

To celebrate or not to celebrate?

Category: Behar, Vayikra

Are we allowed to rejoice in the demise of our enemy?

Pharaoh and Haman.

To celebrate or not to celebrate? This was the dilemma of the week after the news from Iran broke.

Well, there is a long-standing custom that during each summer Shabbat, especially between Passover and Shavuot, we study one chapter of Pirkei Avot. This Shabbat, we will study Chapter 4.

In Mishnah 19, it says: "Shmuel the Small says, 'When your enemy falls, do not rejoice, and when he stumbles, let your heart not exult'" (Proverbs 24:17). So the message seems clear, and the proper behavior seems quite straightforward.

However, this raises a question: Not long ago, we celebrated Passover and read the story of the parting of the Red Sea. In the "Song of the Sea," we say: "I will sing to the Lord... the horse and its rider He has hurled into the sea... Pharaoh's chariots and his army He cast into the sea... they sank like a stone... they went down like lead in the mighty waters." Here, we clearly celebrate the downfall of our enemy.

Many of you might know the famous teaching of the Talmud that when the Red Sea was parted, the angels wanted to sing, but God said to them, "The works of My hands are drowning in the sea, and you wish to sing?" (Sanhedrin 39b). But this was said to the angels, who were not part of the miracle. The Israelites, for whom the miracle was performed, certainly sang and rejoiced. The women, led by Miriam, even went out with timbrels and danced.

Here is another example:

On Purim, we celebrate the downfall of Haman, and we do not hide it. The Megillah explicitly describes how Haman and his sons were hanged. Towards the end of the Megillah, it says that we celebrate Haman's downfall and the miracle

of our deliverance. The blessing recited after reading the Megillah includes, “Blessed is He who avenges our cause and repays the enemies of our soul.” In the hymn “Shoshanat Yaakov,” recited immediately after this blessing, we add, “Cursed is Haman who sought to destroy me.”

So what exactly did Shmuel the Small mean when he said, “When your enemy falls, do not rejoice”? We seem to rejoice every time!

Who Was Shmuel Hakatan?

We can gain some understanding of this teaching by understanding who the author of the statement is.

Shmuel “the Small” was a Tanna, a sage who was part of the academy in Yavneh in the first generation after the destruction of the Second Temple. The Talmud (Sanhedrin 11b) recounts an interesting story that explains why he was called “Shmuel the Small.”

Once, Rabban Gamliel, who was the Nasi (president) of the Sanhedrin at the time, asked for seven of Israel’s greatest sages to come early the next morning to discuss the need to add an extra month, Adar II (as in this year), to the calendar.

The next morning, Rabban Gamliel found eight people present instead of seven. He said, “Who has come without permission? Let him leave.” Shmuel the Small stood up and said, “I am the one who came without permission. I did not come to intercalate the year, but to learn the practical law.” He explained that he came not to be one of the seven, but as an “apprentice.”

Rabban Gamliel responded, “Sit down, my son. You are worthy of declaring all the leap years....” In truth, Shmuel the Small had been invited, but someone else came without an invitation. To avoid embarrassing the uninvited person, Shmuel the Small took the blame upon himself. This act earned him the title “the Small.”

This story helps us understand why Shmuel the Small was the one to expound the verse, “When your enemy falls, do not rejoice.” His behavior reflected humility and consideration for others, even in such situations.

However, it’s not so simple.

Who Authored the 19th blessing?

The Amidah prayer is the backbone of each of the three daily prayers. This prayer is also called “Shmoneh Esreh, which means, “Eighteen,” because it originally contained eighteen blessings. However, if you count them, you will discover nineteen.

The Talmud recounts that initially, Rabban Gamliel in Yavneh instituted eighteen blessings encompassing all the physical and spiritual needs of a person. However, in the period following the destruction of the Second Temple, various sects emerged within the Jewish people, such as the Sadducees, Boethusians, and Christians. Each of these groups denied different parts of the Torah. Additionally, cases of informers and traitors within the Jewish community increased, causing terrible suffering. Rabban Gamliel saw the need to add a blessing against these informers to emphasize the severity of their betrayal and the danger of heresy among the Jewish people.

Rabban Gamliel asked the sages to suggest someone suitable to compose such a prayer. Who ultimately did it? Shmuel the Small (Berakhot 28b).

The blessing states, “For the slanderers let there be no hope, and may all the heretics and all the wicked perish in an instant. May all Your enemies be swiftly cut down and may You uproot, crush, cast down, and humble the reign of wickedness swiftly in our days. Blessed are You, G-d, who destroys enemies and humbles the wicked.”

Here we see that Shmuel the Small, who taught, “When your enemy falls, do not rejoice,” also vehemently opposed those who sought to undermine the foundations of Jewish faith, and prayed for the immediate downfall of these informers and heretics who caused great suffering to the Jewish people.

So how do we reconcile these ideas?

The Explanation

The explanation is that when it comes to enemies of the Jewish people like Haman and Pharaoh, we must pray for G-d to save us from them, and when God punishes them, it is our duty to rejoice.

What Shmuel the Small advocated throughout his life—“When your enemy falls, do not rejoice”—was not directed towards figures like Hitler. He was referring to the person who lives next door and annoys you daily. The guy whose dog barks all night, preventing you from sleeping, and despite your repeated pleas for him to do something about it, stubbornly refuses to listen. Or the guy who competes with you in business, opening a store opposite yours and vying for the same customers, stealing your livelihood. Or that politician you deeply despise because you believe his views are destructive.

It is these kinds of situations that Shmuel the Small had in mind when he said, “When your enemy falls, do not rejoice,” because “lest G-d see and it displease Him” (Proverbs 24:18). Because God cannot tolerate gloating that stems from personal vendettas, malice, and cruelty (Yachel Yisrael 4, p. 367).

A Story

I want to share a story that reflects this point.

There was a follower of the Alter Rebbe, who lived about three hundred years ago. He was a wealthy man deeply involved in charitable activities, a great scholar, and a person of exemplary character. His name was Reb Sender.

Sender and his father were tea merchants in Russia. They would travel to Leipzig, Germany, where they met with their main supplier to negotiate prices and quantities. Afterwards, the goods would be shipped to the Russian border.

In their town, there was a Jewish businessman who was hostile towards the Chasidim and envious of Sender and his father’s success. He decided to start trading tea himself. His envy led him to falsely accuse them of tax evasion to the authorities, aiming to become the sole tea merchant in the town. Although Sender and his father conducted their business legally, a government investigation would likely uncover minor administrative faults, something which could land them in very hot water.

The competitor planned to inform the authorities about the tea shipment as soon as it crossed into Russia. He thought that the tea would be confiscated, causing Sender and his father to lose a significant amount of money and face criminal charges.

Unaware of these machinations, Sender traveled to Leipzig as usual and paid a large sum upfront for a substantial quantity of tea. Meanwhile, rumors spread in the city that the authorities were investigating tea shipments and smuggling. A few days later, it became known that a complaint had been filed against a large tea shipment.

Sender and his father, fearing that the authorities would unjustly confiscate their tea, decided to hide the goods in a secret location until the situation calmed down. Their plan succeeded, and the authorities did not seize the shipment. Instead the shipment of the informer arrived and was confiscated. His scheme backfired like a boomerang. Well, the informer no longer had a livelihood, and he fell ill from the stress. Many people felt pity for him and donated money to his family so they could live with dignity. Only a few knew of his malicious plan, including Sender and his father, but they did not tell anyone.

Meanwhile, the tea of Reb Senders spoiled while in hiding. They also incurred a significant financial loss and subsequently decided to abandon the tea business.

The informer's daughter grew up and reached marriageable age, but he had no money to provide a dowry. One day, Sender visited the home. When he entered, it was clear that the informer was trying to mutter something unsuccessfully. Nonetheless, he was very moved when Sender comforted him and urged him to trust in G-d. After Sender left the house, a bundle of money was found under the pillow, enough to provide a respectable dowry for his daughter.

Some time later, Sender himself passed away. The Alter Rebbe came to Shklov to comfort Sender's father and said to him: "I see that your son has 'garments' I did not anticipate," meaning that his soul radiates with an exceptionally high spiritual light.

The Alter Rebbe asked those present to tell him stories about Sender. They recounted several stories, but the Rebbe was still not satisfied and requested more. When he heard the story of how Sender treated the person who caused him significant financial losses and how Sender repaid evil with good, he finally said: "Now I understand. I did not anticipate such garments."

In short, we can celebrate the fall of the Iranian president, but when it comes to our fellow Jew, Shmuel the Small insisted that we should not rejoice in another's downfall, and Chasidism teaches us to aspire to an even higher level: to repay

good for evil. This is what is expected of a Chasid!