

Sermon: Parshat Emor  
Metuchen 2011/5771  
Rabbi Gerald L. Zelizer

“What Shall a Jew Say About the Killing of Bin Laden?”

There is a well known joke that a soothsayer tells Bin Laden that he will die on a Jewish holiday. When he asks which one he is told “Whenever you die it will be a Jewish holiday!” Well ironically last Sunday it was not a Jewish holiday of course, but it was Yom Hashoah.

On Yom Hashoah last Sunday I as others, experienced an emotional disconnect from the morning to the night. In the morning, as many of us, I looked at the eyes of the Israeli astronaut Ilan Ramon in a moving video shown at the

Israel Segal Lecture. At night, I looked into television pictures of the eyes of Osama Bin Laden as his search and killing was announced at the hands of American forces. What an emotional disconnect! In the morning I found myself absorbed and staring at the eyes of Ilan Ramon, wondering what motivated his heroism and fortitude. In the evening I found myself unable to stare at the eyes of Bin Laden in the photographs knowing how those eyes found great satisfaction at the broadcast of the collapse of the twin towers, the collapse of the Pentagon, and the crash of the plane in Pennsylvania – not to speak of earlier killings throughout the world that he engineered.

So is there a Jewish response to the death of our most evil enemies? When a person dies in Judaism and we learn the news the response is “

” –

“Blessed is the righteous judge.” A kind of reluctant but necessary acceptance of God’s will in the world’s way. We don’t like it, but we accept it, as the way the world works. But that judgment, that phrase, does not seem to fit in here. If indeed it was the judgment of God frankly we accept it! We welcome it.

All week we rabbis have been exchanging views on classical Jewish responses and what passages are appropriate in response to the death of Bin Laden. Somewhat different

responses from that in a tabloid which read “We got the bastard” – I considered the proper Jewish response all week as I remembered living through with the parents the death of a young man who was bar mitzvah in this congregation who perished in the Twin Towers. Others shared with me how their lives were scarred permanently, some of them by their experience in lower Manhattan. So let’s see what phrases might be suitable.

How about from the Book of Proverbs chapter 4 “ ” – “When your enemies collapse do not rejoice.” Well, that phrase is probably the opposite of our feelings. Another colleague of mine suggested “

” – “Blessed is God

who is good and who brings the good.” A little closer to our emotions on hearing the news but still different. And then another colleague suggested from the weekday Amidah “

” – “Blessed is God who humbles our enemies.” Maybe the most heartfelt quote is “

” – “at the destruction of the evil, joy!”

And of course every Jew here knows from the Seder God’s reprimand to the angels for gloating at the Red Sea at the destruction of the Egyptians. Every Jew here knows the interpretation of the spilling of the drops of wine in regret that our enemies’ blood regrettably was

spilled in order to secure our freedom. But let me share a more realistic explanation of that whole passage at the crossing of the Red Sea from the kotzker rebbi which goes as follows. After the crossing of the Red Sea the angels began to sing God's praise. God interrupts the angels "No let the children of Israel be the first to praise me." And in the words of the Torah "

– "Then Moses sang – not the angels, but Moses." Why did the Almighty insist that the angels stand back and allow the children of Israel to sing God's praise first and foremost? asks the kotsker rebbe. God explains that Israel will sing praises of God only when they feel it spontaneously. Since they spontaneously felt that

at that moment God says “allow them to do it lest they lose the spontaneity.” That comment is more realistic on the drowning of the Egyptians – on the death of a Bin Laden – than others that we know. Maybe we should have captured him for a trial, but give space for our joy at his elimination because that is our spontaneous reaction, the people to rejoice since we feel it. We rejoice because we feel that “Justice has been done” as the perpetration of those many slaughters of innocents is no longer capable of planning more..

Another colleague of mine recalls watching a recording of the Eichmann trial with a reaction similar to my own at seeing Bin Laden in the media as the death was announced. “In this

man's eyes it reflected the ghosts of his uncountable victims, and also nothing at all is reflected." I am riveted by the face of Bin Laden but do not want to look into his eyes. Those eyes witnessed the snuffing out of so much life, those eyes remain willfully blind to the pain and loss he caused. Coincidentally, on the same day that Bin Laden was killed, Moshe Landau, the presiding judge at the Eichman trial, died at age 99.

One last comment on the disposal of Bin Laden's body, apparently done respectfully and in accordance with the religious structures of the Islamic religious tradition – as it should be. I could not help when I heard that contrasted care in carefully disposing of a villain's body with the



disposing of Daniel Pearl's body. Perhaps you recall when Khalid Sheik Muhammad, third in command of Al Queda under Osama Bin Laden, boasted in front of a military tribunal "I decapitated with my blessed right hand the head of the American Jew Daniel Pearl, in the city of Karachi, Pakistan." And leaving his body in a shallow grave. Less known is that a Muslim philanthropist who was hated by the extremists, Abdul Sattar Edhi, collected Pearl's remains and arranged for transport back to California for burial. That philanthropist did honor the Jewish traditions in ways that the assassins did not. Just a comparison.

Many analogies of Bin Laden have been made to Hitler. It's ironic that the day of the killing of Bin Laden was 66 years to the day that Hitler's death was announced. As Hitler, the burial place of Bin Laden was not known. Perhaps as we search for the proper phrase the same phrase we use for Hitler also is the most appropriate: “

” – “May his name be blotted out and his memory forgotten.”

Shabbat Shalom