

PESACH SERMON
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*Eliot Spitzer, the Palestinians and
The Festival of Pesach*

It is with a very warm and embracing feeling that I welcome all of you to our Pesach services. I do this knowing full well that the fact that you are here is a poor reflection on you. It simply means you couldn't afford to go to a hotel for Pesach. It seems as if everyone goes to a hotel for Pesach these days! It seems as if every hotel is kosher for Pesach! So what makes people choose one over the other? I think hotels keep this in mind when they advertise ... looking at the advertisements some stress the menu they are serving, appealing to the Jews' stomach. Some stress the scholars they will be having, appealing to the Jews' mind. Still others stress their unique locations, from Disney World to the Alps to famous golf resorts ("Have your Seder on the 16th tee!") to renowned Spas ("Seder at the Shvitz!"). If this be the case, then I think I know where Eliot Spitzer went with his family for Pesach this year. It must be to the Flamingo Beach Resort in Costa Rica. I say that because the Flamingo Beach Resort in Costa Rica has at the center of its advertisement a monkey wearing a yarmulke!

It's hard to find words to describe how sad and tragic the story of Eliot Spitzer is. He had it all ... Princeton and Harvard graduate, Governor of New York, beautiful wife and three children, his father is one of the wealthiest New York real estate agents. As Governor of New York he was already being spoken of as a potential Presidential candidate in the future. Many people really thought he would be the first Jewish president. But his future came crashing down with the revelation of the time and money he spent with a prostitute. What word can be used to describe our reaction to all this? Strangely enough, there is one word that many people used. It was used in the first sentence of a story about this matter in the Wall Street Journal. It was used in the first sentence of a New York Times blog on the story. And the word is: Schadenfreude. The last time I used this word was in a sermon some three years ago. It is spelled, s-c-h-a-d-e-n-f-r-e-u-d-e. It is a German word that we Brooklyn guys don't throw around lightly. But there it was on the front page of the Wall Street Journal story about the Spitzer incident, right in the first sentence which started, "It's schadenfreude time on Wall Street ..." whereas the New York Times wrote, "As news that NY Governor Eliot Spitzer had been linked to a prostitution ring swept Wall Street Monday afternoon, the reaction can be described in one word: schadenfreude." The German word 'schadenfreude' takes seven English words to define it. It means: "malicious satisfaction in the misfortune of others." And yes, there were many people who were happy that Mr. Spitzer had fallen. As Attorney General of the state of New York, Mr. Spitzer had made many enemies among many of the higher-ups on Wall Street for his tenacity in prosecuting them. There are some in the know who said that what Mr. Spitzer had done was necessary

in an era of Enron and WorldCom. But a lot of others didn't feel that way. And so, when the news of Mr. Spitzer's fall hit the floor of the stock exchange, there was much celebration with CNBC quoting one trader's reaction – which spoke for the vast majority on Wall Street – “This proves “there is a God,” said the trader.

In some ways schadenfreude is a natural reaction. It is natural to feel good when the bad guys get their due. But schadenfreude is like smoking and drinking ... it may feel good while you're experiencing it, but the long term affects can be dangerous to your health.

Perhaps that's why Jewish law forbids it. In *The Ethics of the Fathers* we are taught that Shmuel Ha-katan taught: “Binfol oyevacha al tismach – when your enemy falls do not rejoice.” In other words: “Thou shalt not schadenfreude.” But the interesting aspect of this statement by Shmuel Ha-katan is the fact that these are not really his words! All he is doing is repeating a verse from the Book of Proverbs. There is nothing original in his statement, so why is it put into *The Ethics of the Fathers* in his name? Perhaps there is a lesson in the fact that it was Shimon Ha-katan who was teaching this statement from *The Book of Proverbs*. Shmuel Ha-katan was known to have been the rabbi who wrote the blessing in our silent amida which was meant as a critique of the early Christians. And yet, despite the fact that he was the one who was calling for the defeat of the early Christians, he was still the one who said: “When your enemy falls do not rejoice.”

Which brings us to Pesach. There is a popular ditty that tells us that all Jewish festivals boil down to: “They tried to destroy us, we won ... let's eat!” But you know what? That's not true! What we celebrate on Pesach is our exodus from Egypt, not the defeat of the Egyptians. Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk, a great Biblical commentator, writes in his book, “*Meshech Chochmah*,” that because of the concept of “binfol oyevecha al tismach – that you should not rejoice when your enemy falls” – no Jewish holiday celebrates the defeat of others. And he goes on to point out that this is why, right at the time of the exodus, we were told that the festival of Pesach was to be a seven day holiday. Why seven days when the exodus took only one? Explains the *Meshech Chochmah*, because it was destined that on the seventh day the Jews would cross the Red Sea and the Egyptians be destroyed. But if it was only then when we are told that the seventh day was to be a holiday, we would think it was because of the destruction of our enemies. So the seventh day was declared a holiday, even before this took place! Similarly says the *Meshech Chochmah*, on Chanukah we commemorate not the defeat of the Greeks, but the miracle of the oil. And on Purim ... the celebration of Purim takes place not on the day Haman and our enemies were destroyed, but on the following day when all was quiet.

This concept of “Thou shall not schadenfreude,” – thou shall not rejoice in the falling of your enemy – is codified as part of Jewish law during this holiday of Pesach. Whereas we recite the full Hallel, the Psalms of praise and thanksgiving to the Almighty on the first days of Pesach, we recite the abbreviated Hallel on the last days, because those were the days on which they Egyptians were killed and our joy must be limited. But do you know

what this means? Do you know how far this is taken? Because we don't say the full Hallel on the last days of Pesach it was considered inappropriate to recite them during the intermediate days of Pesach. After all, how does it look on the day of the full holiday we don't say the full Hallel ... how can we say the full Hallel on those days that are not a full holiday? And so it ends up that on six of the eight days of Pesach we don't sing a full praise to God, because "binfol oyevcha al tishmach – when your enemy falls, do not celebrate." These words in the book of Proverbs are underscored in importance by the words in the verse that follows: "Pen yireh Hashem v'ra b'ainav – lest the Lord see it and it displeases Him."

Yes, the Lord is watching when you rejoice over the fall of your enemy, and it displeases Him. So how do you think God felt last month when He saw the people in Gaza dancing in the streets, giving out candies and celebrating the murders, shooting and killing of eight Yeshiva students in Jerusalem? That the shooting was as despicable an act of violence as one can imagine, there is no question ... think of it: innocent civilians, unarmed, students in a theological school, teenagers ... it can't get worse than that!

Sure, war is hell. But even in war, there are certain rules of conduct ... you just don't go killing innocent civilians and most certainly not women and children. And to add inhumanity to inhumanity, to rejoice over this? As one op-ed writer put it, "The attack at the Yeshiva was a barbaric murder of eight children who were engaged in religious study. This odious and inhuman terror attack exemplifies the extremist and inhuman path of the terror organizations Hamas and Hezbollah. The terror must prompt the free world to comprehend the magnitude of terrorism and its threats and to realize that a clear and unequivocal stance must be assumed against it. There can be no negotiations with terrorism that indiscriminately aims itself at students, women and babies, without any consideration for the means and the targets." You know where that op-ed appeared? In a Kuwaiti newspaper! These are the murderers that Jimmy Carter can't wait to meet! It should be obvious to any civilized human being what an act of barbarity it was. But that didn't stop many Arab newspapers as referring to it as a "heroic operation," and the Palestinians celebrating in the streets because their enemies had fallen. I know that many will say that it wasn't *all* the Palestinians. We always hear something like that ... it's not *all* the Muslims, it's not *all* the Arabs, it's not *all* the Palestinians ... it's just a small minority. Fuhgedaboutit! Now we know! Now we know the truth for sure! A poll taken by the respected Palestinian pollster, Kahlil Shikaki, right after the incident revealed that 85% of the Palestinians applauded the slaughter. 85%! Mr. Shikaki said he was shocked by the results! I don't know why! Let me just remind you: this isn't the first time we've seen such barbarism by a collective people. You remember a few years ago when two Israeli soldiers mistakenly drove in to the Palestinian city of Ramallah? They were lynched ... dragged through the streets ... torn to pieces ... with their murderers marching through the streets showing their blood covered hands to the cheers of the masses.

And you know what? To some degree, this explains the fence that Israel is erecting, separating itself from the Arabs on the West Bank. On one level – the physical level – that fence is meant to keep out suicide bombers and those who would randomly kill Israelis. And it's been pretty successful at that! But I think that fence has a psychological purpose as well. After Oslo, many in Israel thought there was going to be a “new” Middle East; the walls separating Israel from its Arab neighbors – physically and psychologically – would come tumbling down; no different than the wall that divided Berlin and that divided East and West. But now we know that was all a dream. We talked of peace -but they planned for war. We spoke of friendship - but they taught hatred in their schools. We talked of our right to exist - but they insisted on their right to return. We talked of life - they talked of death. Just this week the PLO announced that it was giving its highest medal to two terrorists who were involved in the Sbarro pizza store massacre. This at the discretion of Palestinian President Abbas, while negotiating peace with Israel! A few years ago, in viewing a video shown on television in which a Palestinian mob was seen mutilating the body parts of the six Israeli soldiers killed in Gaza, Israel's Major General Dan Harel, head of the Southern Command, said, “It made me sick to my stomach. It is unbelievable that human beings could reach such lows. The video I saw emphasizes the difference between us and them.” Similarly, Colonel Eyal Eisenberg, Commander of the Givati Brigade that saw eleven of its soldiers blown to bits was quoted in Israel's Maariv newspaper: “I haven't told this to anyone but in the midst of this operation, we assisted a baby being born and evacuated an elderly Palestinian woman who was injured and summoned a local ambulance for her. Terrorists ran and fired from behind the ambulance. Therefore, I do not want to make any comparison between our scale of values and theirs. If my soldiers can assist a Palestinian woman giving birth when six of their comrades have been blown to bits in the street but, at the same time, they fire at us from behind an ambulance, you must understand that we are at opposite ends of the scales of values. They are at the very bottom.” Yes, they have left us no choice but to build a wall to make sure that *we* never become like *them*. That *their* way will not become *our* way. We are building a fence not just to keep their murderers out, but to keep the mores of their society out as well.

In the middle of the Haggadah – in a part I fear many skip – there is a rabbinic analysis of four sentences from the Torah that describe our Egyptian bondage. And for each phrase and each sentence there is a Midrashic interpretation. One of the phrases is: “Vayarehu otunu hamitzrim.” The literal translation seems to be: “And the Egyptians were bad to us.” “They mistreated us.” Other translations are: “The Egyptians considered us bad.” Or, “They suspected us of evil.” But a most relevant translation is, “The Egyptians made us bad.” We began to stoop to their level. There is always a danger and tendency during war to lash back at one's enemies ... enemies who blow up school buses and Pesach Seders and Yeshivot. There is always a tendency to strike back measure for measure. But we don't do that. That's the challenge for us as Jews; never to be like them. The Torah tells us – the Torah commands us: “Do not emulate the abominable practices of the Egyptians.”

We don't rejoice when an enemy falls. We get no satisfaction from the suffering of others. "Schadenfreude" is a German word. "Rachmanus" is a Jewish word. The whole purpose of Pesach – the whole purpose of the Egyptian experience according to Rabbi Soleveitchik – was to teach us an ethical sensitivity to the suffering of others. While others felt good about Eliot Spitzer's fall, I felt nothing but sorrow for the man and his family. As for the Palestinians, I wish them no harm. I feel sorry for the choices they've made and for the leadership they have chosen. Our people do not perform acts of vengeance like others do. We've had every reason in the world to strike back and hurt others; instead, as reflected in the words we said at the Seder last night of Shefoch Chamascha; we left vengeance to God ... not for us! Arab children, whose parents became refugees, are taught to become suicide bombers ... Jewish children whose parents became refugees were taught to write best selling books about the experience! We are different! While Islam and Christianity preach only their followers can be "saved," Judaism sees salvation being open to all good people. We pray for the salvation of others, not for their downfall.

Tonight at the Pesach Seder we will do what every other people do – most every people at moments of joy, at moments of victory, lift their cup in celebration. We will do that as well. But we won't do it the way other cultures do it. Our cup will not be full ... we will have taken off drops of the wine. For us as Jews, our cup cannot be full when others have suffered.

We are different! Vive la difference! Let us raise our children to be knowledgeable of it and proud of it, as the Hagaddah puts it: "V'haya ki yishalacha bincha machar – when your child asks you on the morrow, 'What's this Judaism all about?'. . . let us be able to respond as Jewish parents have responded through the ages . . . with pride in our past and great hope for our future, with the hopes for nachas . . . genuine Yiddisha nachas, as we proclaim: "Ashreinu, mah tov chelkeinu u'ma yafa yerushaseinu . . . happy are we, how goodly is our portion, how pleasant our lot, how beautiful our Jewish heritage.