

God Doesn't Get Mad, He Gets Even: A Torah View of Revenge



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1. Vayikra 19:18

י דם רעהו אגני יהוה: לא תשנא את אחיך בלבבך הוכח תוכיח את-
י עמיתך ולא תשא עליו חטא: לא תקם ולא תטר את בני עמך
י ואהבת לרעהו כמוך אגני יהוה: את חקתי תשמרו בהמתך לא תרביע
בלאים שדך לא תורע בלאים ובגד בלאים שעטנו לא יעלה עליך:

¹⁶ You shall not be a gossipmonger among your people, you shall not stand aside while your fellow's blood is shed — I am HASHEM. ¹⁷ You shall not hate your brother in your heart; you shall reprove your fellow and do not bear a sin because of him. ¹⁸ You shall not take revenge and you shall not bear a grudge against the members of your people; you shall love your fellow as yourself* — I am HASHEM.

¹⁹ You shall observe My decrees; you shall not mate your animal into another species, you shall not plant your field with mixed seed; and a garment that is a mixture of combined fibers shall not come upon you.

At the root of the precept lies the purpose¹ that a man should now and reflect that whatever happens to him, good or bad, is caused by the Eternal Lord, blessed is He, to occur to him; from a human hand, from a man's brother's hand,² nothing can be without the will of the Eternal Lord, blessed is He. Therefore, should a man inflict suffering or pain on him, let him know in his soul that his bad deeds were the cause,⁴ and the Eternal Lord (be He blessed) decreed this upon him; and let him not set his thoughts to take revenge from him. For the other is not the [primary] cause of his trouble, since it is sin that brought it about. As David (peace be with him) said, "So let him curse, because the Lord has told him" (II Samuel 16:10): he attributed the matter to his sin, not to Shim'i b. Gérah. Moreover, there is another great benefit resulting from the precept: [it serves] to stop contention and remove hates from people's hearts. And when there is peace among people, the Eternal Lord grants them peace.

Hatred and vengeance are also very difficult to escape, since one's heart is very easily enticed [by them]. A person is very sensitive to his humiliation and feels extreme anguish. [Under these conditions] vengeance becomes as sweet as honey since it is his only respite. Therefore, if he finds the strength to flee the urgings of his nature and to override his own feelings so as not to hate the one who has evoked the hatred within him, and he neither takes revenge when the opportunity arises nor bears a grudge, but instead he disregards all this and removes it from his heart as if it had never existed, there goes a strong and courageous individual. This is something which is easy only for the ministering angels, among whom the aforementioned traits do not exist, but not for dwellers of a physical world who were formed from the earth. Nonetheless, it is the King's decree, and the verses are clearly spelled out and need no elucidation (Vayikra 19:17, 19:18): "You must not hate your brother in your heart. You must not take revenge, nor harbor a grudge against the members of your people."

2. Sefer Ha'Chinuch on the prohibition of revenge

משרשי המצוה, שידע האדם ויחן אל לבו כי כל אשר יקרהו, מטוב עד רע, הוא סבה שמבוא עליו מאת השם ברוך הוא, ומיד האדם מיד איש אחיו לא יהיה דבר בלתי רצון השם ברוך הוא; על-כן כשיצעהו או יכאיבהו אדם, ידע בנפשו כי צונותי גרמו, והשם (יתברך) גזר עליו בכה, ולא ישית מחשבותיו לנקם ממנו, כי הוא אינו סבת רעתו, כי העוון הוא המסבב, וכמו שאמר דוד עליו השלום: הנחו לו ויקלל כי אמר לו השם (יתברך): תלה הענין בחטאו ולא בשמעי בן גרא. ועוד נמצא במצוה תועלת רב להשבית ריב ולהעביר הפשטמות מלב בני-אדם, ובהיות שלום בין אנשים יעשה השם שלום להם.

3. Mesillas Yesharim Chapter 11

גם השנאה והנקמה – קשה מאד לשימלט ממנה לב הותל אשר לבני-האדם, כי האדם מרגיש מאד בעלבונותיו ומצטער צער גדול, והנקמה לו מתוקה מדבש, כי היא מנוחתו לבדה. על כן לשיהיה בכחו לעזוב מה שטבעו מכריח אותו ויעבר על מדותיו, ולא ישנא מי שהעיר בו השנאה, ולא יקם ממנו בהודמן לו שייכל להנקם, ולא יטר לו, אלא את הכל ישבח ויסיר מלבו כאלו לא היה – חזק ואמיץ הוא! והוא קל רק למלאכי-השרת שאין ביניהם המדות הללו, לא אל שוכני בתי חמר אשר בעפר יסודם. אמנם, גזרת-מלך היא, והמקראות גלויים באר היטב, אינם צריכים פרוש (ויקרא קדושים יט, יז): "לא תשנא את אחיך בלבבך", "לא תקם ולא תטר את בני עמך" (שם, יח).

4. Bamidbar 31

וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: וְלָכֵן נִקְמַת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאֵת הַמִּדְיָנִים
אֲחֵר תִּאֲסֹף אֶל-עַמִּיךָ: וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-הָעָם לֵאמֹר הִחְלִצוּ מֵאִתְּכֶם
אֲנָשִׁים לְצַבָּא וַיְהִיו עַל-מִדְיָן לְתֵת נִקְמַת יְהוָה בְּמִדְיָן: אֵלֶּף לַמִּטָּה
אֵלֶּף לַמִּטָּה לְכָל מִטּוֹת יִשְׂרָאֵל תִּשְׁלַחוּ לְצַבָּא: וַיִּמְסְרוּ מֵאֵלֶּפֶי
יִשְׂרָאֵל אֵלֶּף לַמִּטָּה שְׁנַיִם-עָשָׂר אֵלֶּף חֲלוּצֵי צָבָא: וַיִּשְׁלַח אֹתָם

¹ **H**ASHEM spoke to Moses, saying, ² "Take vengeance for the Children of Israel against the Midianites; * afterward you will be gathered unto your people."

³ Moses spoke to the people, saying, "Arm men from among yourselves for the legion that they may be against Midian to inflict HASHEM's vengeance against Midian. ⁴ A thousand from a tribe, a thousand from a tribe, for all the tribes of Israel shall you send to the legion."

5. Tehillim 91

אֵל-נִקְמוֹת יְהוָה אֵל נִקְמוֹת הוֹפִיעַ: הַנְּשֹׂא שֹׁפֵט הָאָרֶץ הַשֵּׁב גְּמוּלָה עַל-
גְּאִים: עַד-מְתֵי רָשָׁעִים | יְהוָה עַד-מְתֵי רָשָׁעִים יַעֲלוֹז: וַיִּבְעוּ יְדַבְּרוּ עֲתָק
יִתְאָמְרוּ כָל-פְּעֻלֵי אָנוּן: עִמָּךְ יְהוָה יִדְכָּאוּ וַנְּחַלְתֶּךָ יַעֲנוּ: אֲלִמְנָה וְגַר
יִהְרְגוּ וַיִּתּוּמִים יִרְצָחוּ: וַיֹּאמְרוּ לֹא יִרְאֶה-יְיָ וְלֹא יִבִּין אֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב:

¹ **O** God of vengeance, HASHEM; O God of vengeance, appear! ² Arise, O Judge of the earth, render recompense to the haughty. ³ Until when will the wicked, O HASHEM, until when will the wicked exult? ⁴ They speak freely, they utter malicious falsehood, they glorify themselves, all doers of iniquity. ⁵ Your nation, HASHEM, they crush, and they afflict Your heritage. ⁶ The widow and the stranger they slay, and the orphans they murder. ⁷ And they say, "God will not see, nor will the God of Jacob understand." ⁸ Understand, you boors among the

6. Tehillim 149

הִלְלוּ יְיָ | שִׁירוּ לַיהוָה שִׁיר חֲדָשׁ תְּהַלְתוּ בְּקִהְל חֲסִידִים: יִשְׂמַח
יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּעֲשׂוֹי בְּנֵי-צִיּוֹן וַיְגִילוּ בְּמַלְכָּם: יִהְלְלוּ שְׁמוֹ בְּמַחֹל בְּתֹף וּכְנֹר
יִזְמְרוּ-לוֹ: כִּי-רוֹצֶה יְהוָה בְּעַמּוֹ יִפְאַר עֲנוּיִם בִּישׁוּעָה: יַעֲלוּ חֲסִידִים
בְּכָבוֹד יִרְנְנוּ עַל-מִשְׁבֹּתָם: רוֹמְמוֹת אֵל בְּגִרוֹנָם וְחָרַב פִּיפּוֹת בְּיָדָם:
לַעֲשׂוֹת נִקְמָה בְּגוֹיִם תּוֹכַחוֹת בְּלֵאמִים: לְאַסֵּר מַלְכֵיהֶם בְּזָקִים
וְנִכְבְּדֵיהֶם בְּכַבְלֵי בְרוֹז: לַעֲשׂוֹת בָּהֶם | מִשְׁפָּט כְּתוּב הַדָּר הוּא לְכָל-
חֲסִידָיו הִלְלוּ-יְיָ:

¹ **H**alleluyah! Sing to HASHEM a new song; His praise is in the congregation of the devout. ² Let Israel exult in its Maker; let the Children of Zion rejoice in their King. ³ Let them praise His Name with dancing; with drums and harp let them make music to Him. ⁴ For HASHEM favors His people; He adorns the humble with salvation. ⁵ Let the devout exult in glory, let them sing joyously upon their beds. * ⁶ The lofty praises of God are in their throats, and a double-edged sword is in their hand — ⁷ to execute vengeance among the nations, rebukes* among the regimes; ⁸ to bind their kings with chains, and their nobles with fetters of iron; ⁹ to execute upon them written judgment* — that will be the splendor of all His devout ones. Halleluyah!

7. Berachos 33

A related exposition:

גדול מקדש שנתן בין שתי אותיות – אמר רבי אלעזר – **R' Elazar said: Great is the Sanctuary, for it was placed in Scripture between two Divine Names,** " בפעלת ה' מקדש ה' " – as it says: *The foundation of the dwelling place that You have made, O Hashem, the Sanctuary, my Lord, that Your hands have established.*^[30]

A third exposition regarding wisdom:

כל אדם שיש בו דעה – אמר רבי אלעזר – **And R' Elazar said: For any person that has understanding, כאילו נבנה בית המקדש ביומיו – it is as if the Sanctuary were built in his days. דעה נתנה בין שתי אותיות – For understanding was placed in Scripture between two Divine Names, מקדש נתן בין שתי אותיות – and the Sanctuary was placed between two Divine Names (as demonstrated above).**^[31]

The Gemara challenges these expositions:

מתקיף לה רב אחא קרחינא – **Rav Acha Karchinaah objected: אלא מעתה גדולה נקמה שנתנה בין שתי אותיות, you would also have to say: Great is vengeance, for it was placed in Scripture between two Divine Names, אל-נקמות, אלא – But accordingly, מקדש נתן בין שתי אותיות – for it is written: O God of vengeance, Hashem! O God of vengeance, appear!**^[32] Would you indeed submit that vengeance is a great thing?!

8. Yoma 32

The Gemara records a related teaching:

אמר רבי יוחנן מושב רבי שמעון בן יהוירק – **And R' Yochanan said in the name of R' Shimon ben Yehotzadak: כל תלמיד חכם – Any Torah scholar**

– or bear a grudge like a snake^[1] – אינו תלמיד חכם – **who does not take revenge – שאינו נוקם**

The Gemara objects:

– **לא תקם ולא תטר** – **But it is written in the Torah: You shall not take revenge and you shall not bear a grudge.**^[3] How can R' Shimon ben Yehotzadak require one to act in a manner prohibited by the Torah?

The Gemara answers:

– **הוויא במקומו** – **That prohibition was written with regard to monetary matters,** – **דתינא** – **as is evident from that which was taught in the following Baraisa:** – **איזו היא נקימה – WHAT IS TAKING REVENGE,** – **ואיזו היא נטירה – AND WHAT IS BEARING A GRUDGE?** – **נקימה** – **The following case illustrates TAKING REVENGE:** – **אמר לו השאילני מנלך – [ONE MAN] SAID TO [ANOTHER]: "LEND ME YOUR SICKLE."** – **אמר לו לאו – [THE SECOND] REPLIED TO HIM: "NO!"** – **למחר אמר לו הוא השאילני – THE NEXT DAY, [THE SECOND MAN] SAID TO [THE FIRST]: "LEND ME YOUR HATCHET."** – **אמר לו איני משאילך – [THE FIRST] REPLIED TO HIM: "I AM NOT LENDING IT TO YOU** – **בדרךך שלא – JUST AS YOU DID NOT LEND ME your sickle!"** – **הוא – AND WHAT IS an example of TAKING REVENGE.**^[4] – **ואיזו היא – AND WHAT IS an example of BEARING A GRUDGE?** – **אמר לו – [ONE MAN] SAID TO [ANOTHER]: "LEND ME YOUR HATCHET."** – **אמר ליה לא – [THE SECOND] REPLIED TO HIM: "NO!"** – **למחר אמר לו השאילני חלוקך – THE NEXT DAY, [THE SECOND] SAID TO [THE FIRST]: "LEND ME YOUR SHIRT."** – **אמר לו הילך – [THE**

The Gemara answers:

– **אין במילתה מיהא גדולה היא – אמר ליה – Yes! In its proper place vengeance is indeed a great thing.** – **והיינו דאמר עילא – And this sentiment, that vengeance is at times a great thing, is in accord with what Ulla said: שתי נקמות הללו – אחת לטובה – Why these two vengeance in the verse?^[33] – אחת לרעה – One is to mete out benefit [i.e. reward] and one is to mete out punishment.**^[34]

The Gemara explains:

– **טובה דכתיב, הופיע מהר פארן – This vengeance is intended to mete out benefit, as it is written: He appeared from Mount Paran.**^[35] – **לרעה דכתיב, אל-נקמות ה' אל נקמות הופיע – And at the same time it is intended to mete out punishment, as it is written: O God of vengeance, Hashem! O God of vengeance, appear.**

– **איני כמותך שלא – אמר ליה – HERE, IT IS FOR YOU. I AM NOT LIKE YOU, FOR YOU DID NOT LEND ME your hatchet.** – **זו היא נטירה – THIS IS an example of BEARING A GRUDGE.**^[5] Only in cases such as these, which are money related, does the Torah forbid taking revenge and bearing a grudge.^[6] R' Shimon ben Yehotzadak, on the other hand, speaks of a person who was subjected to personal suffering, in which case the prohibition does not apply.^[7]

The Gemara challenges this answer:

– **ואערא דגופא – And is it not wrong to take revenge or bear a grudge in a case of personal suffering? – והא תנא – But it was taught in a Baraisa: הנעלבין ואינן עולבין – THOSE WHO SUFFER INSULT BUT DO NOT INSULT in response, שומעין הרפתון ואינן עושין – WHO HEAR THEIR DISGRACE BUT DO NOT REPLY, שישין – WHO PERFORM God's will OUT OF LOVE^[8] AND ARE HAPPY even IN SUFFERING.^[9] – **ואהכין – REGARDING THEM THE VERSE STATES: BUT THEY WHO LOVE HIM [God] SHALL BE AS THE SUN GOING FORTH IN ITS MIGHT.**^[10] This Baraisa praises one who maintains his silence although he was subjected to personal disgrace. How, then, can R' Shimon ben Yehotzadak insist that a Torah scholar take revenge in such circumstances?**

The Gemara answers:

– **לעולם דנקיט ליה בליביה – Actually, R' Shimon ben Yehotzadak means only that [a Torah scholar] should keep the matter in his mind, and allow others to avenge his honor. He does not mean that the scholar himself should make any response.**^[11]

13. Rav Soloveitchik (1903-1993)
Kol Dodi Dofek



The fifth knock of the Beloved is perhaps the most important. For the first time in the annals of our exile, Divine Providence has amazed our enemies with the astounding discovery that Jewish blood is not cheap! If the antisemites describe this phenomenon as being “an eye for an eye,” we will agree with them. If we want to courageously defend our continued national and historical existence, we must, from time to time, interpret the verse of an “eye for an eye” literally. So many “eyes” were lost in the course of our bitter exile because we did *not* repay hurt for hurt. The time has come for us to fulfill the simple meaning of “an eye for an eye.” (Exodus 21:24) Of course, I am sure everyone recognizes that I am an adherent of the Oral Law, and from my perspective there is no doubt that the verse refers to monetary restitution, as defined by halakhah. However, with respect to the Mufti^D and Nasser,^E I would demand that we interpret the verse in accordance with its literal meaning — the taking of an actual eye! Pay no attention to the saccharine suggestions of known assimilationists and of some Jewish socialists who stand pat in their rebelliousness and think they are still living in Bialystok, Brest-Litovsk, and Minsk of the year 1905,^F and openly declare that revenge is forbidden to the Jewish people in any place, at any time, and under all circumstances. “Vanity of vanities!” (Ecclesiastes 1:2) Revenge is forbidden when it is pointless, but if one is aroused thereby to self-defense, it is the most elementary right of man to take his revenge.

The Torah has always taught that a man is permitted, indeed, has a sacred obligation, to defend himself. With the verse, “If a burglar is caught in the act of breaking in” (Exodus 22:1), the Torah establishes the halakhah that one may defend not only one’s life but his property as well.⁷ If the thief who comes to take the property of the householder is capable of killing the householder (should the householder not comply with his demands), the householder may rise up against the criminal and kill him. For good reason the Torah relates that two of its great heroes, Abraham and Moses, took sword in hand to defend their brethren: “And when Abraham heard that his kinsman was taken captive, he led forth his retainers” (Genesis 14:14). “And when Moses saw the Egyptian smite a Jew . . . he struck down the Egyptian” (Exodus 2:11-12). This behavior does not contradict the princi-

ple of loving-kindness and compassion. On the contrary, a passive position, without self-defense, may sometimes lead to the most awesome brutality. “And I will gain honor from Pharaoh, and all his hosts, his chariots, and his horsemen. And the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord” (Exodus 14:17-18). God did not seek honor and recognition. He wanted Pharaoh, Moses’ contemporary, to know that he must pay a high price for his edict that “Every male child born shall be cast into the river” (Exodus 1:22). His present desire is that the blood of Jewish children who were slain as they recited the eighteen benedictions of the daily [Amidah] prayer shall also be avenged. When God smote the Egyptians, He sought to demonstrate that there will always be accountability for the spilling of Jewish blood. At present, it is necessary not only to convince the dictator of Egypt [Nasser], but the self-righteous Nehru,^G the Foreign Office in London, and the sanctimonious members of the United Nations, that Jewish blood is not cheap. Therefore, how laughable it is when they try to persuade us to rely on the declaration of the three Great Powers guaranteeing the status quo.^H We all know from experience what value can be attached to the pronouncements of the British Foreign Office and the so-called friendship of certain officials in our State Department. In general, how absurd is the request that an entire people be dependent on the kindnesses of others and remain without the ability to defend itself. Public and private honor is dependent upon the possibility of defending one’s life and one’s honor. A people that cannot defend its freedom and tranquility is neither free nor independent. The third of the phrases of Divine redemption is “And I shall redeem you with an outstretched hand and with great judgments” (Exodus 6:6). Thank God we have lived to see the day when, with the help of God, Jews have it within their power to defend themselves.

Let us not forget that the poison of Hitlerite anti-semitism (which made Jews fair game to all) still permeates this generation, which looked with equanimity upon the horrible scene of the suffocation of millions in gas chambers as a normal event that need not be challenged. The antidote for this venom that poisoned minds and dulled hearts is the readiness of the State of Israel to defend the lives of its citizens. Listen! My Beloved Knocks!

14. Rav
Shlomo Chaim
Ha'Cohen
Aviner



Q: Is it ethical to kill a terrorist when it is logical to assume that he will no longer murder?

A: This question can be divided into two parts: 1. From the perspective of reality, how is it possible to be certain that he has stopped murdering? It is impossible to know. 2. Even if we know that he will no longer murder, we must still kill him. But why – isn't this the law of a "rodef" (literally "pursuer" - a case in which one is permitted to kill a pursuer so that the pursued person is saved from harm)? If he is in pursuit, we kill him and if he is not in pursuit, we do not kill him. There are three answers given by halachic authorities: (a) The terrorist is not finished being a "rodef". He is not an "individual rodef" who is angry with a particular person and wants to kill him, he is a "communal rodef" who wants to kill Jews and he does not care which Jews they are. If we capture him, put him in jail, and he is later released, as is the custom – to our great distress – he will continue to murder. The organization of parents of those murdered by terrorists has exact records which state that more than 180 Jews have been murdered by released terrorists who have murdered again. This means that when you free a terrorist with the proper goal of helping Jews, you endanger more Jews. This person is therefore not a one-time "rodef," but a perpetual "rodef." (b) The halachic authorities also say that you should kill him in order that others will see and be frightened. This "rodef" is teaching other "rodefim" through his action. If he kills Jews and when the police approach, he gives up and we have mercy on him, we encourage others to act like him, thus endangering other Jews. Therefore, in situations like these, we must be extremely ethical. The question is, ethical to whom – the "rodef" or other Jews? Answer: to both of them. We must be ethical to the Jews who have done nothing wrong and to him, since if we kill him, we stop him from killing others and lessen his "Gehinom" (punishment in the World to Come). The Mishnah in Sanhedrin (71b) says that the "ben sorer u-moreh" (the rebellious son – see Devarim 21:18-21) is killed on account of his future. While he has done many things wrong, he has not committed a sin for which he is liable for capital punishment, but he is killed so that he will die innocent and not guilty. In our case the terrorist is already liable, but he should die liable and not even more liable. We do not use the concept "he should die innocent and not die guilty" to create new laws, but to explain them. (c) These are halachot of war, and in war, we do not lock up an enemy who is shooting at us, but we fire back at him. This is similar to what King Shaul said to the "Keni" (Shmuel 1 15:6): "Go, depart, go down from among Amalek, lest I destroy you with them." This means, even though you are my friend, if you are there, you could get hurt or killed. In the halachot of war, we do not make such calculations as it says, "The best of the non-Jews should be killed." The Tosafot raised a major difficulty with this statement: how can we say such a thing when according to halachah it is forbidden to kill a non-Jew and all the more so the best of the non-Jews (Tosafot to Avodah Zarah 26b and see Beit Yosef Yoreh Deah 158)? Tosafot explained that this statement refers to a time of war. This non-Jew seems pleasant or, in our case, he killed but he will be pleasant. No, we did not make such calculations in a time of war; even a pleasant-seeming non-Jew is killed.

In sum: we therefore see that killing a terrorist is ethical.

תשובה: Shut She'eilat Shlomo