

The True Revenge

Category: Emor, Vayikra

The largest group of converts from Europe hail from Germany. What can we learn from Jewish history about this?

From Our Greatest Enemies

Does Judaism believe in revenge? Yes or no?

If we are honest, we'll admit that we all have had moments, myself included, when we felt happy that something bad happened to someone we didn't like. We may have even made that bad thing happen ourselves.

So here's an example that most of us can relate to: When America kills terrorists like Osama Bin Laden.

Are we allowed to be happy that he was killed? Is that moral?

At first blush, we might say that it wasn't revenge here—we are talking about stopping the next mega-terror attack, because this man said again and again that his goal was to hurt as many innocent people as possible, and he backed up his words with acts of terror. And so, killing him meant saving the lives of hundreds and perhaps thousands of people.

Secondly, there's the idea of prevention. A man who caused the death of thousands of people himself deserves death—and his death was a deterrent to others who otherwise would do the same thing.

In Judaism, we don't necessarily seek revenge—but we most explicitly do seek victory. And killing Bin Laden, while a small victory over Al Qaeda, was not yet the final victory. Destroying this enemy was only the first stage of victory here.

Everyone has heard of the story of Purim, in which the evil Haman wanted "to eradicate, kill and destroy" the Jewish Nation to such an extent that ever since then, whenever we want to say that someone is a serious anti-Semite, we compare him to Haman.

But even though Haman ended up hanging from a tree, Queen Esther didn't stop there, and asked the king to have his ten sons hanged too—and yet even that didn't end the story with Haman.

The Talmud (Tractate Sanhedrin 96b) tells us something very interesting: “The sons of the sons of Haman studied Torah in Bnei Brak”—meaning that Haman's very descendants, generations later, converted and became part of the Jewish nation, ending up studying Torah in the yeshivahs for which Bnei Brak is still famous.

Now that is the ultimate Jewish victory—that the descendants of the very same person who wanted to eradicate the Jewish Nation themselves become, of their own free will, joined to the Jewish Nation, choosing the fate of the very nation that was persecuted by their ancestors.

Here's another example of the same kind of “victory” in Jewish history.

The famous Ten Lost Tribes of Israel that everyone's heard about lived in ancient Israel. At the end of the First Temple era, King Sancheiriv from Assyria came along and exiled them, and ever since then, they lost their roots. They assimilated into wherever it was that they ended up. As for Sancheiriv himself, he was assassinated by his own children after he failed to conquer Jerusalem. And again, the Talmud tells us something interesting: “Some of the descendants of Sancheiriv taught Torah in public. And who were these? Shmaya and Avtalyon.”

In the Second Temple Era, in the period of the Zugos, the Pairs of Jewish leaders who acted as counterparts and partners to each other, Shmaya and Avtalyon were the leaders at one point. They were actually both converts to Judaism, and were a critical link in the chain of tradition that passed the Torah down from generation to generation. And these two converts were descendants of the same king who had exiled the Ten Tribes: Sancheiriv.

Another example of this phenomenon is Devorah HaNeviah, Deborah the Prophetess. She was one of the few women leaders of the Jewish Nation.

The Book of Judges tells us that it was she and her top general, Barak Ben Avinoam, who battled Sisra, who had come with a mighty army to conquer the Holy Land in her time. Not only that, but the Book of Shoftim tells us that Sisra was assassinated by a woman, Yael the wife of Chever the Kaini.

And again, the Talmud tells us: “Some of the descendants of Sisra studied Torah in Jerusalem. Thus, not only was it Haman and Sancheiriv, but also Sisra who “merited” that some of his descendants converted and joined the Jewish Nation. And according to various opinions, one of those descendants was Rabbi Akiva himself—one of the greatest leaders to ever rise in the Jewish Nation.

The Source of All Evil

But in reality, the Torah itself gives us an example of this. Can anyone guess what it is?

So let’s go back in Jewish history and take another look at the Pharaoh who enslaved the Jewish people in ancient Egypt. This Pharaoh was essentially no different than Hitler, may his name be erased. He slaughtered Jewish children, put Jews in work camps, and so on.

But who was it that saved the life of Moshe, the leader who would go on to redeem the Jewish Nation? His very own daughter.

We’ve all heard the story of how Batya, the Egyptian princess, found Baby Moshe floating in a basket on the Nile River.

The Torah tells us, “And the daughter of the Pharaoh went down to bathe at the river,” on which the Talmud (Tractate Sotah 12b) elaborates, “She went down to rinse herself of her father’s idols.”

Now, imagine for a moment what it would be like if Hitler had a daughter—who then converts to Judaism, saves the leader of the Jews and ultimately joins the Jewish Nation when they go out of Egypt. This is what Batya was like.

A couple of years ago, there was an article in an Israeli newspaper on a very interesting phenomenon. Out of all the countries in Europe, the greatest number of converts to Judaism were coming specifically from the Germans—it was specifically Germany from which more people were joining the Jewish Nation.

The article interviewed several of them, trying to understand this phenomenon. Psychologists tried to explain that it came from a repressed guilt over knowing that their grandfathers were part of the Nazi Party, and perhaps even personally murdered Jews themselves—triggering in them such an oppositional response

that they even converted and became Jews themselves.

But the truth is that we don't need to look for explanations—because it's just the same phenomenon described in the Talmud happening in our day and age again.

In the terminology of Chasidic philosophy, this is called is'hapcha —when the greatest good comes out of the very evil itself.

And there can be no greater victory for the Jewish Nation than when our enemies themselves, or at least their descendants, become part of the Jewish people.

We even have the same phenomenon in Chasidic history.

When the Chasidic movement began close to 300 years ago, it had many opponents, particularly against Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the founder of the Chabad movement.

The primary and most famous opponent of the movement was Rabbi Eliyahu of Vilna, known as the Vilna Gaon—but ultimately, among his descendants there were quite a few Chasidim.

In addition to that, the argument the opponents used against the Alter Rebbe was that he was a rebel against the Czar who was helping the Russian Empire's enemies. In that period, the Ottoman Empire was considered an enemy of Russia, and the Holy Land was part of the Ottoman Empire. And because the Alter Rebbe was sending a lot of money to support the poor of the Holy Land, his opponents argued that he was sending money to Russia's enemies, and other such similar arguments.

Now, the individual who had written and signed the document that informed on the Alter Rebbe was a man named Avigdor ben Chaim, who was also the chief rabbi of the city of Pinsk. The result was that the Alter Rebbe was arrested and transported to Petersburg, where he was imprisoned for 53 days, only getting released on the 19th of Kislev, which became a holiday for Chabad Chasidim ever since.

The story is told that this same Rabbi Avigdor lost his pulpit and eventually his sanity, ending up as a drunk who would show up at Chasidic 19th of Kislev celebrations and ask for a bit of liquor—saying that in his “merit” did they have the holiday in the first place.

And not only that, but it is told that two of Rabbi Avigdor's sons became devoted Chasidim, so much so that they were ashamed of their father—to the extent that when they would be called up to the Torah, they would ask not to be called up using their father's name but rather, the names of their fathers-in-law.

Kiddush Hashem

Which brings us to this week's Torah portion.

In this week's Parshah, we read about the classic and all-important mitzvah of Kiddush Hashem, which, translated literally, means "Making G-d holy" (or "sanctifying G-d").

Traditionally, Kiddush Hashem has been translated as "Sanctifying G-d's Name"—which, in plain English, means giving G-d a good reputation. And that is accomplished by giving Jews and Judaism a good reputation—primarily by publicly displaying moral and ethical behavior.

The verse in the Parshah (Vayikra 22:32) states, "And I will be made holy in the midst of the Jewish Nation." And the Rebbe explains that a Kiddush Hashem is when we see a Jew win, like when Chananya, Mishael and Azarya were rescued from the fiery furnace—that was Kiddush Hashem because then the whole world saw G-d's Hand out in the open.

Likewise, by extension, when we succeed in killing an evil man like Osama bin Laden, it's also a Kiddush Hashem, a sanctification of G-d's Name, because it shows the victory of good and the defeat of evil.

But the greatest Kiddush Hashem is when we not only get rid of evil people, but when their descendants convert and become part of the Jewish Nation.