

Life-Giving Contradictions

By Rabbi David Wolpe

Ecclesiastes is full of contradictions. Better the day of death than the day of birth we are told; but then we are reminded that a live dog is better than a dead lion. Everything is futile, we are told; but then urged to obey the commandments — or to enjoy life with the one we love. Ecclesiastes teaches a great life lesson: No single value, idea or practice can be right for all people at all times.

This realization was the great theme of historian and philosopher Isaiah Berlin's life: "Values may easily clash within the breast of a single individual; and it does not follow that, if they do, some must be true and others false...total liberty for wolves is death to the lambs." Different values and ideas suit different times and jostle each against the other. As Ecclesiastes reminds us, there is a time for every purpose under heaven.

Humanity has suffered terribly from those who thought they were wise enough to prescribe for others exactly how to live. Judaism teaches an ultimate unity, but understands that it is not accessible to the flawed human mind. When Hillel and Shammai disputed, the Talmud tells us that each spoke the words of the living God.