

TORAH TABLE TALK – PIRKE AVOT

Don't Rejoice in the Suffering of Others

Parshat B'shalach, Exodus 14:1 – 17:16

Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt

With love to their grandchildren

Elka, Joshua, Lindsay, Oren ז"ל, Jenny, David, Lauren, Kayla, Zenna, and Emily

Each day we celebrate the redemption of Israel by chanting and referring to the song which the people sang upon witnessing the drowning of the Egyptians at the Red Sea. We chant this song each morning in its entirety in the preliminary section of the morning service and we make mention of it both in the central section of the morning and evening liturgy when we say, "Moses and the children of Israel sang with great joy this song before the Lord: Who is like you, *Adonai*, among the mighty..." While we may rejoice in our salvation, God appears to have been more circumspect. We find references to the well-known *Midrash* in which God silences the angels when they break forth in song at Israel's salvation.

And yet God never silences the people of Israel. Thirty five hundred years later we are still thanking God for redeeming us from slavery and singing the song that was a response to the death of the Egyptians. How do we reconcile God's grief with our joy? In *Pirke Avot* we find another approach to human suffering. Shmuel Ha-Katan reminds his contemporaries not to rejoice in the misfortunes which befall one's enemies. He does this in the simplest of statements – he quotes a verse from the book of Proverbs and allows it to speak for itself.

Pirke Avot 4:20

Shmuel Ha-katan used to say: "Rejoice not when your enemies fall. Let not your heart be glad when another stumbles. Adonai may see it and if it displeases God, God may remove from the enemy divine wrath." (Proverbs 24:17-18)

Sources

Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 39b

Does the Holy One, blessed be He, rejoice over the downfall of the wicked? Is it not written, [That they should praise] as they went out before the army, and say, "Give thanks unto the Lord for His mercy endures forever." (II Chronicles 20:21) Concerning this verse, Rabbi Jonathan asked: Why are the words, "He is good" (as in Psalms 108:1) omitted from this expression of thanks? Because the Holy One, blessed be He, does not rejoice in the downfall of the wicked. Rabbi Samuel ben Nahman said in Rabbi Jonathan's name: What is meant by, "And one approached not the other all night?" (Exodus 14:20) In that hour the ministering angels wished to utter the song (of praise) to one another before the Holy One, of blessing, but He rebuked them, saying: 'My handiwork [the Egyptians] is drowning in the sea; would ye utter song before me!' Said Rabbi Jose ben Hanina: He Himself does not rejoice, yet He causes others to rejoice. Scripture supports this too, for it is written, "And it shall come to pass, that as the Lord rejoiced over you to do good ... so *yasis* will the Lord cause rejoicing [over you by destroying you]," (Deuteronomy 28:63) and not *yasus* (so will the Lord rejoice etc.) This prove it. (*The verse uses the word Yasis is a causative verb – thus God causes others to rejoice – rather than yasus which would imply that God himself did the rejoicing.*)

Midrash Avkir

When the Holy One was about to drown The Egyptians in the sea, Uzza, heavenly prince of Egypt, rose up and prostrated himself before the Holy One, saying: Master of the universe, You created the world by the measure of mercy. Why then do You wish to drown my children? The Holy One gathered the entire heavenly household and said to them: You judge between Me and Uzza prince of Egypt. At that, the heavenly princes of the other nations began to speak up in behalf of Egypt. When Michael perceived this, he gave the sign to Gabriel, who in one swoop darted down to Egypt, where he pulled out a brick with its clay enclosing a [dead] infant who had been immured alive in the structure. He then came back, stood before the Holy One, and said: Master of the universe, thus did the Egyptians enslave Your children. Whereupon the Holy One sat in judgment over the Egyptians in accord with the measure of justice and drowned them in the sea. In that instant the ministering angels wished to

utter song before the Holy One, but He rebuked them, saying, "The works of My hands are drowning in the sea, and you would utter song in My presence!"

Midrash Tehillim 22:1

"Israel saw the Egyptians dead" (Exod. 14:30). What did the children of Israel do to them? Each man in Israel took his dog, went down, and, placing his foot upon an Egyptian's neck, said to his dog, "Eat of this hand, which used me as a slave. Eat of these bowels, which had no mercy on me."

Commentary

Shmuel Ha-katan is unique in Pirke Avot. A man of deep piety, he was known for his humility. His name literally means, Samuel the Small. Unlike most other statements in Avot, his consists of a verse from the Bible which he often quoted; he offers no interpretation or expansion of the words of Scripture. Sh'muel allows the Bible to speak for itself.

And yet, if we are not supposed to rejoice in our enemies' misfortune, how are we to understand the daily repetition of *Shirat Yam Suf*, the Song of Israel at the Red Sea. Is this not a celebration of Egypt's demise and the destruction of the Egyptian army? The sages framed the Song by prefacing it with the following words: "When the people Israel witnessed the great power which the Lord wielded against the Egyptians, the people feared the Lord; the trusted in Him and in his servant Moses." (Exodus 14:30-31) The Song at the Red Sea is not so much about the demise of the Egypt as it was about the birth of Israel's faith. Israel's ability to sing was a sign of their new found faith in God. Still, the sages understood the all too human tendency to rejoice in the fall of those who cause us pain. The Midrash reflects both points of view. The event at the Red Sea was also about the triumph of justice over tyranny and terror.

In light of the recent war in Gaza, Israel find itself struggling with both the need to protect its citizens as well as a deep seated anger over years of attacks. What is truly extraordinary about the state of Israel is that there is so little fanfare or celebration over what is an obvious military victory. Israel does not rejoice in the death of innocent people. It went into Gaza, did what was necessary and then left. Israel's neighbors may interpret this as a sign of weakness; we can view the actions of the Israel army as a sign of its moral center. Were there errors? Were there moments when Israel might have done things differently?? I suppose so. But Israel is a nation where the words of Shmuel Ha-Katan are at the very heart of its culture. And in that I take great pride!

Questions to Ponder

1. Usually statements in *Pirke Avot* contain general comments and aphorism from the sages. On rare occasion the sages will quote a proof text to make a point. Shmuel Ha-katan's statement is the only one that I am aware of in which the author simply quotes a verse. Why doesn't Shmuel Ha-katan offer some interpretation for the scriptural verse which he quotes? How would you apply this verse to your life?
2. The statement in Sanhedrin above suggests that while God does not rejoice in the suffering of the evil, he also does not prevent us from rejoicing in the down fall of the wicked. Why do you think this is the case? If God doesn't think it is right to take pleasure in the suffering of others why should he take pleasure when we do? Do you think that this is a cop-out on the part of God?
3. Two of the statements above mention the fact that God 'silenced the angels' when they broke forth in song. How do these two passages use this statement differently?
4. In what way is Shmuel Ha-katan's statement relevant to the recent war in Gaza relevant and to the cultural and social climate in Israel, today? If you lived in Sederot, how would you feel about your Palestinian neighbors and the recent Israeli incursion into Gaza? If you were a rabbi living in Sederot, how might you use this statement in delivering a sermon?
5. Do you think it is possible for Israelis and Palestinians to find some reconciliation and a way to live together? What must the neighbors of Israel do to make this possible? What must Israel do?

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