

When J.K. Rowling, author of the Harry Potter books, wrote a mystery for adults, she used a pseudonym, Robert Galbraith. Perhaps she wanted to see if her book would be compelling even if it weren't associated with her fame. Her identity was discovered eventually through a careful computer analysis of word use.

More recently the news has been full of reports about Elena Ferrante, the author of a very popular four part series about a young woman growing up in Italy after the war, who it seems was really someone else. In this case the author's true identity was revealed against her wishes by a persistent reporter who followed the money trail of advances and royalties paid out.

The book which we read on Sukkot, Kohelet, or Ecclesiastes, hides its author behind a general term, "the assembler of wisdom" or "the one who calls people together". Because he alludes to his wealth and prominence, traditionally Kohelet was identified with King Solomon, but careful word sleuthing, places the language in a different period of history. No royalties were paid for this book, so there is no money trail to follow- and the question of authorship remains hotly contested by scholars.

As interesting as the question of who wrote this book, is the question of what it is doing in the Bible in the first place.

As we saw last night, in the short sections that we read, the tone of the book is not in keeping with the rest of the Bible. Kohelet seems cynical, jaded, pessimistic and the religious content in the book is nil. And we are not the only ones to experience it in this way. Many centuries ago, someone was upset enough about the contents of this book, to add a coda, written in a much later period than the rest of the book. This later author felt the book was too unorthodox and wanted to reign in its ideas. In the concluding dozen or so verses that he added to the book, he cautions us that wisdom, the result of human intellect, must take second place to piety and obedience to God's laws, ideas found nowhere else in Kohelet.

Despite the controversy surrounding this book, some Jewish sages saw meaning in it, otherwise its reading would not have been commanded for the holiday of Sukkot. One contemporary writer who sees special value in Kohelet, is my colleague Rabbi Audrey Korotkin, who related to the book from her own life in an article last year for Ten Minutes of Torah. Perhaps looking at the text through her eyes might help us learn something meaningful as well.

It's pretty common when you are 13 years old, to believe that everyone else has it made, and that you are the only one confused about life. Even adults often believe that if only they were wealthier, better connected, smarter or savy-er, they would have this thing called life, all figured out. Perhaps you've thought that as well from time to time.

But the author of Kohelet was wise and experienced. He had amassed great fortunes, and also had the opportunity to study and to work in the world. He had chased money and fame, wisdom and enjoyment. He writes about his quest for understanding, surveying all of the options that exist for a person in his world.

Kohelet's conclusion, is at some level, a disappointment. He writes that we will never be able to make sense of life in some grand cosmic sense. We will always have to wonder why the race is not to the swift, why sometimes very hard work is in vain. We will see the wicked flourishing and our momentary successes, fall apart. Death will come both for the righteous and the wicked. But for Kohelet, and for us as well, that should not be the end of the story. Even when we can't completely make sense of life, he argues, we can still find purpose and satisfaction in the tasks we take on in our daily lives.

As humans we have limitations, but we also have a great deal of potential. As Rabbi Korotkin puts it: We can create. We can share. We can heal and we can love. The great rabbis of over 1,000 years ago, who commented on Kohelet, in the collection of midrashim Ecclesiastes Rabbah reached a similar conclusion. The teaching of this book was to their minds, that we should make the most of every day of our lives, right up to its end.

JK Rowlings wanted her book to stand on its own and Elena Ferrante has written specifically about how she didn't want her biography to become the focus, rather than her books themselves. For Kohelet, with its mystery author, we have no choice but to judge the book by its contents. Refocusing us on the goodness of everyday life, of the meaning of the little things we do for others and the joy which can be found in the the here and now, is no small benefit for teens and adults as well: "Go your way and eat your bread with joy....live joyfully with the one whom you love all the days of your life...whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your strength". Good advice, for a life of fulfillment.