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חירות ואחריות

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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

THIS IS THE DVAR TORAH THAT NEVER ENDS, NEVER ENDS...

Rabbi Aryeh Klapper, Dean

Irony is a complicated thing. It can be difficult to distinguish broad irony from obvious contradiction, or oxymoron. As with sarcasm, our willingness to see it is often based on our presuppositions about a text, and those presuppositions often say more about ourselves than about that text.

For example: Do you think G-d appreciates sarcasm? Then you probably think that Kayin said to Him in Genesis 4:13: "Is my sin too great for You to bear, i.e. to forgive? (After all, You control the whole universe, and what is man that Thou art mindful of him?)" But if you conceive of G-d as above that kind of humor, you probably think Kayin said "My sin is too great to be borne", and was utterly contrite.

Which brings us to King Solomon. Proverbs can seem pedantic, but Song of Songs brims with the joy of linguistic play (e.g., swearing by the gazelles and the does, which just so happen to be (near-)homonyms for names of G-d). Kohelet is famously dour, and contradictory. Yet our understanding of the book may be significantly affected by whether we are willing to see its author as capable of empathetic self-mockery (making genuine and deep fun of yourself without losing your sense of self-worth).

My focus here is Kohelet 12:12.

יִתֵּר מִהֶמָּה בְּנִי
הַזֶּהָר
עֲשׂוֹת סִפְרִים הַרְבֵּה אֵין קֵץ
וְלִהְיוֹת הַרְבֵּה יָגַעַת בָּשָׂר

Chabad.org has a fairly standard translation:

*And more than they, my son,
beware;
making many books has no end,
and studying much is a weariness of the flesh.*

The problem is that "more than they" has no antecedent: more than what? There are no obvious objects of wariness

in the preceding verses. This drives the Jerusalem Bible to translate

And furthermore, my son,

even though "furthermore" seems to me an impossible translation of **וְיִתֵּר מִהֶמָּה**.

Koren's "The Israel Bible" even more creatively translates:

A further word:

Against them, my son, beware!

This seems to be an effort to have the "them" refer forward rather than back, but it's not clear to me that there is a plausible postcedent either.

Some Rabbinic readers have the "them" refer to the 24 books of Tanakh, the Written Torah. Everything else is Oral Torah, which it was forbidden to commit to writing, and so

More than those (books), my son, beware of making books

One problem with this is that at the time Kohelet was written, the Written Torah was not yet complete. Another is that the verse seems to warn against "making books without end", rather than against Book 25.

This second problem can be resolved by making infinity a reason not to publish. The Written Torah can be bounded, but the Oral Torah has no bounds, so it cannot be contained in books.

I don't find this convincing – why not write down as much as we can, as it develops (as we are in fact doing)? But here we have our first flash of humor, glinting from the crevices. This interpretation is of course Oral Torah, and yet we find it in printed books!

We can seal this crack in our armor. In the ideal world, Oral Torah would never be written. That we find this interpretation in a book reflects only a concession to our

weaknesses, and the strain of a seemingly endless Exile (may Hashem be *mechasev et baketz!*).

But this seems to me to miss the point. Let us concede that the interpretation should never have been written down. The verse itself, by contrast, is unquestionably Written Torah. Shouldn't we be nonplussed by a written book that warns against the writing of books?

For this reason, Rav Shlomo Kluger joyously inverts the verse, and the concession. One Rabbinic position suggests that the purpose of the world is to allow all possible souls to be incarnated; when the last soul has experienced (what we call) life, the world as we know it will end. So too, perhaps the Exile will continue until and only until all potential interpretations of Torah have been given existence in our world. It is only through the publication of infinite books that the endtime (*ketz*) can be brought. So

*More than those, my son,
Be careful to make (infinite) books so long as there has been no End!*

By making the overall thrust of the verse positive, this interpretation goes some way toward providing an antecedent for "those". Verse 12:11 speaks of the "words of the sages", so we can say that even more than heeding the words of our predecessors, we are commanded to write down our own creative thoughts. (Netziv argues that the prohibition against writing down Oral Torah never applied to private notebooks anyway.)

Rava, however, goes further (Eruvin 21a).

דרש רבא
מאי דכתיב ויתר מהמה בני הזהר עשות ספרים הרבה וגו'
בני הזהר בדברי סופרים יותר מדברי תורה
שדברי תורה יש בהן עשה ולא תעשה
ודברי סופרים כל העובר על דברי סופרים חייב מיתה
שמא תאמר אם יש בהן ממש מפני מה לא נכתבו
אמר קרא עשות ספרים הרבה אין קץ ולהג הרבה יגעת בשר

Rava expounded

What is the meaning of Kobelet 12:12?

*My son! Be more wary of Rabbinic decrees (divrei Soferim) than of
Torah law*

*as Torah law includes both positive and negative commandments
whereas anyone who transgresses Rabbinic law deserves death*

*Lest you say: If Rabbinic laws have substance, why weren't they
Written?*

Scripture says: the making of books has no end. . .

There can be no greater demonstration of Rabbinic superiority than the transformation of *sefarim*=books into *soferim*=rabbis. And to top it off, Rava's answer as to why Rabbinic law was not written cheerfully reverts to *sefarim*!

Rashi thinks this goes too far. While everything about Rava's statement seems to me to indicate one should be **more** wary of the words of rabbis than those of Torah, Rashi translates Rava as saying:

*and in addition to those (of Torah, which are primary), my son,
be wary of the word of the Rabbis (as well)*

The danger of celebrating infinitely creative interpreters is that they may eventually overwhelm the text they interpret.

Maharshal, however, may offer a reading that validates the enterprise. The *sefarim* produced by the *soferim* must never see themselves as the end of the process, as a definitive reading which subsequent scholars and generations cannot argue with and even reject on the basis of first principles. Thus he rejects the Shulchan Arukh and all other works which present themselves as self-sufficient and self-justifying.

This reading incorporates many levels of irony. The *sefer* in the (theoretically finite, but not yet complete) written Torah commands the *soferim* to produce (infinite) *sefarim* of Oral Torah, which because it is infinite cannot ever be contained in *sefarim*. But that is fine, so long as those *sefarim* acknowledge that they are continuing a conversation rather than ending it.

I need to acknowledge that I'm far from certain that Maharshal actually suggests this reading; I may be projecting my love of irony onto him. Readers are encouraged to look at any of Maharshal's many introductions to volumes of Yam Shel Shlomoh and draw their own conclusions, and I would appreciate if you shared them with me.

In any case, it would be ironic to use this reading as the ending of this essay. So I will conclude instead by acknowledging that Alshikh reads the verse simply as recommending brevity; one should not make books – or divrei Torah – that *seem* endless.

Shabbat shalom and moadim lesimchah!