



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SHEVI'I SHEL PESACH > Seventh Day

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Shevi'i Shel Pesach

And You Sing?!

ABSTRACT

May we celebrate when our enemies perish?

This is not merely an academic question. It addresses issues that affect us all: What attitude should we have toward our enemies? Does Judaism advocate hatred of our adversaries and joy at their misfortune? Surely, it does not advocate turning the other cheek? So how do we deal with people who have crossed us? What does the Torah say about gloating or schadenfreude – “*nit farginen*” in Yiddish?

These and many related questions are answered in the classic story of the battle between good and evil so vividly captured in today's Torah reading, which recounts the dramatic pursuit of the Jews by the Egyptians until the shores of the Red Sea. On this very day 3325 years ago the sea miraculously splits, the Jews walk across to safety and erupt in a song of praise to God. The Egyptians follow and drown. The angels are thrilled and sing too, but God stops them: “The work of My hands is drowning in the sea and you sing?!”

Meanwhile, the Jews sing away, and their song becomes so permanently etched in our collective memory that it is repeated daily in our prayers!

So how do we resolve this contradiction and answer the question: May we celebrate when our enemies perish?

The fact that God muzzled the angels suggests the answer is no. The fact that the Jews rejoiced and sang after the splitting of the sea suggests the answer is yes. The fact that we don't praise God as “good” when our enemies perish – even when we are saved – suggests that there is an inherent contradiction going on here.

This sermon resolves the contradiction, explaining when it is right to rejoice and sing praise, and when it is more proper to keep silent. In so doing it draws on the examples of Rabbi Meier and his wife Bruria, and Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai and his son Elazar. It also supplies some life-changing and inspirational lessons from modern day life on how we may transform our enemies.

AND YOU SING?! MAY WE CELEBRATE WHEN OUR ENEMIES PERISH?

1. Splitting of the Sea (Joke)

A professor of biblical criticism was delivering a lecture on the splitting of the sea, attempting to demonstrate that it was not a sea at all, but a tidal pool with water about two inches deep.

As he expounded his proofs, an old lady from the back row exclaimed: "What a miracle!"

This irritated him to no end. "Excuse me, Madam, I just explained that there was NO miracle. The water was two inches deep!"

The old lady gasped, "I can't believe the magnitude of this miracle!"

He was now really angry, "Lady! Are you deaf?!" he shouted, "No miracle! Two inches of water!"

But she would not be denied: "What a miracle! The entire Egyptian army drowned in two inches of water."

2. A Major Question

As we know, today's Torah reading recounts the dramatic pursuit of the Jewish slaves by the Egyptians until they trap them on the shores of the Red Sea. The sea miraculously splits, the Jews walk across to safety and erupt in a song of praise to God. The Egyptians follow and drown.

Because of this story, a major question arises in Judaism: What should be our attitude when our enemies perish?

This question is amplified by the Talmud which quotes Rabbi Yochanan as saying that as the pursuing Egyptians were drowning, the angels began singing too, but God rebuked them, saying "The work of My hands is drowning in the sea and you sing?"¹

But then why, when the Jews sang, their joyful burst of praise to God was considered perfectly fine. Indeed, this event – one of the greatest moments in history – is permanently etched in our collective memory and repeated daily in our prayers!

3. The Talmud's Answer

The Talmud addresses this issue in a round-about way.

It points out that it is written in the Book of Chronicles² – which recounts how the enemies of Israel turned on each other and did not harm the Jewish people – that, at the time, the Jewish singers sang, "Give thanks

¹ *Sanhedrin* 39b: R. Aha b. Hanina said: When the wicked perish, there is song; [thus] when Ahab b. Omri perished there was song. But does the Holy One, blessed be He, rejoice over the downfall of the wicked? Is it not written, [That they should praise] as they went out before the army, and say, "Give thanks unto the Lord for His mercy endureth for ever," concerning which R. Jonathan asked: "Why are the words, 'He is good' omitted from this expression of thanks?" Because the Holy One, blessed be He, does not rejoice in the downfall of the wicked. For R. Samuel b. Nahman said in R. Jonathan's name: "What is meant by, 'And one approached not the other all night?' In that hour the ministering angels wished to utter the song [of praise] before the Holy One, blessed be He, but He rebuked them, saying: 'My handiwork [the Egyptians] is drowning in the sea; would ye utter song before me!'" See also *Megillah* 10b.

² *Chronicles* 20:21.

to the Lord, for His mercy endures forever." Their song pointedly omitted the phrase "*for He is good*" – which is how it is normally written many, many times in the Book of Psalms: "Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good; His kindness endures forever."

Here – even though He had saved the Jewish people – God was praised as merciful for His act of salvation, but not as good.

Why? Because other people had to die!

It seems as if the goodness of God is in question whenever His creation is harmed – even if this is necessary!

But, we still don't know the answer to *our* original question: What should be our attitude when our enemies perish? Are we allowed to rejoice when this happens or not?

- The fact that God muzzled the angels suggests the answer is no.
- The fact that the Jews rejoiced and sang after the splitting of the sea suggests the answer is yes.
- The fact that we don't praise God as "good" when our enemies perish – even when we are saved – suggests that there is an inherent contradiction going on here.

4. Contradiction

The answer comes – in typical Jewish fashion – through yet another contradiction.

Consider the following verses in the Book of Proverbs:

- "When the evil perish, there is joyful song," *ba'avod resho'im rinah*.³
- "When your enemy falls, do not exult, and when he stumbles, let your heart not rejoice," *b'nefol oiyivcho al tismach, u'b'kosehlo al togail li'bcho*.⁴

³ Proverbs 11:10.

⁴ Proverbs 24:17.

Does that make sense?

It does, when you consider the Hebrew grammar of these verses.

The first verse, which speaks of joyful song when the evil perish, refers to the evil in the plural, as a category not personally as individuals. Here we are speaking about a large category of cruel people who personify evil – like the Nazis, for example.

The second verse, which prohibits joy when an enemy falls, refers to the enemy in the singular, “your enemy.” This means your personal enemy – like your neighbor who poisoned your dog because it was barking too loud.

The key distinction is that we rejoice over the demise of *evil*, not of an individual who perpetrated *an evil*.

“When the evil perish, there is joyful song” does not describe a personal celebration, but a song praising God for eliminating evil.⁵

Did you ever notice how some people simply derive pleasure from the misfortunes of others? Even if they gain absolutely nothing from the other’s failure, they delight in it. The word used for this is schadenfreude. In Yiddish the expression is “*nit farginen*.”

Schadenfreude is truly a disgraceful quality, because the one deriving pleasure is not benefiting in any way from the other’s loss. It’s one thing if he benefited from it; even then it is not appropriate to celebrate, but at least then you can find some basis for rejoicing. But to exult and rejoice “when your enemy falls” or “stumbles” – to laugh, for example, when a person slips – that is unacceptable.

And that is what the second verse is negating, in contrast to the first verse which is honoring and celebrating the demise of evil in general, as a force that is antithetical to God and to all that is good.

⁵This also explains the other differences between the two verses: 1) The first verse uses the word “*rinah*,” the second “*tismach*” (*simcha*) and “*togail*” (*gilah*). 2) (When the evil perish (*ba’avod*), the latter – (when your enemy) falls, stumbles (*be’nefol, b’kosehlo*): *Rinah* signifies not a personal celebration, but a restrained song praising God for eliminating evil. Which is appropriate when evil perishes. But *simcha* and *gilah* includes an unbridled celebration and rejoicing, which is not appropriate when “your enemy” falls or stumbles.

5. Talmudic Story

We can understand this better from the following story in the Talmud⁶:

In Rabbi Meier's neighborhood lived some criminals, and they caused him a great deal of trouble. Accordingly, Rabbi Meir prayed that they should die. But his wife Bruria said to him: "How do you arrive to this position? How is such a prayer permitted?"

She then quoted him Psalm 104, where it says, "May sins vanish from the earth and the evil be no more."⁷ And she pointed out that it says "sins" not "sinners." Therefore, the logical deduction is that when sins vanish, there is no more evil or evildoers.

So, said Bruria to Rabbi Meier, "Pray for them that they should repent, and your problems will disappear."

This is what Rabbi Meier did, and the criminals repented.

In other words, a personal vendetta even against evil people is not the way of the Torah. But that does not suggest we should "turn the other cheek." We should always be mindful that there is evil in the world. However, our objective has to be to eliminate evil, not the evildoers. (Because when evil disappears, so do evildoers.)

6. No Small Task

This is no small task. Yet, it is absolutely necessary.

This is what God expects of us, as evidenced by what happened to Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai.⁸

When the Roman rulers of the Holy Land placed a prize on the heads of Rabbi Shimon and his son Rabbi Elazar, the two had to flee, and they hid in a cave for twelve years. During this time, they spent every minute of their day studying Torah.

⁶ *Berachot* 10a.

⁷ *Psalms* 104:35.

⁸ *Shabbat* 33b.

When they emerged from the cave, they were in an elevated spiritual state and could not connect to the material world. Therefore, when they saw people plowing the earth and sowing seeds, they were shocked: How could people set aside the eternal life that is Torah and occupy their days with the transitory material life? So intense was their anger at what they saw that whoever they looked at burned up in flames.

Proclaimed a voice from heaven: "Have you come out to destroy My world? Return to your cave!"

They went back for another year and this – their thirteenth year of study – taught them to value endeavors other than their own.

From then on, wherever Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai went, his look would heal rather than destroy.

7. God's Plan

God's plan in creating the material universe and all its mercurial temptations is not to destroy and annihilate the world. And this is what Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai had to learn. When he emerged after his thirteenth year of study – his Bar Mitzvah if you will – he understood that his job was not to burn up the world but to repair it.

This teaching applies to our enemies as well. We should not rejoice at our enemy's destruction, rather we should look for ways to transform him and bring him to re-connect with God in repentance (*teshuvah*).

When an evildoer repents, he no longer commits evil and thus evil vanishes.

8. Angels and Humans

And now to explain the difference between humans and angels, who were not permitted to rejoice, while the Jews were allowed to sing a joyous song of praise.

Unlike the angels, the Jews had personally been saved from death at the hands of the pursuing Egyptians. And thus they sang praise to God for saving their lives and destroying the evil ones who refused to allow them to leave after 210 years of bitter exile.

Indeed, it is a mitzvah to acknowledge any form of liberation – and certainly to thank God for a miracle. This is a logical mitzvah, for it reflects the basic decency of expressing gratitude to one's savior. Had the Jews not sang praise, it would have meant that they took what just happened for granted. It would have been an insult to God.

9. Hallel

This is why today we say Hallel, [as the collection of psalms which praise God is known. The first one begins – and many other repeat – *Hallelu-Yah!*]

But the Hallel we say today, in celebration of the splitting of the sea, is a shortened Hallel.

One reason: Because⁹ many Egyptians drowned at that time, and we are reminded what the Book of Proverbs says, as was cited earlier: "When your enemy falls, do not exult, and when he stumbles, let your heart not rejoice."

So we are grateful to God. We praise God for saving us. We are glad we were spared, but we don't overdo it. We do not gloat over the destruction of evil people. We focus on the elimination of the evil that empowered them.

⁹ According to Beis Yosef (*Tur Orach Chaim* 490, from *Shibolei HaLeket* citing *Midrash Harneinu*). See also *Midrash Pesikta D'Rav Kahana* on Deuteronomy 16:14, why the Torah doesn't even once refer to joy (*simcha*) on Passover in contrast to Sukkot where *simcha* is mentioned three times.

10. Divine Perspective (Optional)

That is the Divine perspective – there is no joy in simply seeing people die even if they are your enemies and even if they are evil.

This is why God rebuked the angels for singing. Unlike the Jews, the angels were never in any danger. So, in effect, God said to them: “What do you have to sing about? You should be thinking of ways to prevent such evil from befalling earth! You should be thinking of ways to help evildoers repent! You should be thinking of ways to help them transform their evil deeds into good!”

The angels were disciplined by God to stand mutely and meditate on the death of the Egyptians. And this is the deeper meaning of the verse we read in the Torah today: “One did not come near the other all night long”¹⁰ (the verse from which Rabbi Yochanan derives that God silenced the singing angels).

11. Lessons for Us

In summary, what lessons can we derive from this episode?

First of all, we *must* sing joyful praise to God and acknowledge the gifts He showers upon us daily. And, of course, we must be especially joyful and grateful when He protects us from harm and eliminates our enemies.

But we must never personalize this. We must never rejoice over the downfall of our personal enemies – who may be neighbors or relatives – but rather always look for ways to transform them.

“Is that realistic?” you are probably asking.

I tell you it is. It is realistic and far reaching, for it is the solution to many conflicts of everyday life.

¹⁰ Exodus 14:20.

Never allow an enemy to control your heart by forcing you to hate him or her. For all people are creatures of God, and God Himself calls them “the work of My hands.”

Because each and everyone is created in the Divine Image, each contains a core of good and when the surface evil (the crust) is eliminated, each can be transformed into an agent of good.

12. An Unlikely Convert (Inspirational Story)

I'd like to conclude with an inspirational story of two Jews who applied these lessons and brought about an astounding transformation in another human being. This story was related by Kathryn Watterson in her book *Not By the Sword* and also collected in the *Chicken Soup for the Jewish Soul*.¹¹

When Michael Weiss and his wife Julie moved to Lincoln, Nebraska, they began receiving hate calls and then hate mail. Typical missives read: “You will be sorry you moved here, Jew boy!” Or, “The KKK is watching you, Scum.” Or, “The Holohoax was nothing compared to what's going to happen to you.”

Naturally, they reported all this to the police. And this is how they learned that the likely perpetrator was a man named Larry Trapp, the “grand dragon” of the local Ku Klax Klan and avowed Neo-Nazi, who was believed to be terrorizing Black, Vietnamese and Jewish families in the area.

The police told the Weissers that this man was very dangerous and, as it later turned out, he had been planning to bomb their synagogue B'nai Jeshurun. The police also told the Weissers one unusual fact about Trapp – that he was confined to a wheelchair and house-bound.

¹¹This version has been adapted from the summary of the original story included in *The Chicken Soup for the Jewish Soul*, by Jack Canfield, Mark Victor Hansen, and Dov Peretz Elkins, pp. 7-13.

This last fact caused the Weissers to wonder how lonely he must be, and how isolated in all his hatred. Thinking about this, Julie conceived of an idea. In response to his hate mail, she was going to send him a different kind of response. Each day she would mail him a passage from the Book of Proverbs on how to treat your fellow man and conduct your life.

Meanwhile, Michael began calling Trapp's KKK hotline and leaving him messages like: "Larry, why do you hate me? You don't even know me, so how can you hate me?" And: "Larry, do you know that the first laws the Nazis passed were against people like yourself who had physical handicaps? Do you realize you would be the first to die under Hitler?"

On one occasion when Michael called, Trapp picked up the phone. Of course, he responded with a bunch of invectives, but he also asked, "What do you want?"

Michael said, "I know you are in a wheelchair, and I thought maybe I could take you to the grocery store or something." Trapp was stumped. It took him a moment to recover. Finally, he cleared his throat and said, "That's nice of you. But don't call this number anymore."

However, Michael continued to call, and he asked his congregation – following the example of Rabbi Meier and Bruria – to include in their prayers someone "who is sick from the illness of bigotry and hatred. Pray that he can be healed too."

It took a while, and other people got involved as well, but eventually there came a time when the Weissers were invited by Trapp to his home. They brought him dinner and a friendship ring. That night Trapp removed the swastika rings from his fingers and put on the friendship ring. And when he did that, he broke down in tears.

Overwhelmed by emotion, the Weissers started crying too.

Five months after the Weissers began their campaign to transform their enemy, Trapp resigned from the Ku Klax Klan. He wrote apologies to the many people he had threatened and abused. He said, "I wasted the last forty years of my life and caused harm to other people. Now I've learned we're one race and one race only."

A short while later, Trapp found out that he had less than a year to live. At that point, the Weissers invited him to move into their home. As his health deteriorated, they took care of him, fed him and waited on him. Everyone in the family – including their three teenage children – pitched in.

On June 5, 1992, Larry Trapp converted to Judaism in a ceremony at B'nai Jeshurun – the very synagogue he had planned to bomb. And three months later he died in the Weissers' home, with Michael and Julie beside him, holding hands.

At the funeral, Michael said:

"Those of us who remain behind ask the question, 'O Lord, what is man? We are like a breath, like a shadow that passes away...' And yet, somehow, we know there is more to our lives than what first meets the eye."

May we all internalize that lesson today. Amen.