

Your Enemy's Donkey  
Drash by Joe Hample, Rabbinic Intern  
Beth Chayim Chadashim, Los Angeles  
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Remember last summer when Sen. Larry Craig, family values conservative, was busted in an airport men's room for making a pass at a cop? What crossed your mind when you heard that news item? I know what crossed my mind. I thought, It serves him right. I thought, this guy has been an enemy of the gay community for many years: he's had this coming a long, long time. Pierre de LaClos wrote: "Revenge is a dish best served cold."

But wait: was that a Jewish thing to think? Do we Jews believe in revenge? This week's parashah, from Exodus, suggests otherwise. The text says, If you find your enemy's ox or donkey wandering around loose, you shall surely bring it back to its owner. If you see your enemy's beast faltering under its load, you may not want to help, but you must relieve the animal (Ex. 23:4-5). Is this about humane treatment of livestock? In that case the verse shouldn't say your enemy's donkey: it should say any donkey, your neighbor's donkey. The focus on your enemy's donkey proves the issue here is treatment of your enemy. We're talking about the constraints on what you can do to an adversary. The laws of war, so to speak.

The Torah gives us mixed messages about vengeance. Three times in the Torah it says, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth! But our sages never interpreted this formula as an invitation to indiscriminate maiming. Rather, the aphorism defines the upper limit on discipline: you must not take a life for an eye. It might be paraphrased, Let the punishment fit the crime. In any case, the rabbis decreed monetary compensation for bodily injury in lieu of retribution (BT Bava Kamma 83b-84a), since it could never be certain that the retribution was precisely commensurate with the offense.

The larger sense of the Torah is that we Jews do not believe in revenge. Leviticus (19:18) cautions us not to take vengeance, but to love our neighbor as ourselves. Deuteronomy (32:35) explains that vengeance is a Divine prerogative exclusively: "Vengeance is mine," says the Eternal; that is, no one else's. You are not supposed to go around de-eyeing and de-toothing your personal enemies.

The same applies to public enemies. How do you feel about the death penalty? I didn't shed any tears for Timothy McVeigh, but that's not the point. DNA studies show many people on death row are innocent, but that's also not the point. The point is, even if they were guilty, capital punishment doesn't deter crime, capital punishment doesn't protect society. If someone has evidence to the contrary, I'm willing to listen. But as far as I can tell, the death penalty is about vengeance, period. And human beings have no right to vengeance.

Vengeance is big in the Mideast, as you know. The Palestinians want revenge for 1948. The Israelis want revenge for the Qassam rockets and the Katyusha rockets, for suicide bombings, for the Palestinians siding with Hitler during World War II. But God does not authorize human beings to take vengeance. God can take vengeance, if and when God deems it appropriate: but you and I must not hope or pray for the suffering of our foes. We have to help them with their

ox and with their donkey. We have to permit the flow of food and medicine to civilians in Gaza. Judaism doesn't command us to love our enemies: that teaching comes from another faith tradition, and I consider it unrealistic. Judaism doesn't command us to turn the other cheek: the Talmud (BT Sanhedrin 72a) says, If someone comes to kill you, kill them first. But if you are not in immediate danger, you have a duty to remember your enemy's humanity. In Proverbs (25:21) we read, If your enemy is hungry, give them bread: if your enemy is thirsty, give them water. And if we're fighting as Jews, then presumably we're fighting for Jewish values. Vengeance is not a Jewish value.

Let's take a look at the silent meditation after the Amidah, on page 44a of your prayer book. The first line of the Hebrew says, V'limkal'lai nafshi tiddom: on the second line of the English, "and to those who curse me may my soul be silent." This is hard. This is a real leap of faith, that it's in our best interest to relinquish vengeance, to forgo humiliating someone who once humiliated us, to refrain from exploiting someone who once exploited us. But we have nothing to gain if Larry Craig is destroyed for being queer. We have nothing to gain from children starving in Gaza. Vengeance is a cheap high with a bitter hangover. Happiness depends on letting go of grudges.

George Herbert wrote, "Living well is the best revenge." You and I continue to lead our liberated lives: and Larry Craig now has few defenders but the ACLU, which supports everyone's right to be gay, even his. Larry Craig dependent on the ACLU! That's our revenge. That's revenge enough.

We are called to live in a world where vengeance is not the answer, where we must renounce the quick fix of retribution for the long and difficult process of reconciliation. The ox and donkey of our parashah agree with the accumulated wisdom of the Jewish people. Vengeance doesn't pay.