

“Rejoice Not . . .”

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“REJOICE NOT when thine enemy falleth, and let not thine heart be glad when he stumbleth, / Lest the Lord see [it], and it displease him, and he turn away his wrath from him.”

This is one of the most beautiful passages in the Bible (Proverbs 24:17-18), and indeed in the Hebrew language. It is beautiful in other languages, too, though no translation comes close to the beauty of the original.

Of course, it is natural to be glad when one's enemy is defeated, and the thirst for revenge is a human trait. But gloating – Schadenfreude – is something different altogether. An ugly thing.

Ancient Hebrew legend has it that God got very angry when the Children of Israel rejoiced as their Egyptian pursuers drowned in the Red Sea. “My creatures are drowning in the sea,” God admonished them, “And you are singing?”

These thoughts crossed my mind when I saw the TV shots of jubilant crowds of young Americans shouting and dancing in the street. Natural, but unseemly. The contorted faces and the aggressive body language were no different from those of crowds in Sudan or Somalia. The ugly sides of human nature seem to be the same everywhere.

THE REJOICING may be premature. Most probably, al-Qaeda did not die with Osama bin-Laden. The effect may be entirely different.

In 1942 the British killed Abraham Stern, whom they called a terrorist. Stern, whose nom de guerre was Ya'ir, was hiding in a cupboard in an apartment in Tel Aviv. In his case too, it was the movements of his courier that gave him away. After making sure that he was the right man, the British police officer in command shot him dead.

That was not the end of his group – rather, a new beginning. It became the bane of British rule in Palestine. Known as the “Stern Gang” (its real name was “Fighters for the Freedom of Israel”), it carried out the most daring attacks on British installations and played a significant role in persuading the colonial power to leave the country.

Hamas did not die when the Israeli air force killed Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, the paralyzed founder, ideologue and symbol of Hamas. As a martyr he was far more effective than as a living leader. His martyrdom attracted many new fighters to the cause. Killing a person does not kill an idea. The Christians even took the cross as their symbol.

WHAT WAS the idea that turned Osama bin Laden into a world figure?

He preached the restoration of the Caliphate of the early Muslim centuries, which was not only a huge empire, but also a center of the sciences and the arts, poetry and literature, when Europe was still a barbaric, medieval continent. Every Arab child learns about these glories, and cannot but contrast them with the sorry Muslim present.

(In a way, these longings parallel the Zionist romantics' dreams of a resurrected kingdom of David and Solomon.)

A new Caliphate in the 21st century is as unlikely as the wildest creation of the imagination. It would have been diametrically opposed to the Zeitgeist, were it not for its opponents – the Americans. They needed this dream – or nightmare – more than the Muslims themselves.

The American Empire always needs an antagonist to keep it together and to focus its energies. This has to be a worldwide enemy, a sinister advocate of an evil philosophy.

Such were the Nazis and Imperial Japan, but they did not last long. Fortunately, there was then the Communist Empire, which filled the role admirably.

There were Communists everywhere. All of them were plotting the downfall of freedom, democracy and the United States of America. They were even lurking inside the US, as J. Edgar Hoover and Senator Joe McCarthy so convincingly demonstrated.

For decades, the US flourished in the fight against the Red Menace; its forces spread all over the world, its spaceships reached the moon, its best minds engaged in a titanic battle of ideas, the Sons of Light against the Sons of Darkness.

And then – suddenly – the whole thing collapsed. Soviet power vanished as if it had never existed. The American spy agencies, with their tremendous capabilities, were flabbergasted. Apparently, they had no idea how ramshackle the Soviet structure actually was. How could they see, blinded as they were by their own ideological preconceptions?

The disappearance of the Communist Threat left a gaping void in the American psyche, which cried out to be filled. Osama Bin Laden kindly offered his services.

It needed, of course, a world-shaking event to lend credibility to such a hare-brained utopia. The 9/11 outrage was just such an event. It produced many changes in the American way of life. And a new global enemy.

Overnight, medieval anti-Islamic prejudices are dusted-off for display. Islam the terrible, the murderous, the fanatical. Islam the anti-democratic, the anti-freedom, anti-all-our-values. Suicide bombers, 72 virgins, jihad.

The US springs to life again. Soldiers, spies and special forces fan out across the globe to fight terrorism. Bin Laden is everywhere. The War Against Terrorism is an apocalyptic struggle with Satan.

American freedoms have to be restricted, the US military machine grows by leaps and bounds. Power-hungry Intellectuals babble about the Clash of Civilizations and sell their souls for instant celebrity.

To produce the lurid paint for such a twisted picture of reality, religious Islamic groups are all thrown into the same pot – the Taliban in Afghanistan, the Ayatollahs in Iran, Hizbollah in

Lebanon, Hamas in Palestine, Indonesian separatists, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and elsewhere, whoever. All become al-Qaeda, despite the fact that each has a totally different agenda, focused on its own country, while bin Laden aims to abolish all Muslim states and create one Holy Islamic Empire. Details, details.

The Holy War against the Jihad finds warriors everywhere. Ambitious demagogues, for whom this promises an easy way to inflame the masses, spring up in many countries, from France to Finland, from Holland to Italy. The hysteria of Islamophobia displaces good old anti-Semitism, using almost the same language. Tyrannical regimes present themselves as bulwarks against al-Qaeda, as they had once presented themselves as bulwarks against Communism. And, of course, our own Binyamin Netanyahu milks the situation for all it is worth, traveling from capital to capital peddling his wares of anti-Islamism.

Bin Laden had good reason to be proud, and probably was.

WHEN I saw his picture for the first time, I joked that he was not a real person, but an actor straight from Hollywood's Central Casting. He looked too good to be true - exactly as he would appear in a Hollywood movie - a handsome man, with a long black beard, posing with a Kalashnikov. His appearances on TV were carefully staged.

Actually, he was a very incompetent terrorist, a real amateur. No genuine terrorist would have lived in a conspicuous villa, which stood out in the landscape like a sore thumb. Stern was hiding in a small roof apartment in a squalid quarter of Tel Aviv. Menachem Begin lived with his wife and son in a very modest

ground floor apartment, playing the role of a reclusive rabbi.

Bin Laden's villa was bound to attract the attention of neighbors and other people. They would have been curious about this mysterious stranger in their midst. Actually, he should have been discovered long ago. He was unarmed and did not put up a fight. The decision to kill him on the spot and dump his body into [or "in"] the sea was evidently taken long before.

So there is no grave, no holy tomb. But for millions of Muslims, and especially Arabs, he was and remains a source of pride, an Arab hero, the "[lion of lions]" as a preacher in Jerusalem called him. Almost no one dared to come out and say so openly, for fear of the Americans, but even those who thought his ideas impractical and his actions harmful respected him in their heart.

Does that mean that al-Qaeda has a future? I don't think so. It belongs to the past - not because bin Laden has been killed, but because his central idea is obsolete.

The Arab Spring embodies a new set of ideals, a new enthusiasm, one that does not glorify and hanker after a distant past but looks boldly to the future. The young men and women of Tahrir Square, with their longing for freedom, have consigned bin Laden to history, months before his physical death. His philosophy has a future only if the Arab Awakening fails completely and leaves behind a profound sense of disappointment and despair.

In the Western world, few will mourn him, but God forbid that anyone should gloat.