

In the midst of our great rejoicing over the Week of Sukkoth, we want to balance our joy by reading a rather pessimistic book: Ecclesiastes. A lot of what it says appears to be so secular that many rabbis did not want to include it in the Bible. Solomon is also quite a controversial character. Not only was he the wisest of all of Israel's Kings, but he was the richest and the most powerful.

He inherited an empire from his father David and Solomon fortified its boundaries and stationed troops on its borders. He divided the kingdom into 12 districts, with each district taking care of his needs for one month of each year. By this time, the tribes had become so mixed together, that no one region could be called a tribal region any more. This was partially because Israel did not celebrate the Jubilee Year every fifty years like they were told to.

Early in his reign, he built both the temple and an enormous palace. His father David had gathered all the materials needed to build the temple and it was said that during his reign, he made silver as common as stones. He had two spectacular visions, where G-d promised to be with him and make him the wisest and richest of kings.

He composed around 3,000 proverbs and 1,005 Psalms (I Kings 4:32). He also wrote much of the Book of Proverbs, with the Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes and the Book of Job. Much of what he wrote has been lost, and only his writings which have spiritual value have survived. He began his reign as a strong spiritual leader for his people, but things began to change when he began forging alliances with his neighbours by marrying their princesses. By the time he finished, he had 700 wives and 300 concubines (I Kings 11:3).

These ladies progressively turned his heart away from G-d and he allowed them to fill Jerusalem with pagan temples. It was only under King Josiah that they were finally demolished. He even worshipped Moloch, so some of his kids would have been burned on that grotesque altar. He became an enemy of G-d and there is no record of him repenting before he died. He was told that the kingdom would be torn from his descendants, but not during his lifetime, because of his father David (I Kings 11:12, 13).

G-d warned him that He would raise up enemies against Israel because of Solomon's fornication and idolatry. However, he was told that the split into two kingdoms would not be permanent (I Kings 11:39). The only person who dared to challenge him was the prophet Achija and it was near the end of his life.

There is nothing wrong with being brilliant. There is nothing wrong with discovering how things work and coming up with new inventions. However, without a biblical spirituality, not even having great wisdom is of any enduring use.

In Hebrew, there are three kinds of intelligence: knowledge (knowing things), understanding (knowing how things work) and wisdom (knowing how to use your knowledge and your understanding). Solomon had all three kinds of intelligence in great abundance, but I consider his downfall a spiritual disaster which should serve as a warning to us in our information overloading world. Knowledge is doubling every few years and with the internet, we have almost endless information on almost any topic, right at our finger tips.

We are also endlessly inventing new machines and our understanding of how things works is also exploding every few years. In my life time we have touched down on the moon and have generated more international wealth than at any other time in history. We are bringing once fatal diseases under control and international law now regulates almost every aspect of our contacts with other countries.

Sadly, we are becoming increasingly deficient in wisdom as our world becomes more materialistic and spirituality is on the decline worldwide. With the international rise of education and literacy, we are turning into educated idiots. That is what happened to Solomon.

He was the smartest king (Eccl. 1:6). He became a hedonist who explored all kinds of carnal pleasure (Eccl. 2:1-4). He gave in to whatever his flesh desired (Eccl. 2:10). He also became cynical and depressed (Eccl. 1:2; 2:11; 2:20, 23). He became bored and said that there was nothing new under the sun and that everything is just recycled and repackaged. He found no lasting satisfaction in all that he did and was always on the prowl for something new to try.

He also felt that unlimited self indulgence was the best way to be happy (Eccl. 2:24). He did say that there was a season, or time for every purpose (Eccl. 3:1-8) and that G-d had made everything beautiful in its time (3:11). And yet man would always be unable to understand the work of G-d, from the beginning to the end. He said men should fear G-d (Eccl. 3:14). He saw that wickedness is increasing and that judgment is coming.

As he slipped further into his sin, he did see his own downfall (Eccl. 4:13), yet he saw that contentment is better than wealth (Eccl. 5:11). He also praised the value of friendship (Eccl. 4:9,10). His discussions seem to swing back and forth between good spiritual advice and the futility and sadness of life.

Lets look at some of his good advice.

“Better is a child who is poor, yet wise, than a foolish old king who no longer listens to advice.” (Eccl. 4:13). I think that, as he aged, he knew what kind of person he was turning into. What kind of person are you turning into? Do you know how to listen to advice? Do you pursue wisdom?

“For like the sounds of thorns underneath a cauldron, so is the laughter of fools” (Eccl. 7:6). Burning thorns give an unpleasant crackling noise and shoot off embers. Laughing at something does not make it funny. What do you find funny? Vulgarity and racism are never funny, and neither is perverted, sexual humour.

“Do not be hasty in your spirit to get angry, because anger rests in the bosom of fools” (Eccl. 7:9). I have known people who seem to spend all their time getting angry and who fly off the handle at the slightest provocation. They are angry about everything and are mad at everyone. I have worked for bosses who are like this and felt that nobody but them ever got it right. Perpetually fault finding is a carnal bad habit, as is a critical spirit where nothing is ever good enough. How easily do you get angry?

Getting angry is not always wrong. The Messiah got angry in the temple. You have reserve your anger for the right things and it has to be unleashed at the right time.

“Do not be righteous to the extreme and do not show yourself to be too wise, for why would you destroy yourself? (Eccl. 7:16). You cannot fight every battle or correct all the wrongs in this

sorry old world. Pick your battles and learn to walk away from needless confrontations. Also, it is not always a good thing to let people know how much smarter than them you are. No one likes to be made to feel stupid. You can say all you need to say without offending people or showing off how much you know. You will not only unnecessarily alienate people, but you can destroy your credibility, because no one wants to listen to what you have to say if you are always pointing out everything that is wrong and boasting about how smart you are.

I once met Dr. Francis Schaeffer, one of the greatest theological minds of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. He showed courtesy and spoke humbly, even though he was usually the smartest person in the room. He was never afraid to speak his mind, but he always wanted to share and not talk down to people. How about you? I know lots of things, but I never want to make people feel stupid. Are you always trying to fix everything?

“No, upon the earth, there is not a righteous man who does good and who never sins” (Eccl. 7:20). “Only this is what I have found, G-d has made men righteous, but they have sought many detours” (Eccl. 7:29). In these two verses, Solomon is not contradicting himself, as much as he is giving a balanced perspective.

Mark Twain said that the more he learned about people, the better he liked his dog. However, Teddy Roosevelt said that he never met a man whom he did not like. We are sinners by choice, not by design. I rejoice that there are so many good, kind people in our world. I am also greatly saddened that there are also so many violent, evil men, doing immense damage around the world.

We live in a sin infected world and sin is always knocking on the door of our hearts and lives to try and get us to violate our conscience and do what we know is wrong – and which G-d’s Word forbids. I may occasionally get detoured by the incredible deceitfulness of sin, but our goal should always return to the bumpy straight and narrow. The enemy always has a three pronged attack. First he says: “do it, do it!” (temptation). Then he says: “now look at what you have done” (condemnation). He finishes up with: “What’s wrong with it anyway – has G-d really said?” (Confusion).

Some say that we are all hopeless sinners, totally sold out to evil and incapable of doing any good. Some say that we are all nice people who are just a little confused or misled. The truth is that we are all born to choose. I have said this before and let me repeat it. The world is divided between a righteous core and a wicked core. In the days of Noah, the righteous core had shrunk to include only eight people. The wicked core had taken control over the rest of humanity and plunged them into a great darkness.

Our world is filling up with a great darkness once again and the righteous core is shrinking at an alarming rate. Solomon realized that he was sinking into the darkness of the wicked core and that, again, it was by choice and not by design. We either choose the wide path which leads to destruction or the narrow gate which leads to life. May our lifestyle and our choices foster our reaching our full spiritual potential. For all the advantages and blessings that Solomon started his reign with, he ended up in an unimaginably dark place. May the Messiah help us not to follow suit. We want to keep walking on the bumpy straight and narrow and not follow carnal rabbit trails which will lead us nowhere spiritually as they ruin our lives.

“Do not pay attention to all the words which are spoken, for fear that you would hear your servant curse you. For your heart knows full well that sometimes you have cursed others” (Eccl.

7:21, 22). When I was teaching school and heard something that a student should not have said, I would often ask: "Excuse me?", to give them a chance to back down. Angry people, frightened people and confused people will often say the most unfortunate things and we should not always respond or even pay attention. They may just be letting off steam, rather than saying what they really mean. It is good advice if we want to keep our community peaceful and happy.

"Nonetheless, even though a sinner shall do evil a hundred times and persevere in it for a long time, I know that happiness is for those who fear G-d, because of the fear (respect) they have before Him" (Eccl. 8:12). Happiness does not come from always getting your own way. Happiness does not come when you have found success through lying and deceit, even though you may keep on cheating for a long time. Sinful behaviour leaves people fearful and bitter, always having to watch their backs, as they live in the fear of being discovered. Walking with the Messiah according to His Word is the best and only way to be truly happy.

"The words of the wise listened to quietly are worth more the shouts of someone who rules among fools" (Eccl. 9:17). People often have to shout at me to be heard, not because they are being foolish, but because I am getting deafer. Volume is not a measure of content and trying to shout someone down is a very foolish way to communicate. Content is always more a measure of quality than volume.

In Eccl. 12:3-9 Solomon gives some good advice to young people. We need to serve the Messiah while we are young, then we can age gracefully and not be full of regrets because we have used up our strength and energy foolishly.

And finally: "Son, learn from these things because there is never an end to the writing of books and too much study will wear you out. Hear the end of the discourse: fear G-d and keep the commandments for this is the whole duty of man. For G-d is going to judge everything we do, whether good or evil and even the things which were done in secret" (Eccl. 12: 12-14 – or 12:14-16 in my French Bible).

You know the story of student pilot who was afraid he would fail because he talked to himself. He took the test and failed. The teacher commented: "this student talks to himself. This student does not listen to himself". The same could be said of Solomon. He knew better and had a wider understanding of what was important in life than anyone who had come before him – except for maybe Moses and the Patriarchs.

He was not ignorant of right and wrong and he clearly saw the bumpy straight and narrow. He spoke many words of wisdom and warned his readers about the destructive deceitfulness of sin. He knew that a life of sin could bring no lasting satisfaction, but he still went down this path.

There would always be more things to learn and to write about and you can easily wear yourself out trying to always stay on top of your studies. You know, I have probably read one hundred times the books that Socrates, Plato and Aristotle had access to, but I do not think there were many, if any, more intelligent and wiser people than these three giants. If you understand the basic spiritual principles of how to live, you will be fulfilled and not worn out.

The fear of G-d really means a respectful attitude of submission and worship, and the only way worth living is to keep His commandments. The teachings and traditions of men, might turn into a curse, but never the Word of G-d which is sweeter than honey and more precious than

much fine gold. Faith and obedience is the only great source of reward as we wander through this life. But I have a warning for us.

Repentance has a limited shelf life and our hearts and lives will not always be in a place where we want to or are capable of changing our ways. Solomon reigned for 40 years and was greatly blessed by G-d. And yet he self destructed and fell into a very deep pit of sin. When our heart tells us that it is time to change direction, we had better listen, lest we become spiritually hard of hearing.

In Montreal, my French language church was across the street from a small urban park which was full of street people, beggars and drug dealers. They all had incredible sob stories and some of them were mentally ill. Montreal still has lots of soup kitchens and shelters, but there are always those who do not take advantage of these provisions and want people to support them in their bad life choices with any spare change they can talk people out of.

I told my young people that it was not a good place to try and share your faith. Not only were most of these people not interested in listening, but too many of them were former believers who had backslidden. I had one enthusiastic young man who could not find the verse he wanted to share with a street person. The street person found it for him because, even though he had slipped back into darkness, he still knew his Bible.

Knowing the truth and living the truth are separate functions. Solomon did some pretty intense, deep teaching about what life should always be about. But he obviously did not listen to himself and fell into both sexual addiction and alcoholism. There is some indication that he was also into opium flavoured wine. Prov. 23:21 mentions "fancy" wine that the KJV says moves itself around in the cup (bubbles or seethes). People who understand addiction know that unless these sad people get the help they need, they will sink down further and further until their lives are shattered.

Even though he knew it was sinful and forbidden, he allowed his wives to build any number of temples to any number horrendous gods and towards the end of his life, he joined them in their disgusting pagan worship. Many ancient Middle Eastern gods required sexual worship and the wise fool got ensnared and was never able to break free.

He was so smart and got so bored that he let his sexual desires totally take over his life and destroy his spirituality. He rose to such great heights and sunk down into such great depths, that he remains one of the most controversial figures in the Bible. All the kings of the Northern Kingdom and many of the Kings of Judah, followed his evil example, especially since Jerusalem was so filled with grotesque pagan temples. The only king who was able to purge the Holy City of this trash, was Josiah.

He got involved in a fight that was not his and paid for it with his life. He was the last righteous king and none which followed him, followed his righteous example. Instead of running with the crowd and giving in to the loudest voice, we need to decide who we are going to listen to and which fights we are called to fight. Solomon's life was a complete spiritual disaster, don't follow suit and let your life also become a complete spiritual disaster.

Throughout the Book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon does give a spiritually balanced approach to life and does repeatedly affirm that spirituality (walking with G-d according to His Word) is the only way to live and find any lasting satisfaction. He admitted that carnal pleasures give no lasting

satisfaction. Even though he gave such good spiritual advice and was aware of G-d's imminent judgment, he became one of history's worst sexual perverts and died in this sad condition.

When Israel was told how a king should behave, Solomon violated the three great no-no's: he had many, many horses. He had a great number of wives. He also accumulated incredible wealth. And even though he was well aware of the commandments, there is no indication that he spent any time as a regular reader of the Torah. How about you? It is also unlikely that he made himself a personal copy of the Torah. I have never made myself a personal copy of the Torah, though I have been studying it for 49 years and have worn out any number of personal Bibles. How many Bibles have you worn out? How regularly do you study the Torah, the Writings and the Prophets? Do you regularly study the best commentary on the Tanach (Old Testament) – which is what the New Testament is.

I want to make several applications of this amazing book, as we bring our study to a close. First of all, do not indulge in what the Torah forbids, for fear of falling into addiction. If you do struggle with any addiction, seek professional help and even talk to me and the rebbetzin, so that we can coach you through the counselling. We have had extensive counsellor training and experience.

Next, learn to exercise strong self control and do not live principally for pleasure. There is no lasting satisfaction in pleasure, but there is in walking the bumpy straight and narrow according to the Word of our Messiah. Also, do not rely on your own knowledge and understanding to give direction to your life. The spiritual wisdom of the Bible should be your only reliable mentor when it comes to making good life choices.

Learn to discern and listen to reliable, good, godly advice and learn how to apply it and put it into practice. Solomon knew better but did not do better. Do not fall into the same trap.

When you fall, do not roll around in the mud, get back up. "A righteous man falls seven times and gets back up, but the wicked fall into mischief" (Prov. 24:17). Learn to repent, seek atonement (cleansing) and make as much restitution as is possible. Do not let your guilt crush you. Let the L-rd show you how to overcome that which may be defeating you.

Always cultivate the fruit of the Spirit and never cultivate the works of the flesh and learn to seek the Messiah at every stage of this fleeting life. Do not sow wild oats. Once they take root, they are very hard to get rid of. Build good habits and solid spirituality into your life and none of the storms of life will destroy the house of your faith and obedience.

Finally, life never stands still, so enjoy every stage of your life, and be aware that judgment is coming. So much evil and tragedy has stormed through our world in every generation and so many evil people get away with so much evil, but no one gets away with anything forever. We may not always get justice in our lifetime, but earth and sky will stand presently before G-d's great Judgment Seat. What you have sought forgiveness for and repented of, will never be thrown in your face in the Judgment Day. Live joyfully in the light, full of contentment and spiritual wisdom and let Him break all the chains that bind you and set you free.