

Zera Shimshon

by Rabbi Shimshon Chaim Nachmani zt"l

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Chapter LIX: Kohelet (Ecclesiastes)

Essay 1. Acceptance of the Book of Kohelet

מדרש על פסוק "מה יתרון לאדם בכל-עמלו", אמר ר' בננימין בקשו חכמים לגנוז ספר קהלת מפני שמצאו דברים מטיין לצד מינות, אמרו כל חכמתו של שלמה שבא לומר "מה יתרון לאדם בכל-עמלו", יכול אף בעמלה של תורה, חזרו ואמרו לא אמר "בכל-עמל", אלא בעמלו, ב"עמלו" אינו עמל אבל עמל הוא בעמלה של תורה עכ"ל. קשה וכי דבר רחוק הוא זה שלא יוכלו להבינו מתחלה קודם שיבקשו לגנוזו, ומהו חזרו לומר. ועוד קשה דהא פתיב "בכל-עמלו", ומלת "בכל" מרבה כל מיני עמל אפילו עמל של תורה.

There is a midrash on the verse “What profit has a man from all his labor that he labors beneath the sun?”

Rabbi Binyamin said, the sages sought to hide away the book of Ecclesiastes, because they found in it words that incline toward heresy. They said: all the wisdom of Solomon comes to say, “What profit has a man from all his labor,” but one might think [think that he meant] even in the labor of Torah. They reconsidered and said: He did not say “in all labor,” but rather “in his labor”; in his labor there is no [profit from his] labor, but he does [profit from his] labor in the labor of Torah.

- Eccl. Rabbah 1:3

It is difficult to understand this: Is this such a far-fetched matter, that they could not understand it at first before seeking to hide the book? What does it mean, “they reconsidered and said”? Further, there is a difficulty because it is written “in all his labor,” and the word “all” includes every kind of labor, even the labor of Torah.

אמנם תדא פירוקא לתבירתה, דאין הכי נמי דמלת "בכל" מרבה עמל של תורה, אלא דאמרינו בפרק ו' דפסחים רב ששטת כל תלתין יומין מהדר ליה תלמודא, ואמר תדאי נפשאי, תדאי נפשאי, לך קראי לך תנאי. איני? והא אמר רבי אלעזר אלמלא תורה לא נתקיימו שמים וארץ, שנאמר "אם-לא בריתי יומם ולילה חקות שמים וארץ לא-שמת", מעיקרא כי עביד איניש, אדעתיה דנפשיה קא עביד.

However, there is one resolution to the other: indeed, the word “all” does include the labor of Torah, but as it says in chapter 6 of tractate Pesachim:

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Rav Sheshet every thirty days would review his studies, and he would stand and lean against the bolt of the door and say: Rejoice my soul, rejoice my soul, for you I have read [Scripture], for you I have studied [Mishnah].

[The Gemara asks:] **Is that so** [that Torah study is beneficial only for the soul of the person who has studied]? **But didn't Rabbi Elazar say: If not for the Torah, heaven and earth would not be sustained, as it is stated: "If not for My Covenant by day and by night, I would not have set up the laws of heaven and earth."**¹ [The Gemara answers:] But initially, **when a person does** [this mitzva], **he does it for himself.** [Only afterward does he have in mind the benefit that will be brought to the entire world.]

- Pesachim 68b

וְהִסְלֵקָא דְעֵתָא שְׁלֵהּ הַמְקוּשָׁן הֵיךָ שְׂכַל מִי שְׁעוּמַל בְּתוֹרָה צְרִיךְ שְׁנַעְמוּל לְקִיּוּם הָעוֹלָם וְלֹא לְקִיּוּם עֵצְמוֹ, וְזוֹ הִסְלֵקָא דְעֵתָא עֵצְמוֹ שְׁהֵיךָ לְהֵם מִתְחַלְהָ, וּמִשׁוּם הֵכִי לֹא הָיוּ יְכוּלִים לְחַלֵּק בֵּין בְּ"עֵמְלוֹ" לְעֵמְל סֵתָם, וְלִכְּנֹן בְּקִשׁוֹ לְגַנוּז וְכוּ', דְּהוּאִיל דְּמַלְת "בְּכָל" מְרַבָּה אֶפִּילוּ עֵמַל שְׁל תוֹרָה, אִי אֶפְשָׁר לֹאמַר "מֵה־יִתְרוֹן לְאָדָם" וְכוּ'. אֶמְנָם אַחַר כֵּךְ הִגִּיעָה דְעֵתָם לְתִירוּץ הַתְרַצָּן דְּכִי קָא עֵבִיד אִינִישׁ, אֲדַעְתָּא דְנִפְשִׁיהּ קָא עֵבִיד מַעְקָרָא, עַל דְּרָךְ לְעוֹלָם יַעֲסוֹק אָדָם בְּתוֹרָה וּמִצְוֹת אֶפִּילוּ שְׁלֹא לְשִׁמְהָ שְׁמַתוּדָה וְכוּ', וְאִז חֲזָרוּ לְדַיִיק מַלְת בְּ"עֵמְלוֹ", דְּלֹא בְּכָל עֵמַל שְׁל תוֹרָה מִישְׁתַּעֵי, רַק בְּאוֹתוֹ שְׁהוּא עֵמַל מַעְקָרָא אֲדַעְתָּא דְנִפְשִׁיהּ, שְׁאִינֹו לְשִׁמְהָ, בְּ"עֵמְלוֹ" דְּנִקָּא.

The initial assumption of the questioner was that whoever labors in Torah must labor for the sustenance of the world, and not for his own sustenance. This initial assumption was what [the rabbis] too had at first when they debated whether to include Kohelet in canon; **therefore they could not distinguish between “in his labor” and “labor” in general. So they sought to hide the book, because since the word “all” includes even the labor of Torah, it would be impossible to say “What profit has a man** from all his labor that he labors beneath the sun.”

But afterward they arrived at the resolution: that when a person engages in Torah, at first he does so with himself in mind, in line with the teaching “A person should always occupy himself with Torah and commandments even not for their own sake, for from doing so not for their own sake, he will come to do so for their own sake.”² **Then they went back and interpreted the word “in his labor” as referring not to all Torah labor, but only to that which is from the outset for his own sake, which is not for [the Torah’s] own sake. That alone is called “his labor.”** So even if the word “all” does include Torah, it is not meant in a heretical way, G-d forbid, that there is no value in laboring in Torah. Rather, it refers only to those who learn Torah for their own sake, and not for the sake of Torah and the sustenance of the world.

¹ Jer. 33:25.

² Pesachim 50b.

ובפרק ד' דפסחים איתא רבא רמי: כתיב "כִּי־גָדוֹל מֵעַל־שָׁמַיִם חֶסֶדְךָ", וכתוב "עַד־שָׁמַיִם", כאן בעושים לשמה כאן בעושים שלא לשמה, ופירש הרי"ף בעושים לשמה מתקיימים אף השמים בזכותו ונהגים אף המלאכים, אבל שלא לשמה החסד מגיע עד שמים לבד, והם אינם מתקיימים בזוה, ואין נהגים ממנו העליונים זולת התחתונים עכ"ל. ובזה נבא פשוט הכתוב על נכון, "מה יתרון לאדם בכל עמלו", דהיינו מה שיעמול מתחלה אדעתא דנפשיה, "שיעמל תחת השמש", שאין נהגים ממנו השמים והעליונים אלא התחתונים, זה אינו נקרא יתרון.

In chapter 4 of tractate Pesachim it is brought:

Rava raised a contradiction: It is written: “For Your mercy is great above the heavens, and Your truth reaches the skies” (Psalms 108:5), and it is [also] written, “For Your mercy is great unto the heavens, and Your truth reaches the skies” (Psalms 57:11). Here, [when] one performs [a mitzva] for its own sake [G-d’s mercy is above the heavens], here [when] one performs [a mitzva] not for its own sake [G-d’s mercy only reaches the heavens].

- Pesachim 50b

The Rif explained in Ein Yaakov: Regarding those who act for its own sake, even the heavens are sustained by his merit, and even the angels benefit. But those who act not for its own sake, the mercy reaches only unto the heavens, and they are not sustained thereby, and the upper beings do not benefit from it, only the lower beings.

With this, the verse comes out rightly: “What profit has a man from all his labor,” that is, from the labor he does at first for his own self, “that he labors beneath the sun,” that is, that the heavens and the upper beings do not benefit, only the lower ones. That is not called “profit.”

ובדברי אהר עוד יש לפרש הכתוב, דגרסינן במגלה פרק קמא אמר ר' יצחק אם יאמר לה אדם: נגעתי ולא מצאתי, אל תאמן. מצאתי ולא נגעתי, אל תאמן. נגעתי ומצאתי, תאמן. והגוי מילי בדברי תורה, אבל במשא ומתן, סייעתא דשמיא היא. וזהו "מה יתרון לאדם בכל עמלו שיעמל תחת השמש", רצה לומר בזוה העולם מה יתרון לו אם יעמול במשא ומתן, הא אפשר שייגע ולא ימצא ואפשר נמי שימצא בלי גיעה, דהא משא ומתן סייעתא דשמיא היא.

Another way to explain the verse: as we learn in the first chapter of tractate Megillah:

Rabbi Yitzchak said: If a person says to you: I have labored and not found [success], do not believe it. [If he says,] I have found [success] but have not labored, do not believe it. [If he says,] I have labored and I have found [success], believe it.

These words are regarding Torah; but in business, it depends on the help of Heaven.

- Megillah 6b

This is the meaning of “What profit has a man from all his labor, which he labors under the sun?” That is, in this world, what profit does he have if he labors in business? For it is possible he will labor and not find, and it is also possible he will find without labor. For in business, it is all dependent on the help of Heaven.

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