

Pesah (Lesson 2)

by Rabbi Ralph Tawil

Value: Not gloating over the enemy's (opponent's) misfortune.

Pesah's seventh day is traditionally associated with the sea's splitting, Israel's safe crossing, and the Egyptian army's watery last stand (or sink). The Torah reports of Moshe and Israel's hymn to God after that event. The Talmud reports of another attempt at singing—that of the ministering angels. God rebukes these angels and brings them to an understanding of what we should have hoped the best resolution of the conflict would include. In these times, particularly, when we are reluctantly engaged in a battle with an implacable enemy, it is important to stress the Jewish value of not gloating over the enemy's downfall.

Text: Tractate Megilah 10b

R. Yohanan said: What [is the meaning of what] is written: "And they did not approach one another the whole night" ("Velo qarab zeh el zeh kol hallayla") (Shemot 14:20)? The ministering angels wanted to recite a song, but the Holy One blessed be He said to them, "the works of My hand are drowning in the sea and you are singing?!"

Discussion: The context of the Talmudic passage is to prove that Hashem does not rejoice for the downfall of the wicked. This idea is expressed several times throughout the Pesah holiday. For example, we pour out 16 drops of wine when we read about the plagues during the Pesah Seder. Don Yishaq Abarbanel, who was himself expelled from Spain in 1492, explained this custom:

By spilling a drop of wine from the Pesah cup for each plague, we acknowledge that our own joy is lessened and incomplete. For our redemption had to come by means of the punishment of other human beings. Even though these are just punishments for evil acts, it says "Do not rejoice at the fall of your enemy" (*Proverbs 24:17*). (As quoted in *A Different Night* by Noam Zion and David Dishon)

The Midrash (*Pesikta derab Kahanna*) comments that one of the reasons why the word *rejoice* is not written concerning the festival of Pesah is because Egyptians died. Likewise we only recite the [complete] hallel on the first evening and day (and not throughout the holiday) because, as Shemuel said, "Do not rejoice at the fall of your enemy" (*Proverbs 24:17*).

The full context of the verse in Proverbs reads:

If your enemy falls, do not exult;
If he trips, let your heart not rejoice,
Lest the Lord see it and be displeased,
and avert His wrath from him. (*Proverbs 24:17-18*)

Similarly, we find that the Rabbinic commentary to Ya'aqob's situation before meeting his brother Esav, reflecting the same sensitivity. On the verse: "Ya'aqob became exceedingly afraid and was distressed" (Beresheet 32:8), the Midrash (*Beresheet Rabbah* 76:2, see Rashi) comments:

Ya'aqob was afraid that he might be killed; he was distressed that he might have to kill.

The same idea has persisted into the modern state of Israel. The late Prime Minister of Israel, Golda Meir, commented: "Perhaps we can forgive the enemy for killing our children, but it will be much harder to forgive them for turning our children into killers."

Then Chief of Staff, General Yitzhak Rabin commented after the Six-Day War in 1967: War is harsh and cruel, filled with blood and tears. While the joy of victory seized the whole people, among the community of fighters themselves there is a strange phenomenon: they cannot celebrate whole-heartedly. There is a large measure of sadness, of shock, mixed into their festivities. Some fighters cannot celebrate at all. The frontline soldiers saw with their own eyes—not only the glory of victory, but also its price—their fellow fighters fell at their sides in pools of blood. I know that the price paid by the enemy also touched a deep place in the hearts of many. Perhaps the Jewish people has never been educated and never become accustomed to the joy of the conqueror. Therefore, our victory is received with mixed feelings." (As quoted in *A Different Night* by Noam Zion and David Dishon)

All this is fine, but the Torah reports that Moshe and Israel did, in fact, sing after the Egyptians drowned in the sea. Why were they allowed to sing? 1) They were not gloating, but praising God on his victory, not on their own prowess. 2) The children of Israel were allowed to sing and praise God, as they were the ones directly saved from annihilation. The angels, on the other hand, who are looking at the events objectively, cannot be happy that the choice of last resort, that of drowning the Egyptians, had to be taken. They, like God, must desire the repentance of the wicked, and not their destruction.

God chooses to destroy the enemies of Israel, in this case the Egyptians, only as a last resort. The Midrash of R. Yohanan would serve to mitigate the feeling of triumph and self-assured cockiness that might ensue from a spectacular military victory. Though, unfortunately, occasionally the enemy must be destroyed, the victor must realize the cost in human life and limb of the vanquished.

Today's Israelis would much prefer a Palestinian people that would negotiate with them rather than shoot at them. Israel's tremendous investment in the Oslo process is evidence of how far Israel was willing to go for what they hoped would be a peaceful resolution of the conflict. The present Palestinian leadership chooses instead the path of violence. Of course we would rather our enemies be defeated than they defeat us; however, we would prefer that no one be killed and that we could work out our differences without violence.

Application to our lives: When we are involved in competitive sports, let us learn how to be good winners as well as good losers; not gloating over our opponents' mistake, nor making them feel bad about losing.

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