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Center for Modern Torah Leadership



חרות ואחריות

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## DOES G-D GLOAT?

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My friend and colleague Rabbi Carl Perkins recently passed on to me a query from a bar mitzvah student: How can the Torah portray G-d as rejoicing at the destruction of Jewry, even when we are wicked?

Devarim 28:63 in fact emphasizes that G-d's happiness when destroying them is parallel to His happiness when doing well by them.

וְהָיָה כְּאִשְׁר־יִשֹּׁשׁ יְקוּקָה עֲלֵיכֶם לְהִיטִיב אֶתְכֶם וּלְהַרְבּוֹת אֶתְכֶם  
 בְּן יִשְׁרָאֵל יְקוּקָה עֲלֵיכֶם לְהַאֲבִיד אֶתְכֶם וּלְהַשְׁמִיד אֶתְכֶם

*It will be that **just as** Hashem your G-d sas (rejoiced) to benefact you and to multiply you*

*so Hashem yasis to destroy and to shatter you*

My immediate answer was a reference to Megillah 10b. The Talmud there cites our verse and challenges: Does The Holy Blessed One really rejoice at the downfall of the wicked? It concludes:

אמר רבי אלעזר:

הוא אינו שש, אבל אחרים משיש.

ודיקא נמי:

דכתיב "כן ישיש" ולא כתיב ישוש. שמע מינה.

*Said Rabbi El'azar:*

*He does not rejoice but he does cause others to rejoice.*

*A close reading (of the verse) supports this:*

*as Scripture writes yasis rather than yasus.*

*Treat this argument as conclusive.*

Rabbi El'azar's argument is that *yasis* is a transitive verb, meaning "He will make X rejoice". If the Torah meant that **G-d** would rejoice, it would have used the intransitive *yasus*. By using *yasis*, it indicates that G-d will turn us over to others who will rejoice in our destruction, but G-d will not share in their joy.

The Talmud does not claim that Rabbi El'azar arrived at this reading as the result of the grammatical argument. Quite the opposite: It presents his reading as a direct response to the theological challenge raised by the bar mitzvah boy. The grammatical argument is a happy post

facto discovery. The Torah couldn't mean that! And look – it turns out that it really doesn't.

Rabbi Perkins didn't buy the "really doesn't". What I had shown, he contended, is that the Rabbis shared his congregant's moral outrage at the Torah's portrayal of a gloating G-d. Bully for the Rabbis! But how could I explain the fact that the Torah in fact portrayed G-d that way? How could I justify the *psbat* of the verse?

Now in one sense this question did not bother me very much. Despite powerful modern critiques such as Heschel's G-d in Search of Man and Wyschogrod's Body of Faith, I remain strongly sympathetic to Maimonides' rejection of anthropopathism (the attribution of emotion to G—d), and prefer to say "k'b'yakhol" (=as if it were possible) whenever speaking of G-d in such terms. For a Maimonidean, the statement that G-d will rejoice in destruction means only that He will act in a manner that, were a human being to act that way, we would interpret as the outward expression of inward joy in destruction. (Rabbi Perkins called my attention to Laws of the Foundations of Torah 1:12, in which Rambam cites the *first half* of our verse as an example of this.)

The Rabbis too were fully aware that the Torah presents G-d as hating as well as loving, as killing as well as burying. They taught us to imitate His mercy rather than His vengeance, even though the Torah describes him as both *rachum* and *nokeim*. In other words, they seem to have understood at least the negative emotions in Maimonidean terms.

But they also recognized that this approach becomes implausible when needed too often. At some point it becomes very hard for a person of integrity to describe G-d as awesome or merciful, if all the available evidence points to an enfeebled or harsh Divinity. So it should not be a

matter of indifference if the Torah here depicts G-d as gloating amidst our wreckage.

Does the Torah really depict G-d that way? Or, put differently: Is *yasis* here an exclusively transitive verb?

Rabbi El'azar's explanation is broadly accepted in our tradition, even by a pashtan such as R. Yosef Bekhor Shor, who begins by citing the grammatical rather than the theological argument. So perhaps that argument is sufficient.

The problem is that *yasis* appears four other times in Tanakh, and the feminine version *tasis* appears once, while neither *yasus* nor *tasus* ever appears. In at least a few of those other cases, the intransitive reading is considerably more plausible than the transitive, and the reverse is never true. So it seems overwhelmingly likely that *yasis* can be read as intransitive, and Rabbi El'azar's argument simply fails.

Ibn Ezra, so far as I can tell alone in the Tradition, tries a different approach. The Torah tells us that G-d is as joyous at our destruction as at our good – why need that imply that He is joyous at all? Rather, say that the Torah comes to tell us here that our actions cannot really affect G-d and cause Him damage or grief – what we do is fundamentally a matter of indifference to Him, and he experiences the same (absence of grief or) joy either way.

This seems like Maimonides on steroids, but I think it is a mistake. The whole point of Maimonides' approach is that we don't need to deny that the text "means" that G-d has legs or nostrils or emotions. Of course the text "means" that – but who says that G-d intended us to believe what it literally "means"? G-d provided philosophers with a key, in the form of human reason, that enables us to distinguish the metaphoric from the literally true.

I do not share Maimonides' faith in reason and philosophers. But if every Jewish interpreter in history agreed that this verse **cannot** mean that G-d actually gloats (even while disagreeing amongst themselves as to what it does mean), then I think it is reasonable for us to hold that it does not mean that G-d actually gloats.

Now the Rabbis famously say that "A verse does not leave its *peshal*". But the point of that statement is that a

metaphor works only if it is built off a literal truth. The Sword of Torah is an honor to wear only if military swords are part of formal dress uniforms; if wearing a physical sword were shameful, King Solomon would not use that image to represent Torah scholars on parade. Similarly, we can describe G-d as gloating because human beings gloat; but that does not require G-d to actually gloat, any more than Solomon required his Torah scholars to wear dress swords.

Let me sharpen the argument.

Suppose that 'Andrew' makes a literal statement, for example "Mars is bright tonight". Suppose further that Andrew is a believer in astrology, so that for him the statement "Mars is bright tonight" carries the implication "There will be war tonight".

'Bill' and 'Chet', who do not believe in astrology, were present when Andrew made that statement. The next morning, Bill asks Chet whether war is likely. Chet responds: "Mars is bright tonight".

Is the "pshat" of Chet's statement "a red planet is highly visible"? Clearly he does not "mean" that. Yet his sentence makes sense only because Andrew did mean that, and he is speaking in the cultural context created by Andrew's statement.

My point is that we can never know from internal evidence whether a statement about G-d in the Torah was made by Andrew, or rather by Chet.

One final note: For Maimonides, the story should be told differently. Bill believes in astrology, but Chet does not. So when Chet answers,

- 1) Bill takes the answer literally, and
- 2) Chet knows that Bill will take the answer literally, but
- 3) Chet himself does not mean it literally.

Possibly Chet hopes that next time Bill will ask him the question in broad daylight, and receive the same answer. This will force Bill to recognize that Chet never meant it literally, and perhaps to reconsider his belief in astrology. So too, Maimonides may hope that Devarim 28:63's description of a gloating G-d will force readers to reconsider their belief that G-d has emotions.

Shabbat shalom!