

Revenge: Should We Emulate God's Vengeance or Seek Teshuva? Parashat Ekev

By Rabbi Jason Miller

El Nekamot Adonai, El Nekamot Hofia. O God of vengeance, Adonai, O God of vengeance appear!

These are the opening words of Psalm 94, which we recite each Wednesday at the conclusion of morning services. The midrash associates this psalm to Wednesday, the fourth day of creation, because on the fourth day, God created the sun, moon, and stars. But instead of recognizing them as God's servants, humans eventually came to regard the luminaries as independent gods that should be worshipped and because of this idolatry, God showed God's self to be just as the psalm describes - vengeful. A God of Revenge.

Lately I have been troubled by this idea. A vengeful God. Does God really take revenge? And if so, is this a comforting depiction of God? After all, is this the same God to whom we attribute the metaphor of "a loving parent?" The same God who desires peace and encourages our repentance? According to this psalm, God seems to be a proponent of revenge and the psalmist is encouraging God's vengeance. I've been wrestling with this idea, because if God practices revenge, and we are created *b'tzelem Elohim* - in the image of God, and we strive to live our lives emulating God's attributes and actions (*imitatio dei*), then this begs the question... Should we take revenge?

Should we mete out revenge on those who have wronged us, measure for measure, or as the Torah teaches, *ayin tachat ayin* - "an eye for an eye?" And if so, how do we reconcile this idea with the concept of teshuva?

Last year, I offered up a used camera on [eBay](#), the online auction house. Now I have been an eBay user for many years - almost since its inception - and until then, I had only had positive experiences auctioning off those things that would otherwise be left lying around the house in disuse.

At the close of the auction, I received a very nice phone call from the winning bidder explaining that he would be leaving in two days for a vacation and would love to have the camera to take with him. We spoke for a little while, and deciding that people are inherently good and honest, I chose to trust this young man and send the camera overnight with the understanding that he would be sending me payment as soon as possible. Of course, he has been enjoying his new camera for several months now and, well, let's just say he got it for a far better deal than he could have ever bargained for.

Clearly, I was wronged. You could argue I was being naïve or too nice, but I was definitely taken advantage of. And yet, revenge is not something I believe in.

In this morning's parashah, Parshat Ekev, we have the famous words of the second paragraph of the Shema - *v'haya im shamo'a*. But before setting down the consequences for observing and transgressing God's mitzvot, the rewards and the punishments concerning rainfall, Moses reminds the nation of Israelites about what could potentially happen to them should they choose to not love or show loyalty to God. In addition to explaining to this generation, which did not experience the exodus from Egypt firsthand, about God's majestic miracles, Moses also explains to the people that God has the capacity for revenge.

Remember this day, Moses cautions, what God did to Dathan and Aviram, sons of Eliav son of Reuven, when the earth opened her mouth and swallowed them, along with their households, their tents, and every living thing in their train, from amidst Israel (Deut. 11:6). Dathan and Aviram were accomplices of Korach in the infamous rebellion against Moses and Aaron in the Book of Numbers. God took revenge on Dathan and Aviram for their attempted mutiny against God's appointed leadership of the people.

And why does the verse state that God exacted this revenge from amidst all Israel? Rashi, the medieval French commentator quotes Rabbi Judah explaining that this means that wherever any one of them fled, the earth split under him and swallowed him up. For an attempted coup, an unsuccessful coup that challenged God's authority, such harsh revenge was sought by God. Wherever these young men fled, the earth swallowed them up. A vengeful God.

And further, the verse states that the earth did not merely open up to consume Dathan and Aviram, but their punishment went even further. V'et bateihem v'et oholeihem v'et kol ha-ye-koom asher b'rag-leihem - not only did God exact revenge on them, but also on their households. On their actual homes. And on all the living things in their following - their entire entourage. When God seeks revenge, clearly God doesn't mess around.

From before the time of the current wave of violence in the Middle East - the second Intifada, the IDF has bulldozed the homes of the relatives of the homicide bombers of Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Additionally, this past week, IDF spokespersons announced that there might be deportations of terrorist family members. These responsive acts bring to mind the revenge of God taken against Dathan and Aviram, and yet, we would not and should not label these acts as "revenge." They certainly do not fit comfortably in the category of Ayin Tachat Ayin - an eye for an eye. These are actions taken by the Israeli army to deter future terrorist attacks against innocent civilians. But there are those who would deem these military actions to be revenge, further complicating the definition.

Do some acts of vengeance sound justified while others make us cringe? Is it okay for God to be vengeful against God's adversaries, but not for us? Are we a society for whom "an eye for an eye" carries any real legal or moral weight? Are we troubled by the stories of revenge in the Torah, but not by today's stories of revenge through military retaliation and what the government considers a justified response? What is the difference between revenge and punishment? Or between revenge and strategic military deterrence? Just what defines revenge?

A few months ago, I read a wonderful book entitled [Revenge: A story of hope](#). In it, Laura Blumenfeld tells of her challenging journey to research the topic of revenge in response to her own personal craving to avenge the Palestinian terrorist who shot her father (a well-known Conservative rabbi) a decade earlier. Reading this book, which reads like an autobiography/journal/research paper, I felt as though I was on the journey with Laura desperately trying to define revenge.

Traveling all over the world - to Iran, Albania, Sicily, and Jerusalem, Laura interviews everyone from Yitzhak Rabin's assassin to fifth-grade girls about their views of revenge, and the mechanics and psychology of vengeance. She searches for and identifies her father's shooter. She spends a year developing an intimate relationship with this terrorist's family, drinking tea in their home, exchanging gifts, and joining them on visits to the prison to see the man who to them is their son, brother, or cousin; but, to Laura is the PLO rebel who was inches away from taking her father's life after he had finished davening at the Kotel on a Friday evening in 1986.

Her time in Israel researching the book and trying to get as close as possible to the "human side" of this terrorist forces Laura to better get in touch with her own feelings of revenge. She questions whether she actually wants to see her fantasies of vengeance come to fruition. She needs to know whether she is entitled to revenge and if so under whose "rules of the game?" For she quickly learns that not only is revenge difficult to define, but so are the laws of revenge - it seems as if each culture, each country, each village, each religion, each family has its own notion of what warrants revenge and just how the act of revenge is to be carried out in the most "just" way.

In Laura's vision of retaliation against her father's shooter, she hopes that revenge will lead to enlightenment and the hope of redemption. Revenge stories do not pan out as such however. As we know all too well, acts of revenge follow us up through the generations, with warring stories of blame bouncing back and forth to the point that neither side remembers the initial incident anymore. After

centuries of bloodshed, the original act, which will never be completely avenged, becomes the inconsequential piece in the puzzle.

Laura ultimately comes to understand her father's idea of "constructive revenge." Rabbi Blumenfeld urges his daughter to channel her anger and pain into building something up rather than lashing out. She eventually finds solace in the transformation from seeking violent vengeance to looking for positive ways to avenge her father's shooting.

Revenge has the potential to both destroy our society and conversely to make the world a better place to live. The stories of revenge in the Torah stand to make us God-fearing individuals. The God of vengeance serves as a warning to us that we must live in awe of God, loving God, and remaining loyal to the mitzvot. Violent revenge is not an ideal for us to emulate, for as the rabbis teach *avera goreret avera* - a sin only generates another sin. We must look for constructive ways to unfetter the pent up anger that resides among us when someone else wrongs us or our loved ones.

As we just completed the first week in the period from Tisha B'Av to the Yamim Noraim, the High Holy Days, we begin the intense journey toward teshuva. On Tisha B'Av, we remember the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash, the Holy Temple that once stood in Jerusalem. The rabbis of the Talmud teach us in a midrash that the fall of the Temple can be blamed on the incident of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza. A story in which the public embarrassment of one man led him to seek such a horrific act of revenge that our Temple was burned to destruction and our ancestors were exiled from the Holy Land.

How appropriate is it that we move from such a sorrowful story of revenge on Tisha B'Av through a period of consolation and retrospection in the upcoming month of Elul and eventually toward repentance, teshuva, during the approaching chagim in the month of Tishrei.

El Nekamot Adonai, El Nekamot Hofia. God has many attributes. Vengeance is one. But may we use God's vengeance as a model of divine punishment rather than just retaliation. May we look for ways to channel our anger and vengeful feelings into constructive acts of revenge always being mindful of the potential for teshuva.

Shabbat Shalom.