

Parshat Emor 5768
I am happy, I am sad, but it is good that he is gone.
May 7, 2011
Rabbi Alan B. Lucas

There is an old Yiddish folk saying about the names of the '*sedras*', of the Torah portions that we read at this season of the year. '*Sedras*' in the Jewish tradition get their names from the word with which their first sentence begins, so each weekly torah portion has a "name" – today's is *Emor*. And last week we read *Kedoshim* and the week before we read *Acharey Mot*. And if you put these three in sequence it creates a coherent sentence and leads to a pun: *Achary Mot Kedoshim Emor*. "After death, say, 'Holy was he.' "

It is more than just a clever pun. It is a fact that we all say kind things about the dead. This Yiddish expression is the Jewish equivalent of the old Latin proverb: *de mortuis nil nisi bonum dicendum est*, which is literally: "Let nothing be said of the dead but what is good or more commonly, "Speak no evil of the dead." All people have this tradition and rightly so. It is a good practice to say nice things about those who are no longer among the living, for it is a real source of comfort to those who mourn for them.

But there is a significant qualification that should be added to this universal custom of: *Achary Mot Kedoshim Emor*. It is important to speak nicely about those who are dead but there are limits -- there is a point where kindness and good manners becomes hypocrisy.

Osama bin Laden died this week – and I have nothing nice to say about him. The world is a better place because he is no longer in it. Or as Mark Twain once said: "I have never wished a man dead but I have read some obituaries with great pleasure."

Some of you may have heard the joke that is making the rounds – that shortly before his death Osama visited a fortuneteller who predicted that he would die on a Jewish holiday. Intrigued he asked, "which one?" To which the fortuneteller replied, "Don't worry – any day you die will be a Jewish holiday!"

We laugh – and in our laughter – we realize how far we have travelled from *Acharey Mot Kedoshim Emor* – not only do we feel no compulsion to speak well of this guy – we kind of enjoy the opposite – as we enjoy celebrating the fact that he is dead.

Many of us have been wrestling with our feelings regarding the announcement of bin Laden's sudden demise made possible courtesy of the United States Military. As many of you know I wrote a piece, earlier this week where I tried to sort out the question of whether or not it was permissible to rejoice over the death of an evil person.

The sequence went something like this: We heard the incredible news of the raid that took Osama bin Laden's life – and it was hard not to feel joy. Our immediate and spontaneous reaction was

one of celebration. Those demonstrations outside the White House and at Ground Zero on Sunday night – were not strange to us – they seemed to capture how we were feeling. Osama was dead – and we were glad that he was. Then many of us began to feel uncomfortable with our own reactions.

Jews don't rejoice over death, American's don't run to the streets and rejoice over the downfall of our foes – that's what our enemies do! We had trouble reconciling our feelings of joy over the death of Osama with the sense of disgust we felt when we saw Palestinians celebrating after 9/11? We condemned in no uncertain terms the jubilant reaction of our enemies when they rejoiced over our death – yet now when the shoe is on the other foot, are we no better than they? Either they were wrong and we too should be ashamed of ourselves for rejoicing, or such behavior is ok and we were wrong to have condemned them.

So if step one was jubilation and step two was a sense of guilt over our initial jubilation – step three was that we felt guilty that we felt guilty. Why should we apologize? Why shouldn't we celebrate the death of someone so evil? We resented our own sense of guilt - -there is no comparison to our reaction and that of the Palestinians we told ourselves. They were celebrating the death of innocents – we were celebrating the death of evil.

And that is why I wrote my piece and sent it out to the congregation. I shared these conflicting emotions with you and wanted to see if I could help sort them out. I was pleased by the number of response I received – most people thanked me for helping them work through their confusion – which of course was precisely my intention. Some people were confused by the precise nature of my argument and I was able to clarify my thoughts and help them clarify theirs. Some people disagreed. But that do was a form of helping them clarify their own opinion on this subject.

The heart of my argument was that our ambivalence was precisely the right reaction. Our confusion of emotions was not a bad thing – but exactly the right thing that a person should be feeling in confronting the death of someone like Osama bin Laden.

Aharey Mot Kedoshim Emor – was meant as a joke. It was and is always said with a sense of humor. It recognizes that even with good people – even with *very* good people – this desire to *only* speak well of them after they are gone – is unnatural and unhelpful. And similarly with *really* bad people like Osama bin Laden – the desire to *only* – dwell on their evil – makes us feel uncomfortable. And in both extremes our reactions tell us much more about ourselves than it does about the people we are reacting to.

The reactions of prominent people to the death of Osama bin Laden has given us enormous insight into the true nature of these people – much more so than it has enlightened us regarding the nature of Osama bin Laden. This past week has served as a fascinating Rorschach test – which if we learn to read it correctly helps us understand the people who are our leaders and our commentators. Glen Beck hired a marching band to his studio and he passed out cookies – to celebrate the news. Compare this with the dignified and restrained announcement and behavior of our president. Sarah Palin demanded the release of the gruesome death photos to revel in his demise – John McCain argued forcefully that there was no need for us to see the pictures. And in

all of these reactions and so many more – we learned little about bin Laden but a lot about these people. It was not surprising that Beck and Palin reacted the way they did – nor was it surprising that McCain and Obama reacted the way they did. Two reminded us that they were mature leaders and worthy of leading their respective parties and our nation and worthy of our respect. Two reminded us that they were not mature leaders and not worthy of leading anything.

And I tried to argue in that piece I sent out, that if you felt happy that Osama bin Laden was dead – and then felt a bit guilty because you felt happy – that tells me a lot about you. And in my humble opinion – your ambivalence is a sign of your maturity and sensitivity.

I worry about those who feel only joy – even over the death of someone evil. In my opinion it demonstrates a lack of humanity. My objection to the Palestinians who celebrated unabashedly over the death of Americans – was not that we rejoiced over the death of evil and they rejoiced over the death of innocents – as they would argue that they believe we are evil. No, my objection is that their lack of any ambivalence is a sign of their lack of humanity. How do we make peace with those who cannot see our humanity?

In the piece I wrote I cited the *gemorrah* from Sanhedrin 39b where God is critical of the singing at the Red Sea. What I did not go into – as the piece was already long enough – was that in the *gemorrah* – it was not the singing of the children of Israel that God reacts to – but the singing of the ANGELS. In the midrash – the angels are frequently pictured as jealous of God’s attention to us humans – and like children – they are constantly doing things to get God to pay more attention to them – like the good old days – before God created humans and they were the only game in town. In this spirit – some say when the children of Israel began singing at the shores of the Red Sea in response to their miraculous salvation and the death by drowning of their enemy – the angels were worried that humans would once again get all of God’s attention – so they began singing as well, in an attempt to match, if not outdo, our human response. To their surprise – (these midrashim frequently end with the angels getting shut down or put down by God to their eternal frustration) – to their surprise God criticizes them with the famous quote: ““The work of My hands is drowning in the sea and you want to sing?”

What is left for the rabbis to debate – is the question of whether God’s criticism extended to his human subjects or only to the angels. It probably won’t surprise you to know that there are opinions on both sides of the subject.

Here is how I read this wonderful midrash:

I believe that God ultimately does not want us humans to celebrate the death of our enemies either – but that He chose not to be overly critical of us, at that particular moment, because God understood our human nature. God gave us a pass – as it were – because He understands human nature is such that well, how can we *not* feel happy when those who stand for evil, for those who seek our demise are defeated? But in coming down hard on the angels – God also makes it clear – that if it is human to rejoice – it is divine to feel sympathy, even for the least desirable and most despicable of God’s creatures.

In my reading of this midrash, God is prepared to accept us humans as we are, but God also

encourages us to strive to be more than we are.

And so, I was happy when Osama was killed. And I believe my happiness over his death was both normal and appropriate. But I also felt guilty for feeling so happy over the death of another human being – even one as despicable as Osama bin Laden. And that guilt was, I believe a wonderful expression of my Jewishness and my Americanness. And I believe my reaction was similar to the way most of you reacted and similar to the way most of our fellow Jews and fellow Americans reacted – it was an expression of who we are and what we strive to be.

Elie Weisel tells the story that he remembers the day when he was liberated from the camps. When that long night of suffering, torture and death was finally over, he said he remembers that the Poles who were in the camp with them – somehow got their hands on some liquor and proceeded to celebrate the moment by getting drunk. The Jews, Weisel writes, gathered together in the corner, *davened mincha* and said *kaddish*.

I like that story – and I like what it says about us.

It turns out that the day that Osama bin Laden died was in fact a Jewish holiday: it was *Yom Hashoah*. Jews all over the world had spent the day together, as we had here at Beth Sholom, we *davened* and said *kaddish*.

Aharey Mot Kedoshim Emor -- We tend to say nice things after people die. After the death of Osama bin Laden – what shall we say?

The world is better off today than it was then – because he is no longer in it. I am happy, I am sad, but it is good that he is gone.