rewarded and evil-doing punished—and in doing so the authors disagree with the message repeatedly articulated in the story of Joseph in Genesis...Perhaps it is this oppositional stance that led the authors of Job and Kohelet to reflect on their own lives (only at a slight remove) as proof that wisdom's ideology is false.</p>	