

The Solomon Complex: on the dilemma of being a writer and an Orthodox rabbi

by Daniel Ross Goodman

The author Gary Shteyngart once said in an interview that his favorite literary characters are the ones who “can’t shut up to save their lives. Cue Portnoy.” The fictional Portnoy, his real-life creator Philip Roth, and scores of Jewish writers from ancient times and up to our present day simply cannot shut up, even when their continuing to speak is to their detriment. Ever since God gave the floor to Abraham by asking him what he thought about His decision to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, we’ve started to speak our minds, and we haven’t shut up ever since. Something about us Jews—and especially with us Jewish writers—is that “not shutting up” is in our blood.

Not until King Solomon, though, did we have our first *writer* who couldn’t shut up to save his life. According to tradition, he wrote a book of morals (Proverbs), governed ancient Israel with the wisdom of a Supreme Court chief justice, and even wrote an erotically charged romance (Song of Songs). But he couldn’t let up. Of course he couldn’t. He was a writer. He should’ve known when to stop. But writers never know when to stop. And Jewish writers never know when to shut up; we’re congenitally incapable of doing so. So Solomon kept going. He wrote a radical, subversive book called Ecclesiastes. His advisors and confidants told him to bury it, burn it, to make sure it never sees the light of day. ‘Aren’t all the publications you have enough for you, Your Majesty? You really need one more? And not just any one more, but *this* one? This is completely inappropriate for your audience. This is not befitting of you, and neither is it fitting to be read by any Jew. We strongly advise you against the publication of this manuscript.’ So, of course, what did Solomon do? He published it. Of course he published it. He was a

writer. And he was Jewish. Hence, “the Solomon Complex”: if you’re a writer, there is an irresistible impulse to write, even if you’re an Orthodox rabbi (or an Orthodox monarch), and even if by writing you’re putting your entire being—your communal reputation, your professional future, perhaps even your [after-] life—at risk. For Orthodox writers, the Solomon Complex is as inescapable as an incontrovertible Delphic oracle.

Perhaps Solomon would have been better off if he never wrote Ecclesiastes—only the most subversive, radical, counter-traditional text in our canon. That it is in our canon at all is all the more remarkable.

My completely unscientific theory is that Ecclesiastes was written by Solomon, but published under the *nom de plume* “Ecclesiastes” because he was hesitant about airing his theological doubts, existential concerns, and ethical questions in a public forum under his own name. He wasn’t worried about publishing the risqué Song of Songs under his own name (though perhaps it would’ve benefited by a parental guidance warning on the inside flap). But Ecclesiastes? This, he knew, could not be published under his own name. But publish it he most certainly did.

Far more problematic than the “this-is-for-mature-audiences-only” Song of Songs is the proto-Nietzschean Ecclesiastes. The rabbis recognized this issue and noted that, similar to the Book of Ezekiel, a debate raged about whether Ecclesiastes would be accepted into the Jewish Bible at all. Eventually, of course, we know that it was, but not without some agonizing concerns and sleepless nights of scholarly and rabbinic debate.

If Solomon knew that Ecclesiastes would be problematic enough to necessitate publishing it under a pseudonym, then why write it and publish at all? Well, the answer is as obvious as the never-changing midday sun: Solomon was Jewish. And he was a writer.

In Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's great film *The Red Shoes* (1948), a ballerina (Moira Shearer) is given a magical pair of red slippers which allow her to dance in an astounding, exhilarating fashion, but there's one catch—as long as she leaves the slippers on her feet, the slippers do not allow her to stop dancing. When the dancing—beautiful and glorious as it is—starts to cause her physical pain, she persists in wearing the red slippers. But wouldn't the solution be so simple? Once dancing begins to cause her physical pain, shouldn't she simply take off the red slippers? But she doesn't. Of course she doesn't. Why? Because she's a dancer.

“Why do you want to dance?” asks the choreographer (Anton Walbrook).

“Why do you want to live?” responds the ballerina.

“I don't know exactly why...but I must.”

“That's my answer too.”

Dancers must dance, painters must paint, scholars must study, and writers must write—even Orthodox writers.

And oh how we must write, must we incorrigible writers. We write because we live—or is it the other way around?

Would Solomon have been better off to have never written something as anti-traditional as “better to go to a house of mourning than a house of feasting”—or, even more explicitly problematic, “I hated life”, an apothegm which contradicts the very vitalistic, life-affirming heart and animating core principle of Judaism, “choose life”? Perhaps. Would he have been better off, and would he have spared his readers and congregants much religious and existential angst, were he to not have written things like “in this meaningless life of mine, I have seen the righteous perishing in their righteousness, and the wicked living long in their wickedness”; “don’t be too righteous”; and “for the wise man and for the fool, there is no remembrance forever, seeing that in the days to come all will be forgotten,” which subverts the basic ethico-theological position of our faith—that God remembers all the deeds of every individual, and that there is a final judgment, a heavenly accounting and divine judgment, for every action great and small? Probably. But Solomon was a thinking person. And even worse—he was Jewish. And a writer.

So instead of not recording his doubts at all, he wrote them up, but he did so in an experimental fashion. Ecclesiastes is his anonymous—or pseudonymous—attempt to work out his theological, ethical, and religious doubts. He says some extremely troubling and, frankly, subversive things, in the early chapters. But after his agonizing literary journey that reaches into the very depths of his soul, what is his conclusion? “The end of the matter, all having been heard: fear God, and keep His commandments, for this is the whole of man.”

I have authored a few articles which touched on sensitive theological and halakhic (Jewish legal) topics; these articles subsequently garnered a bit of controversy within the Orthodox blogosphere. Would I have been better off to not have

voiced my misgivings about the doctrine of the Sinaitic revelation of the Torah and to not have written about my ethical concerns relating to how our halakhic (legal) system deals with sexual orientation? Most likely. Would I have been better off to have never written these things at all? Most probably. So why did I write them at all? Well, I come from a long line of Jews...and I also am a writer. It is the blessing of my life, and it is also the curse of my life. I don't even like to write. In fact, I hate writing. I'd rather not write at all. My rational mind tells me I have the freedom to write or not write, but a threatening inner voice tells me I *have* to write. I have no choice. When I feel that I have something to write, if I do not write it, I feel physical pain. I wouldn't go so far as to say it's akin to the bad things the Bible says happens to a prophet who suppresses his prophecy, but writers do feel something akin to this; we feel that some force will hold us existentially liable if we do not put the verses with which we have been endowed in our minds onto paper. Writing causes me intellectual pain, and often physical suffering as well. When I have something to write, I cannot eat until it is written. And I cannot drink. Or sleep. Writing causes me physical, bodily harm. Writing causes me to lose sleep, to lose weight, and to lose money—and I can't afford to lose any of these things. But I still write. I have to do it. *We* have to do it. Writers write. We have to write. It's in our blood. Our veins pulsate with words, our arteries swim with sentences. We have to write. For better or worse.

For four years of rabbinical school, I walked along a winding intellectual path toward the rabbinate, writing my way through my religious reservations and spiritual uncertainties, Solomon Complex be damned. Whoops—I probably shouldn't have said that. Is it too late to take that back?

Bio: Daniel Ross Goodman is a writer, an ordained Orthodox rabbi, and a Ph.D. candidate at the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) of America in New York, and is studying English & comparative literature at Columbia University. A contributor to the Books & Arts section of *The Weekly Standard*, he has published in numerous academic and popular journals, magazines, and newspapers, including *The Wall Street Journal*, *Tablet*, *Haaretz*, and *Harvard Divinity School Bulletin*. His first-published work of fiction, a short story (“The End of Days,” *Bewildering Stories*, 2015), won two awards (the Spitzer Prize and the Mariner Award); his second short story (“*Prélude à l'après-midi d'un rhinoplastie: or, When the Rabbi Went for a Nose Job*”) was published in the Fall 2016 issue of *aaduna*; his third short story, “The Tryst,” will be published in the May 2017 issue of *The Cortland Review*, and his fourth short story (“The House of David”) will be published in the Fall 2017 issue of *Calliope*.