

Mordechai Malka

Rav and Av Beit Din of Elad

**Chairman of the Worldwide Committee of
STa”M (Sifrei Torah, Tefillin, and Mezuzot)**

Members of Chief Rabbinate of Israel



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OHR

Parashat Ki Tavo

HAMELECH

When Your Enemy Falls...

It says in this week's parashah (Devarim 28:63): Just as Hashem was glad to be benevolent to you and to increase you, so too will He make glad over you to destroy you and to eradicate you etc.

Rashi comments that the pasuk indicates that Hashem will have your enemies become glad to destroy you. Siftei Chachamim explains that Rashi is making it clear that it is the enemy who will rejoice at the downfall of their adversary, whilst Hashem Himself is not gladdened at the downfall of the wicked. This idea is sourced in Megillah 10b and Sanhedrin 39b where we find, on two separate occasions, that Hashem did not rejoice at the downfall of the wicked.

A Cause for Joy?

On the other hand, King Shlomo teaches us in Mishlei (11:10): Destruction of the wicked is a cause for joy. Chazal (Psikta Zutrata Devarim p. 35a, Sifrei Bamidbar 117) apply this to Pharaoh, Korach, Sisera, Achav, and Haman.

Who is Happy?

The Yalkut Shemoni (Melachim I 233) asks this question. On the one hand, "Destruction of the wicked is a cause for joy." On the other hand, we are taught that Hashem does not rejoice at the downfall of the wicked.

R' Yosi bar Chanina explains: He is not happy, but He causes others to be happy.

A Full Load

The Zohar Hakadosh (Parashat Noach p. 61b) poses this dilemma and offers an alternate reconciliation. That is, there is a certain degree of sinfulness (the calculation is both quantitative and

qualitative) which earns perpetrators total destruction, as alluded to in Bereishit 15:16. When the wicked fill their quota of sinfulness and are thereafter destroyed, that is a cause for joy. But if, for some reason, they are destroyed before the quota is full, Hashem "feels bad", as it were, over their destruction.

Good for the World

The Sefer Hachinuch (Mitzva 34) discusses the rationale behind the prohibition of manslaughter. The reasoning, he says, is known to all, for Hashem built His world in order for it to be inhabited. Therefore, we must not actively destroy people who inhabit the world. However, he adds, thoroughly wicked people, such as heretics and the like, do not help to provide for a better society. These are people who are doing all they could to destroy the world. One of our Sages, who took an active role in lawfully bringing about the demise of the wicked, said of himself, "I am merely getting rid of thorns from the vineyard" (Bava Metzia 83b); i.e., destroying these people will enhance society, much like thorn removal will allow the vineyard to provide more and better fruit.

Why Rejoice?

It seems reasonable to suggest yet another reconciliation, that being, that much depends upon one's intent in rejoicing. As the wicked are being punished, a person can ask himself: Why am I happy? If his happiness is because Hashem's Honor is being displayed as those who violated His command are being brought to task, that is a good type of rejoicing.

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If, however, a person is happy because he had a personal hatred towards that wicked individual, that is not the desirable result. This is a very delicate matter, a fineline distinction, the types of which only Hashem can truly discern. It can be likened to the rule if kanaim pog'im bo, which is not distributed as a permission slip to the general populace as it requires a heart full of genuine sensitivity to the disgrace of Hashem's Honor. Otherwise, such an act can be translated as nothing less than unauthorized murder. (See also Rabbeinu Yonah and Alshich to Mishlei 24:17-18 who similarly propose that intent is an integral factor.)

Why Shmuel Hakatan?

With this we can understand what we are taught in Berachot 28b. Shimon HaPekuli arranged the eighteen blessings (of the standardized silent weekday prayer) in front of Rabban Gamliel in Yavneh. Rabban Gamliel asked the Sages: Is anyone capable of composing a blessing condemning apostates? Shmuel Hakatan was chosen for the job.

Asks the Chid"i (Responsa Chayim Sha'al II:11): Why was it necessary to search high and low to find an author for this berachah? Could not any schoolchild, proficient in the Hebrew language, be capable of performing the task?

The Chid"i (along with Nefesh Hachayim II:13) explains that the Shemoneh Esrei is no simple matter. It is full of deep secrets, each letter and the combination of letters containing countless allusions to Kabbalistic and esoteric concepts. So obviously only a very pious and sagacious genius would qualify.

In line with our previous thoughts, we can suggest another idea as well. Being that this blessing was

meant to invite curses upon heretics, it was of utmost importance that it be composed by a person who was void of personal biases and who would write it totally for Heaven's sake. Shmuel Hakatan was wont to repeat (see Avot 4:19) the verse, "When your enemy falls, do not rejoice etc." He must have practiced what he preached. So he was certainly a suitable candidate for the task of composing this additional blessing.

Causing Others to Rejoice

After all that has been said, there is still room to ask: How is it that Hashem will have some people rejoice over the downfall of their Jewish adversaries? Moreover, from the Targum Onkelos and Targum Yonatan it is apparent that they understand the passage in our parashah to be saying that Hashem Himself will rejoice as the Jews are being punished. Why is this so?

The answer, it seems, is that every curse contains a concealed blessing. The Zohar Chadash relates that Rabi Shimon bar Yochai was asked why the Tochachah (reprimand) in Parashat Bechukotai, which corresponds to the destruction of the first Beit Hamikdash, concludes with words of consolation, whereas the Tochachah in Parashat Ki Tavo, which corresponds to the destruction of the second Beit Hamikdash, does not. Eliyahu Hanavi came to Rabi Shimon bar Yochai to explain to him how Hashem activates His Attribute of Mercy even at times of strict judgment.

So, what then is the hidden blessing contained in the joy which enemy armies and nations will express as they execute and receive reports of the plundering done to Jews? The answer can be found in the words of the Rashbatz (Magen Avot) who explains what is meant by the continuation

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of the aforementioned verse. The pasuk, in full, reads as follows: When your enemy falls, do not rejoice; and when he stumbles, let your heart not gladden. Lest Hashem see [your response] and it will be bad in His Eyes [that you rejoice over your enemy's downfall] and He will repeal His wrath from upon him. Rashbatz adds: Hashem will repeal the wrath from him and instead, direct it upon the one who smirked as his enemy writhed in pain.

We find a similar idea in Nedarim 40a. Rava was ill and he asked that his illness be publicized so that his colleagues will pray for him and his enemies will rejoice at his pain. Rava felt that the inappropriate rejoicing of the enemy will cause Hashem to alleviate Rava's pain (Rashi to Berachot 55b).

We now understand why it is that as the Jews suffer in their long and bitter exile, Hashem specifically sees to it that enemy nations become aware of the Jews' suffering and rejoice over it, as this very rejoicing arouses Hashem's compassion for His children and repeals the harsh verdict. With this, we can understand the aforementioned Targum as well, which indicated that Hashem Himself will rejoice, this being so because the enemy's rejoicing will hasten the redemption.

Beitar and Yerushalayim

This idea lies behind the institution of the fourth blessing of Birkat Hamazon. This blessing was established by the Sages of Yavneh in response to a series of miracles which were done for those massacred in Beitar. The Medrash (Eichah 2:2) relates that Beitar received such a harsh blow because its inhabitants rejoiced over the downfall of Yerushalayim. What did they have against the inhabitants of Yerushalayim? Well, Yerushalayim

hosted a number of wealthy landrobbers, who devised and executed forced sales of real estate. Quite a number of Beitar landowners fell prey to this plot and found themselves homeless and impoverished. Therefore, when Yerushalayim was overtaken by enemy armies, Beitar rejoiced. Hashem saw this rejoicing and was disturbed. Yes, you had been wronged by these people. Nonetheless, a Jew should never express nor even feel joy when he sees or hears of another Jew suffering. This rejoicing caused Hashem to allow the Beitar massacre to transpire, one of the greatest catastrophes in history, taking its toll on innumerable lives, in violent and torturous ways.

Explains the Ben Ish Chai (in his Sefer Benayahu to Berachot 48b): This is why the Sages of Yavneh went out of their way to compose and institute an additional blessing, to be uttered each time a Jew eats a bread-based meal. Several years after the terrible Beitar massacre, a new Roman King took the throne and finally allowed the corpses to be buried. And then, an amazing revelation was discovered. Of all the millions of bodies, not a single one had decayed or rotted. All were intact, odorless. This was truly a miracle. The Sages of Yavneh had been exiled from Yerushalayim. They themselves had been inhabitants of Yerushalayim. Instead of continuing the ongoing strife between Beitar and Yerushalayim, these Sages of Yerushalayim-Yavneh wished to express their grief over the Beitar Massacre by the establishment of a blessing which expresses gratitude to Hashem for the preservation and burial of the Beitar victims. True, they had to be punished; but Hashem saw fit to preserve this degree of honor for them. And the Sages of Yerushalayim-Yavneh would now join in with this show of honor to the inhabitants of Beitar, perpetuating their memory

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by establishing the Berachah Hatov VeHameitiv as an everlasting tribute.

Don't Miss this Great Story!

When Rabbi Yom Tov Lipman Heller (author of Tosafot Yom Tov on Mishnayot) served as Rav as the city of Prague, he did his best to fulfill his duties, paying special attention to just distribution of the responsibility of tax payment. From time to time, government officials levied taxes upon the populace. Some well-to-do members of the Jewish community, instead of taking the bulk of the burden, used their ties with influential parties and excused themselves entirely, thereby shifting the entire burden upon the middle-class and poor. Rabbi Heller felt that this situation had to be rectified, so he secured for himself the position of assessing how much each community member is to pay. He took into account each person's financial ability, and according to his decisions, the wealthy were required to pay higher percentages. This aroused their wrath and they sought to get the Rabbi demoted. They slandered the Rav and heavily bribed government officials to the extent that the Rabbi was accused of very serious offenses of mutiny. All they had wanted to do was to get the Rav demoted. Instead, he was on his way to a death sentence compounded with an expulsion of the entire Jewish community.

Miraculously, just then, the Rav's son, Rabbi Shmuel Heller was instrumental in saving the lives of a wife and child of a high ranking official. As remuneration, this official fought for the dismissal of the death sentence, replacing it with a heavy fine, which basically emptied all of the Rav's financial resources.

In addition to saving the Rabbi's life, Hashem saw to it that the slanderers receive their due, one by

one, as they and their close ones contracted illnesses and passed away. One of the leading rabble-rousers was a fellow called Rephael. In the not too distant past, he had actually been an advocate of the Rav. It was just the redistribution of tax responsibility which had riled up his anger and got him to take action. Now, when he fell ill, the Rabbi thought to visit him, but did not want to appear as one who is laughing at the downfall of an adversary.

Instead, this Raphael sent for the Rabbi. When he came, Raphael apologized profusely for his wayward and sinister actions and begged the Rabbi to pray for his recovery. Raphael could not control himself. He erupted into tears. Rabbi Yom Tov declared, "I forgive you wholeheartedly and I will pray that Hashem send you a speedy recovery."

The Lessons We Can Glean

Let us learn from this parashah how much Hashem truly loves us. Even when we sin and must be punished, Hashem does so with a dose of compassion. He has our adversaries rejoice at our downfall so as to hasten our redemption.

Let us learn not to rejoice at the downfall of a fellow Jew even if he has harmed us in the past. Let us rejoice at a downfall only when Heaven's Glory is thereby enhanced. Let us care for and pray for all our brethren. Through this, may we all merit to be inscribed and sealed in the book of the righteous, for a peaceful and good year. Amen.

Shabbat Shalom Umevorach

Ketivah Vachatimah Tovah

Fondly,

Mordechai Malka