

# Towards a Jewish Theology of Nonviolence

Aaron J. Tapper

Towards the end of the Passover Seder, families traditionally open the front door of their home to the Prophet Elijah, who in Jewish belief will herald in the messianic age. Many Jews are familiar with the “Eliyahu Hanavi” prayer which asks for peace, yet in traditional homes another prayer is also said at this time in the Seder, *Shfokh Chamatkha*:

*Pour out Your fury against the nations who do not know You and upon the regions where they do not invoke Your name because they devoured Jacob and desolated his home. Pour out Your wrath on them and may Your blazing anger overtake them. Pursue them with anger and destroy them from under the heavens of Adonai.*

Who are these nations deserving of God’s wrath? Does “the nations that do not know you” mean all non-Jews? Does it mean non-Jews who are immoral and unethical? Or does it mean just those non-Jews who have persecuted other Jews? What about the non-Jews who persecute other non-Jews? And why are we asking for destruction just before we offer a prayer for peace?

For the non-orthodox and non-traditional, it is easy to simply ignore this prayer—most Reform, Reconstructionist, and other Liberal Haggadot don’t even include it, substituting instead a prayer praising God for saving the Jews in every situation. Yet the idea in Judaism of triumphing over our enemy is not one that we can—or should—simply ignore. An important part of our tradition is bound up in violent retribution. Instead of ignoring this vengeful rage we must address it.

## *Celebrating Violence*

Passover follows directly after Purim, a holiday in which Jews celebrate the massacre of our enemies. *Celebrating violence* is a fundamental component of this holiday.

According to Jewish law, during the holiday’s 24-hour period a Jew is obligated to hear Megillat Esther, the

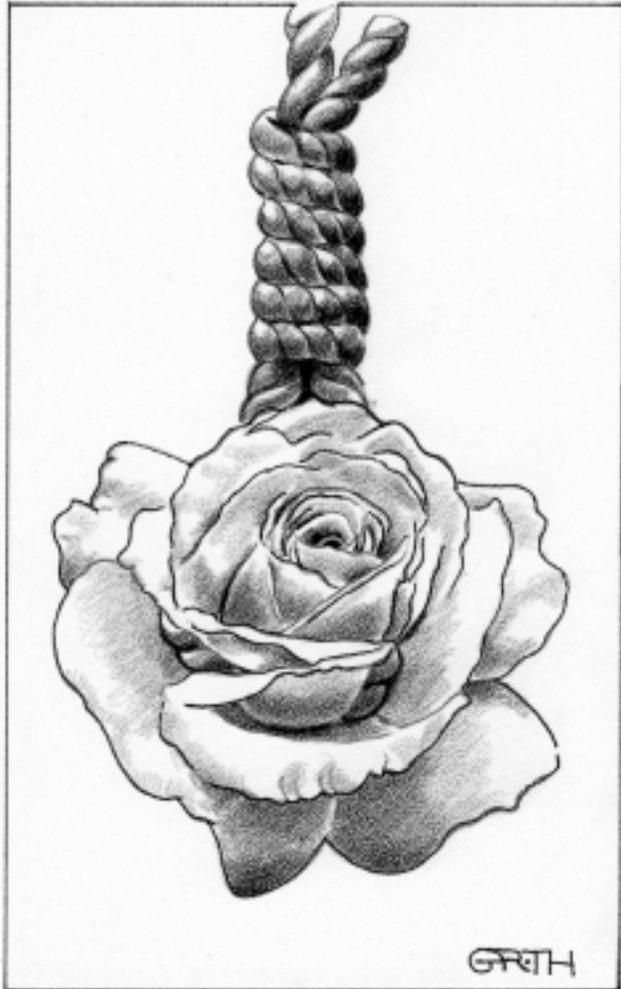
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sacred text read on Purim, twice, and during this recitation Jews commonly *celebrate* the killing of human beings. Although I am aware that some scholars say that the megillah is a brilliantly written farce, the Jewish communities that I have been exposed to in my life have not focused upon this literary technique. Instead, at Jewish Day Schools, in Jewish summer overnight camps, at synagogue services and in various yeshivot, I have been invited to cheer and applaud King Ahashverosh’s sentencing and hanging of the character Haman, as well as his ten sons, alongside the killing of more than 75,000 others at the hands of Jews. Following a traditional custom, though the entire text is chanted with specific troupe, we have recited the verse of Haman’s hanging using a special upbeat melody, one of six verses in the megillah that is treated in this way, for each of these passages contains descriptions of events that are perceived as having been beneficial to the Jews of the Purim story.

Many rabbis defend this upbeat celebration. For example, according to Rabbi Andrew Sacks, the Director of the Rabbinical Assembly of Israel’s Masorti movement and a previous congregational rabbi of eight years, many, if not most, contemporary Jews who celebrate Purim use this holiday simply as a time to rejoice; the cheering involved with the megillah’s reading is “merely an extension of this atmosphere and is not necessarily related to the text’s seemingly hateful ideas.”

I respectfully disagree. It is my experience that many Jews actually delight in the hanging of Haman and his sons, largely because they see these deaths as justified. And what of vindictive extremists who have used our Purim text to justify acts of violence? Only eleven years ago, Baruch Goldstein carried out perhaps the most heinous act a Jew committed in the twentieth century, when he murdered 29 Muslims and injured more than 100 others while they were praying in Hebron’s Cave of the Patriarchs. Though it is surely true that Goldstein has been an exception to the rule, an historical outlier in Jewish history, it is *davkah* on Purim that he chose to carry out this act. I firmly believe that passages such as the following can only create hatred in Jews: “Thus the Jews smote all their enemies... and did what they would to those that hated them.”



### *A Prayer for 'Righteous Gentiles'*

Though Purim is unabashedly a celebration of Jewish triumph, Passover presents itself as a more nuanced holiday. Even many non-Jews are aware of the custom during the Seder of spilling wine out of our cups during the recitation of the Ten Plagues, symbolizing the idea of our communal discomfort with celebrating the suffering and deaths of the Egyptians, an idea echoed in various midrashim.

Realizing the contradiction in calling for God's wrath to be waged upon non-Jews immediately before making a prayer for universal peace, some rabbis have offered the following prayer as an alternative or accompaniment to *Shfokh Chamatkha*:

*Pour out Your love upon the nations who have known You and upon the regions where they call upon Your name, due to the loving-kindness that they have enacted upon Jacob's descendants and for defending Your nation Israel from those who would devour them. May they live to see the sukkah [of peace spread] over your chosen ones and to participate in the happiness of your nations.*

Until three years ago, I chose to recite this passage at my

family's Seder, after my father said *Shfokh Chamatkha*. I was comforted that I was performing a custom I believed was more than 500 years old, said to have been established around the same time as *Shfokh Chamatkha*. Similar to passages in the Talmud, I also felt that in reciting both texts alongside one another my family was being more accurately reflective of our pluralistic, multi-opinioned tradition.

But eventually I became dissatisfied with this second tradition as well. I was asking God to bless those people who were already, in common vernacular, "good to the Jews", I realized that this prayer was limited in scope, focusing on a single group of non-Jews who—at least in my mind—already seem to be on God's path. Though this prayer did not call for violence, it continued the pattern of dividing the world into Jew and non-Jew, those who help Jews and those who hurt Jews, creating an 'othering' that has generated much violence. Soon thereafter I learned that this second tradition was probably fabricated circa 1963, as the Halachic authority, Rabbi David Golinkin, contends in the Spring 2003 edition of *Conservative Judaism*.

### *Understanding Forgiveness*

In the Summer of 2003 I had the opportunity to spend one month in Freetown, Sierra Leone, volunteering as a research intern with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). As many people know, prior to the ceasefire of 2002 a bloody and ruthless civil war raged in Sierra Leone for more than ten years. One of the many forms of violence perpetrated during this time was the chopping off of an "enemy's" hands.

On one of my last days at the TRC, I spoke with a Sierra Leonean who had lost his left hand in one such attack. Hesitantly questioning him as to what he would do if he encountered the man who had viciously chopped his hand off, I asked him about his understanding of the concept of forgiveness. In one of the more profound moments of my life I listened to the beautiful way that this individual had decided to treat his so-called enemy.

"I would embrace him," he said. "I would hug him and tell him that I forgive him. I know that he didn't chop off my hand because he hated me. He didn't even know me. He chopped off my hand in a crazed state of fear and madness."

Is it possible for my Jewish community to deal with perceived enemies in this same way? Or should we pray for their demise or even their deaths? What about those who don't actually commit a crime? Should they be punished for intentions of thought? Purim's Haman, as the megillah informs us, didn't kill anyone. Using terms from the United States criminal system, Haman only "conspired" to kill others. And according to the text his sons didn't even do that. As for the more than 75,000 others who were killed by the Jewish community that day, the text implies that some of these non-Jews were killed in self-defense and some were murdered in pre-emptive attacks.

But Jewish texts offer an abundance of voices in favor of reconciliation. According to one text, the esteemed Talmudic figure Beruriah finds her husband, Rabbi Meir, praying for God to destroy some men. Shocked at her husband's behavior Beruriah sharply admonishes her husband, asking him to explain how he could make such a prayer. Rabbi Meir explains that on his way home he was robbed by two thieves and his prayer was asking God to 'justly' punish these sinners. Citing her own interpretation of a verse from the Book of Psalms, Beruriah tells Rabbi Meir that rather than asking God to destroy the men—to destroy the sinners—he should instead pray for God to destroy their sins.

In looking at the advocacy of nonviolence in the Jewish tradition, one is not hard-pressed to find that Beruriah was following an ages-old Jewish tradition that confronts a Jew's urge to commit revenge, focusing instead on the biblical commandments not to bear a grudge and to forgive others. Being created *b'tzelem Elokim*, in the image of God, commands us to take our lives—and the lives of all others—extremely seriously. Indeed, as a famous Mishnah teaches us, the loss of a single life is equivalent to the death of the entirety of humanity. The Jerusalem Talmud teaches us that it does not matter if the individual is a Jew or a non-Jew. Both are holy in the eyes of God.

This theology of nonviolence and communal forgiveness has been developed by contemporary rabbis Everett Gendler and Jeremy Milgrom, among others. It is a theology we can apply to reconciling with children of WWII-era Germans who must live with the actions of parents and grandparents they did not themselves condone. It is a theology we can apply to the situation in the Middle East, where only by engaging in compassionate forgiveness will we be able to achieve an endurable peace.

Jacques Derrida, a Jew from Algiers who knew much about both war and genocide, wrote that there is an element of giving within the concept of forgiveness, a giving of a piece of oneself to another in response to an unforgivable act. But, he continues, the process must be performed despite this paradox. Reconciliation is *the* path towards healing, the way towards peace, whether in Sierra Leone, South Africa, or Israel and Palestine. We, as a Jewish community, must attempt to reconcile with our perceived enemies, both for the safety and sustenance of the Jewish community as well as the future stability of our global world.

### *A New Prayer*

Using Beruriah's wisdom and other Jewish texts and customs as a backdrop, I recently composed the following prayer, to be said during the Pesach Seder, either in place of or alongside *Shfokh Chamatkha*:

*Pour out Your love upon the communities who do not know You—both Jews and non-Jews—and the regions where they call upon Your name in vain, for we all need help from you to see the hate inside of us. Transform our*

*evil thoughts so that we can use our power to make the world whole and to perfect its brokenness. May we live to see the sukkah of peace and to participate in the happiness of all of Your nations. Give all of us Your support, so that we can achieve a state of internal peace and a peace within the human collective, in Your name if not in ours, in our name if not in Yours. You who brings peace to Your world brings peace to us and to the people Israel and to all humankind, and we say Amen.*

Judaism is hardly a monolithic religious tradition. For every passage of Isaiah 2:4, “beat their swords into plowshares, their spears into pruning hooks”, there is a Joel 4:9, “beat your plowshares into swords, your pruning hooks into spears”. Yet all Jews have a choice in deciding to identify with a particular textual tradition.

Some associate with the prevalence of violence over non-violence. Members of my own family, in fact, opt to ask God to inflict violence on others through the *Shfokh Chamatkha* prayer, perhaps as a spiritual and psychological outlet for centuries of cruel and unjust Jewish persecution. I understand this anger and pain, for it is deeply embedded in both the Jewish community's narrative and my own. I comprehend the reasons for legitimizing these ideas because of our historical maltreatment. It is clear that individuals exist in the world that have deeply negative feelings towards Jews, often times committing hateful acts. I do not dispute this reality.

It is my humble thought, however, that *Shfokh Chamatkha* and other texts of this kind do not reflect our ideal way to treat malicious or immoral people. For me, Jewish prayer should—and must—echo not the way we think the world is but rather the way that the world should be. Religious texts shape our community's consciousness; the habits of our ideas manifest in our physical actions. *Minbag yisrael k'balachab*; our community's casual customs often become etched into law. We must not run from this verity. Instead we should be vocal in re-interpreting, if not marginalizing, our hateful texts. Each text in the Jewish canon emerged in a particular time and place. Though many of our hateful texts were written in times of great persecution, our contemporary worldview must transcend our past; our prayers must focus on our ideals for the future.

In a time in which our world clearly needs physical and spiritual healing, I respectfully hope that this new *Shfokh Abavatkha* prayer can serve as an addition, and perhaps a replacement, to the Jewish tradition of *Shfokh Chamatkha*, replacing the tradition of *darchei shalom*, paths of peace, in the center of our ideological canon, furthering the Jewish community's efforts to transform and heal the world.

