Review

When geniuses collide

In ‘The Wisdom of King Solomon,’ Ecclesiastes isn’t all gloom

By Aaron Leibel
Special to WJW


I’m groggy, punch-drunk even, from reading this book. Each page seems to explode with ideas, philosophical questions dealing with the nature of humanity and our lives and destinies on earth.

It’s partly the nature of the work, which, as its title indicates, deals with the great Jewish philosopher and king, Solomon, who, despite historical evidence to the contrary, is assumed for the purposes of the book to have written Song of Songs, Proverbs and, most important for this work, Ecclesiastes. That is because, author Haim Shapira says, “the text acquires much more power” when we say “an almighty king” wrote it.

But more than that, the author himself is to blame for bombarding my brain in such an extraordinary way. He is an Israeli who has a two Ph.D.s (mathematical genetics and science education) and teaches mathematics, psychology, philosophy and literature. If that’s not jaw-dropping enough, he also is a concert pianist and has written seven best-sellers. Holy moly! Roll over Da Vinci and tell Einstein the news!

Not only are the author of the book and the assumed author of Ecclesiastes both geniuses, but many other wise and brilliant people make appearances here. Among those quoted in the book are Yeshayahu Leibowitz, the outstanding Israeli scientist and ethicist; Russian authors Leo Tolstoy, Anton Chekhov and Fyodor Dostoevsky; preeminent Torah scholar Maimonides; American poet Walt Whitman; 17th-century Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza; Greek philosopher Epicurus; and Scottish philosopher David Hume.

The book is a fascinating learning experience. One concept I found intriguing — and which is indispensable for analyzing Ecclesiastes — was the idea that both sides of a contradictory statement may be true. Shapira quotes Thomas Mann: “The opposite of a trivial truth is a false statement. The opposite of a profound truth is another profound truth.”

For example, writes the author, “Life is wonderful” and “life is horrible” are examples of two profound truths. Ecclesiastes is both “life-affirming” and “deeply pessimistic.”

Ecclesiastes believed that getting old is “vanity and suffering.” But Shapira...
“Life is wonderful” and “life is horrible” are examples of two profound truths, the author writes. Ecclesiastes is both “life-affirming” and “deeply pessimistic.”

Sometimes experience does.
Wisdom is different from knowledge, he notes. “The latter can be handed down, the former cannot.”
“Knowledge can help us get along in life; wisdom can help us find meaning in life.”

Despite the complex subject matter, I felt comfortable with the ideas discussed in the book. Where there were difficulties, the author simplified. He notes, for example, that the French psychologist Jacques Lacan devised the following formula to explain desire: Desire = Demand — Need.

In the beginning of Ecclesiastes, the biblical book’s author writes: “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” Hevel, the Hebrew word for vanity, is usually translated as “pointless,” “futile” or “meaningless.” If all of life is “meaningless” — Shapira translates the word as “fleeting” — then wouldn’t our attempt to make it meaningful also be pointless?

Frankly, reading that some of the greatest minds in history have concluded that life is meaningless tended to depress me. I suspect it may have a similar effect on others, as well.

So, maybe our best course is to ignore such questions and concentrate on living good and joyous lives.

Unless, of course, you get pleasure from thinking about the unknowable — or even enjoy encountering mind-stretching, intriguing ideas. If so, dash out and buy yourself a copy of this book.

Aaron Leibel is a former editor at The Jerusalem Post and Washington Jewish Week. His novel, Generations: The Story of a Jewish Family, which spans 1,500 years and three continents, is available at amazon.com and in Kindle format.