

Bin Laden is Gone: Is It Alright to Rejoice?

Sermon for Beth-El, Fort Worth

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May 7, 2011

Alyssa commented thoughtfully on her *parashah*. I love her idea of the Eternal Light not only as a symbol of God, but as a challenge to us to let God's light shine through us. Whether the world is a darker or brighter place this week in that sense is an interesting question. Monday and Tuesday one person after another kept asking me versions of the same question. Osama Bin Laden was dead, killed Sunday night in a daring and courageous raid in Pakistan. Our soldiers had killed him and brought his body back for positive identification. As the media worked up the story the first night crowds formed outside the White House, in New York's Times Square and "Ground Zero." Political leaders then and the next day were clearly thrilled. This was the arch-terrorist behind Al Qaida, murderer of thousands of innocent Americans on 9/11 and many, many more victims 'round the world both before and after. We had sworn to take him "dead or alive." We did. How could you not rejoice?!

And then, one after another, people caught themselves short and asked, "Is this the right thing to do—this rejoicing over someone's death?" The question came up at a class I was teaching Monday, and then a Star-Telegram reporter called that afternoon. Tuesday morning at the gym a retired executive asked, then an out-of-town congregant emailed me the same question, and someone in for counseling asked it. None of us are going to miss this guy! But is it really right to be rejoicing over his, over anyone's, death?!

I tell Confirmation classes and others regularly, "If it's a moral question, it's a Jewish question." Religion is designed to be a perspective on life, helping us appreciate its holiness and its satisfactions, as at this Bat Mitzvah, but no less vitally providing guidance for dealing with difficult questions and coping with difficult times. So when an unusual situation raises an uncommon question, we are supposed to say, instinctively, "What would Torah say about that?"

Jews, and Christians, too, are taught about loving neighbors, and hating the sin but not the sinner. And here we all were thrilled that this evil man (is that ours to judge?) was dead. No doubt not just yours truly, but religious leaders all over the country were getting the same question. The President called it justice—and most of us would agree. And yet . . . and yet somehow we who are taught the supreme value of every life (a value Bin Laden clearly did not share) felt queasy, soiled even. You are not supposed to rejoice at people's deaths. Right?

Or maybe not. Maybe you don't rejoice over the death of ordinary people, including ordinary sinners (a category which encompasses us all!). But would we regard it as a tragic necessity, or a wonderful thing!, had one of the plotters succeeded in killing Hitler, or Stalin, or ... you pick the historical example, the Torah's is Amalek. At Purim every year we rejoice over Haman's demise. So what of this modern murderer?

One classic Jewish text and commentary immediately came to my mind, and another occurred to me as I pondered the matter further.

We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, says the Torah, abused, exploited, suffering. Finally, with signs and wonders, God led us out. Just as we thought we had it made, the Torah reports, the Egyptian armies were seen in hot pursuit. So God split the sea, we crossed on dry land, and as Pharaoh and his host pursued, the waters flooded back. A few Egyptians, almost to the shore, tried to struggle up on land and—the Torah reports—God Himself hurled them back into the sea to drown. Seeing that whole drama, all the people, led by Miriam and the women, sang for joy. The enemy was dead!

Now that is not exactly a commandment, “Thou shalt rejoice in the defeat of your foes,” and Proverbs 24:17, as it happens, does specifically advise, “If your enemy falls, do not rejoice.” Some of the early rabbis were clearly very uncomfortable with all this rejoicing at the death of so many Egyptians. You cannot change the Torah, though. It says what it says. What you can do, what preachers in every generation do, is give it your own spin. So, centuries ago, Midrash Mechilta, a classic commentary on the book of Exodus, added another whole level of meaning. Many of us just quoted it a couple of weeks ago in our Passover seders. Says the Midrash: the Egyptian armies were drowning in the sea. The people broke out in songs of jubilation. The angels on high jubilant, at our escape and the Egyptians’ defeat, broke out in song. God silenced them, says the Midrash, saying: “My children are drowning—and you sing praises?!”

Think about that a minute. God drowned the Egyptians because they were flaunting God’s will, doing evil. But God regarded that as a tragic necessity, not something to be pleased about. On the other hand, God did not silence the people who had just escaped. How could they not be not only relieved, but delirious with joy? They were free! The enemy who would have killed them was dead and gone! Of course they rejoiced. They were only human. But from the angels God could expect more. The pristine ideal may be that the death even of Osama Bin Laden is a tragedy, but God would not expect Bin Laden’s victims to spare any tears for him. That certainly goes for the relatives and loved ones of the innocents his henchmen murdered. And, I think, on 9/11 we all felt like victims.

It is good that we feel queasy about rejoicing. But we, too, after all, are human.

A second text. We do not have time this morning to go into the morality of capital punishment; but they had it in biblical times. Moreover, in some surrounding cultures—there is evidence of this in Egypt—to strengthen the deterrent power of public executions they liked to leave the body hanging in the public square to rot. Deuteronomy 21, verses 22 and 23 explicitly forbid that. You may execute the criminal convicted of a capital crime, but you may not leave his body on display. He must be buried by sundown, for, “a hanging body is an affront to God.” Why?, ask the rabbis. He violated God’s law and was executed only after a fair trial. Because, they answered, every human being, even a criminal, a murderer, even Osama Bin Laden, is created in the image of God.

So there are times, sadly, when we must kill an enemy of society. Even if we disapprove capital punishment, you can use lethal force to defend yourself against someone trying to kill you. Under threatening circumstances a police officer—or a soldier in battle—may shoot to kill. This is not a sin, but, to use the term again, a tragic necessity.

I think President Obama is to be commended for the decision to show some respect for the body—the image of God. No reasonable person doubts Bin Laden is dead. Al Qaida acknowledges that! There is no reason to pander to the voyeuristic pleasure or curiosity of the mob.

Bin Laden was a murderer. A mass murderer, even. He would have killed again. We buried him at sea within 24 hours. We can hardly be expected to feel bad that he is dead. Should we rejoice? Maybe not. But we are not angels. Amen