

# Kohelet: Debating Faith

■ by **ELI KOHN**

**A**s a high school Jewish studies teacher, and a subsequent Jewish studies curriculum developer, I have long been troubled by the question of how we educate students towards growth in religiosity, particularly in the area of Jewish belief and practice. Curriculum models have been designed which focus on student attainments in the domains of Jewish studies knowledge and skills. But in the affective domain, for example, educating towards belief and faith in G-d, it is far more difficult both to educate and to measure the impact of our teaching on our students' lives.

Scholars have tried to provide frameworks for religious development within the curriculum. Fritz Oser provides a framework for religious development with which an educator may choose appropriate texts to educate towards this goal. Rabbi Jay Goldmintz points out that we must also consider how the text itself will affect the students' religious development. This article attempts to show how the teaching of a Jewish text, Kohelet, can be taught as a tool to foster religious development and nurturing faith in our students. In particular, my thesis that Kohelet is a dialogue on the purpose of life aims to show how debate on questions of faith can be an important method in nurturing our students' religious beliefs.

Kohelet, or the book of Ecclesiastes, using its English title, is one of the most difficult texts in the Bible to understand. This book has been understood by many as characterizing life as being futile, *hevel* in Hebrew, and of "chasing the wind."

Beyond this rather pessimistic view of life, which stands in seeming contradiction to other biblical texts which emphasize the positive value of life, one encounters in Kohelet teachings that explicitly contradict each other. For example, in 7:2 Kohelet states, "It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting," while later in 8:15 he writes, "I praised rejoicing because man has no better thing under the sun than to eat and to drink and to be merry." Is rejoicing a good or a bad thing? We find contradictions such as these throughout the book.

Furthermore, there are statements in Kohelet which seem to directly contradict traditional Jewish belief. In 9:10 we read, "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with strength for there is no work, nor reckoning, nor knowledge nor wisdom in the grave to where you are going." What does this mean? Do whatever you want in this world as there is no reckoning in the next world? What about traditional Jewish views of reward and punishment, the World to come, etc.?

Commentators throughout the ages have grappled with these questions. Some see Kohelet as citing traditional wisdom and then refuting it. Others see the book as reflecting a single author's changing viewpoints over the years as well as life's ambiguities.

My thesis for interpreting Kohelet suggests a further way of understanding these contradictions which I have developed over many years. It is based on the introduction to Kohelet of the Meiri, a medieval rabbinic commentator, and has been more systematically developed by Rav Yakov Medan, a teacher at the Alon Shvut yeshiva in Gush Etzion, Israel. My



*Rabbi Dr. Eli Kohn is Director of Curriculum Development at the Lookstein Center in Bar Ilan University in Ramat Gan, Israel. He can be reached at [eli@lookstein.org](mailto:eli@lookstein.org).*

work had adapted the principles to the young adult setting.

The essence of my thesis is that Kohelet is best understood as a book that opens a discussion between different personalities and different opinions. Understanding Kohelet as a dialogue rather than a monologue gives the book logical consistency and cohesiveness. Pedagogically, this approach opens students' minds and hearts to different viewpoints which are all placed honestly on the table, discussed, argued and evaluated through a process of critical analysis and debate.

I identify four characters in Kohelet:

1. The builder
2. The philosopher
3. The pleasure-seeking person
4. The G-d-fearing individual

These characters are debating philosophical questions of faith and belief, in particular, the meaning and purpose of life.

The author allows each character to have his say and argue rationally why his explanation of life's purpose is correct. The builder believes the purpose of life is to design and create structures and build-

ings for the betterment of mankind. The philosopher believes that the purpose of life is to try and understand its processes and why things happen as they do. The pleasure seeking person sees enjoyment and rejoicing as the purpose of life while the G-d-fearing individual sees faith as the core of his purpose. Through debate, argument and dialogue we are led to an understanding why faith offers such a meaningful explanation to the purpose of life. This interpretation of Kohelet can best help us understand the contradictions in this book.

The book can be divided into “speeches” given by the different personalities and the arguments and counter-arguments given by the other characters. I will first give an overall division of the book and then give some pedagogic reasons why I believe this way of interpreting Kohelet is so appropriate for young adults.

*Chapters 1-2:* introduction; opening statements of the builder, pleasure-seeking person and philosopher

*Chapters 2:24-3:22:* the pleasure-seeking person

*Chapters 4:1-4:16:* the builder (normally in the first person “I”)

*Chapters 4:17-5:11:* the G-d-fearing person (normally in the second person “you”)

*Chapters 5:12-6:12:* the builder; to whom will he give all his wealth after he dies?

*Chapters 7-10:* arguments between the characters about how to deal with death

*Chapters 11-12:* the final winning speech of the G-d-fearing person

Why is this approach so valuable pedagogically when teaching young adults? I give a number of reasons based on my experience and feedback from students:

1. The approach to learning text which allows students to debate and argue is one which young adults thrive on both intellectually and emotionally. There are no axioms with which we

cannot argue. Everything is open for questioning and nothing is a truth which is a “given.” The fact that such an approach is offered by the Bible itself in a “no questions barred” fashion is very refreshing for stu-



**Kohelet is a dialogue on the purpose of life that shows how debate on questions of faith can be an important method in nurturing our students’ religious beliefs.**

identify with the builder, others with the philosopher but they are all personalities that are part of their lives. Students can be challenged to state the strengths and weaknesses of each character’s arguments about the pur-

dents and this nurtures their faith in the Bible as a source for inspiration and direction.

2. Students relate very well to the above four characters that have been identified in the book. Some will naturally

pose of life as detailed in the text. By so doing, students’ can often clarify for themselves more clearly their own viewpoints about the purpose of life. The fact that the biblical text can be made so relevant and meaningful to

[CONTINUED ON PAGE 62]



### Shoolman Graduate School of Jewish Education

Do you have...

- A love of Jewish learning?
- A desire to share it with others?
- A commitment to strengthening Jewish life?

Transform your values into action and join the many students who have enrolled in Hebrew College’s **36-credit online Master of Jewish Education degree program.**

Whether you’re new to the profession or a Jewish educator who wants to move ahead, our professional development courses, degree and certificate programs will give you the Jewish knowledge base and the skills to inspire your students for a lifetime of Jewish learning.

**Now accepting applicants for the 2011-2012 academic year.**

#### New Online Programs:

- Certificate in Early Childhood Education
- Certificate in Jewish Informal Education
- Certificate in Jewish Special Education
- Doctor of Education with a Specialization in Jewish Educational Leadership

Learn more  
[admissions@hebrewcollege.edu](mailto:admissions@hebrewcollege.edu)  
 617-559-8610  
[www.hebrewcollege.edu](http://www.hebrewcollege.edu)

Hebrew College, 160 Herrick Road, Newton Centre, MA 02459

# Faith in Stories

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 61]

experience of searching; Avraham lacks direction and experiences the feeling of insecurity this brings, along with his motivation to move forward despite the uncertainty of where this path leads. This movement must be narrated, not merely explained, because it is this Avraham, the persistent searcher, the tireless explorer, that comes across the lit or burning mansion. Avraham is desperate to find something to orient and direct his life, give it clarity, direction and purpose. Only when the experience of searching is felt by the listener does the moment of questioning mean something. The life-story of this

man who is confronted by the burning mansion is very different than either the midrash read simply, or knowing intellectually that he searched for something. His question is the culmination (and yet equally the beginning) of his directionless search, a moment of profound satisfaction and clarity. Beyond this, the teacher must re-tell the moment of coming across the mansion, his question, and subsequent encounter with G-d. I believe such a telling, following the experience of deep learning, can impact those searching for faith in a way that the moral of the story, wrung dry of the narrative, does not.

Stories have always played a role in the world of Jewish learning. Whether influenced by the abstract and textual model of Talmudic learning, or the influence of “Athens” to move education from the concrete and particular to the universal and abstract, stories and storytelling have taken a back seat in the beit midrash of conventional Jewish education. The time has come to take stories seriously once again as a genuine pedagogical tool to nurture faith, beyond their capacity to entertain or serve other educational goals. Stories bring the experience of faith to life, and create models for the students’ own growth. It is time to have faith in stories. ■

## Kohelet: Debating Faith

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 57]

young adults’ lives is an important learning and teaching goal within itself.

3. The topics raised by the four personalities are ones which naturally concern the young adult. In particular the subject of death which is tackled in a very graphic way in chapter 11 is one which many students are grappling with at this age. While the answer of Kohelet is that only the body dies but the “spirit returns to G-d from where it came,” students may argue or disagree with his conclusion. The debating style of Kohelet allows for multiple views and opinions.
4. The fact that the identity of the speakers in Kohelet are not explicitly mentioned but can be derived from the text allows students to discover the speakers’ identities for themselves. Students can be asked to prepare, say, chapter 4 first on their own in pairs and asked to identify the speaker and his arguments. They themselves then learn to appreciate textual nuances and change of tenses which hint to changes in speakers. This can be done almost as well using English translation as it can

be done in Hebrew. This method of “active learning” in the study of Tanakh, made famous by the teachings of Nechama Leibowitz, is pedagogically challenging for students and they enjoy the opportunity that this method of engaging with the text offers. I have found that teaching Tanakh in this way often nurtures students respect and faith in holy texts of this kind.

5. Students come to learn more about themselves and their own identity through learning Kohelet in this way. “Who am I?” or “Who do I identify with the most in these characters?” is a question which often arises in discussion. Could it be that the four characters are really four dispositions which we each have in our own personalities? The question then is, which one is the most dominant in our own human make up? Can I change or alter the relative impact of my dispositions? A discussion of this kind, especially if Kohelet is studied in the period leading up to Rosh Hashanah, can be a very meaningful and spiritually nurturing experience.
6. The study of Kohelet offers opportunities for integration in other

curriculum areas like science and literature. The opening chapter, for example, which describes “the never ending cycle of life” subtly alludes to the four elements of nature, energy, gas, liquid and solid as proposed by the ancient Greeks. A study of the “Time for all seasons” text in chapter 3, for example, offers an opportunity to look at the literature and music say of Elton John’s “Circle of Life.” How do the lyrics of the song mirror what is in Kohelet and how do they differ? This integrated perspective illustrates the point that the Bible is not just another subject in the curriculum. It is part of a holistic learning experience that incorporates all areas of instruction. The Bible is not just a history book or a collection of laws. It contains a book like Kohelet that deals with the core issues of human existence that are part of an integrated perspective of looking at the world.

Unfortunately, our educational system rarely provides our students with the tools to develop a religious perspective on life and its challenges. It is my hope that this approach to the teaching and learning of Kohelet will offer one path to develop such a perspective. ■