



Should We Celebrate An Enemy's Demise?

Parshat Beshalach: *Exodus* 13:17-17:16:

Judges 4:4-5:31.

A few years ago when Osama bin Laden was killed, most Americans felt that justice had been served up to the mastermind behind the attacks of 9-11. Quite a few gleefully celebrated his demise on social media.

My Facebook feed was filled with people rejoicing. But one dear friend averred, commenting that she could not join in the expressions of happiness. She could never celebrate the death of any human being.

This week's portion tells the story of the miraculous rescue of the Israelites at the Red Sea. After making it through on dry land, they watched their persecutors drown as the waters crashed down on them. Their reaction was pure joy. First Moses led them in song, and then Miriam broke out the timbrel and the women all danced.

A famous Talmudic midrash (*Megillah* 10b) tells us that the angels sought to join in but God rebuked them for rejoicing in the death of human beings.

Is the lesson here that people should not celebrate their enemies' downfall? Maybe. But the text does not condemn the Israelites themselves for it. Their song is repeated in the traditional liturgy to this day.

If we're looking to the Bible for guidance on the issue, we're out of luck. While *Proverbs* offers this: "Do not rejoice when your enemies fall, and do not let your heart be glad when they stumble" (24:17), *Psalms* states: "The righteous will rejoice when they see vengeance done; they will bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked" (58:10). It seems that the text is of two minds here.

This vacillation reflects a natural

instinct to express elation at the undoing of our enemies. Some people might be uncomfortable with this, but it can even be a healthy reaction, especially when it gives voice to the kind of relief we feel when liberated from an existential threat. That's the kind of rejoicing described at the shores of the Red Sea. It's what New Yorkers and Londoners felt as they danced in jubilation on V-E Day.

Perhaps those who feel uncomfortable with it are associating it with the more problematic feeling of *schadenfreude*, the pleasure we experience in the misfortune of foes or even competitors. But are they really the same?



Rabbi Jeffrey L. Falick

I believe that celebrating the elimination of a real enemy — one who has posed an existential risk — is not out of place. Rejoicing in the suffering of a business or personal foil is another matter altogether.

The first is a response to an averted catastrophe. The second is just another unfortunate consequence of our evolved tribalism.

Evolutionary psychologists suggest that both of these human reactions evolved due to their survival advantages. Yet, as is the case with so many of our evolved human tendencies, we have a responsibility to critically evaluate their appropriateness for us today. It's one thing to express joy over the demise of Osama bin Laden. It's quite another to revel in the misfortunes of that guy who cheated you that time. Living with dignity requires us to know the difference. *

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Conversations

- How did you react when you heard about Osama bin Laden's death?
- Are there times when you think that rejoicing in the death of a major terrorist — or even a Hitler — is justified?
- Are there situations that you think are less clear cut, crossing some line? Have you encountered situations when you felt that celebrations about the downfall of a foe were out of place?

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