



Vengeance

When tragedy occurs it is natural to feel a whole range of emotions, including anger, or even its more potent relative, rage. Anger can fuel a desire for vengeance. Who, at one point in their life or another, has not wanted to "get back" at someone, wishing - even for a moment - that the same harm befall a person who caused destruction or hurt.

Jewish texts have a lot to say about the desire for vengeance, which, according to www.merriamwebster.com, is defined as: the act of doing something to hurt someone because that person did something to hurt you or someone else. Judaism has a different definition, which we will see through our study. The following text suggests that we shouldn't take vengeance against others.

Leviticus 19:18	ויקרא יט:יח
¹⁸ You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as thyself: I am YHVH.	יִחְלֹאֲתֶקֶם וְלֹאֲתֹטֵר אֶת־בְּנֵי עַמֶּךָ וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹדְךָ אָנֹכִי יְקֹוֹק:

- This commandment is part of the holiness code, which speaks largely about righteous ways of treating one another. Is this a good place for it? Would you argue for or against placing it in the Ten Commandments?
- The text suggests that we shouldn't take vengeance against other Jewish people. Should we limit our restraint to Jewish people or should we not take vengeance against anyone?
- The reason given for not taking vengeance is "I am YHVH." What do you think this reason means? Why do you think this reason is given? Can you think of other reasons not to take vengeance?

Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 23a	מסכת יומא כג.
...What is taking revenge? Taking revenge is when you ask someone, "Lend me your sickle," and he says no. The next day he comes to you and asks you "Lend me your hatchet." You respond, "I am not lending to you, just like you did not lend to me." This is an example of revenge.	דַּתְנִיָּא אִיזוּ הִיא נְקִימָה וְאִיזוּ הִיא נְטִירָה נְקִימָה אָמַר לוֹ הַשְּׂאִילֵנִי מִגַּלְךָ אָמַר לוֹ לֹא לְמַחַר אָמַר לוֹ הוּא הַשְּׂאִילֵנִי קָרְדוּמְךָ אָמַר לוֹ אִינִי מִשְׂאִילְךָ כְּדַרְךָ שְׂלֵא הַשְּׂאִלְתַּנִּי זֶה הִיא נְקִימָה

- Does the Talmud understand or describe revenge in the same way you might?
- Does what the Talmud describes seem fair? Do you think it is right?



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When Jacob blesses his children, he says the following about Simon and Levi, who avenged the rape of their sister Dina by killing all of the men in the tribe of Shechem.

Genesis 49:5-7	בראשית מט: ה-ז
⁵ “Shimon and Levi are brothers. Instruments of crime are their wares	הַשְּׂמֵעוֹן וְלוֹי אֲחִים כְּלֵי חָמָס מִכְרֵתֵיהֶם
⁶ Let my soul not come into their counsel; let my honor not be united in their assembly, for they have killed men with anger, maimed bulls with will.	יִבְסְדֵם אֶל־תְּבֹא נַפְשִׁי בְקִהְלָם אֶל־תִּתַּחַד כְּבֹדִי כִּי בְאַפִּם הָרְגוּ אִישׁ וּבְרָצֹנָם עִקְרוּ־שׁוֹר
⁷ Cursed be their anger for it is fierce, and [cursed be] their fury for it is cruel. I will divide them in Ya’akov and I will scatter them in Yisrael”	אָרוּר אַפִּם כִּי עָז וְעִבְרָתָם כִּי קָשָׁתָהּ אֲחַלְקֵם בְּיַעֲקֹב וְאֶפְיִצֵם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל

- Jacob doesn't condemn their actions, rather the emotions that led to their actions. Is it possible to separate one's actions from the emotions that might cause them? Is it fair or appropriate to condemn someone's emotions?
- What can we learn (what personal lesson can we take) from the language of this curse?

Shemot 21:22-25	שמות כא: כב-כה
And if men fight, and hurt a pregnant woman, and her child exits (i.e. she has a miscarriage), and there is no further damage, he shall surely be fined as the husband imposes on him; and he shall pay as the judges determine.	וְכִי־יִנְצוּ אַנְשִׁים וְנִגְפוּ אִשָּׁה הָרָה וַיֵּצְאוּ יִלְדֶיהָ וְלֹא יְהִיָּה אָסוֹן עָנוּשׁ יַעֲנֶשׂ כַּאֲשֶׁר יִשִּׁית עָלָיו בַּעַל הָאִשָּׁה וְנָתַן בַּפְּלָלִים:
But if there is any damage, you shall give life for life,	וְאִם־אָסוֹן יְהִיָּה וְנָתַתָּה נַפְשׁ תַּחַת נַפְשׁ:
eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot,	עֵין תַּחַת עֵין שֵׁן תַּחַת שֵׁן יָד תַּחַת יָד רֶגֶל תַּחַת רֶגֶל:
burning for burning, wound for wound, bruise for bruise	כּוֹיָה תַּחַת כּוֹיָה פָּצַע תַּחַת פָּצַע חַבוּרָה תַּחַת חַבוּרָה:

- Here the Torah suggests that vengeance should be carried out measure for measure. Do you think this is fair? Do you think it's just?



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- What are the negative implications of following this law? Can you think of any positive implications?

Tractate Bava Kama 83b	בבא קמא פג
<p>Why [do you assume that one pays damages instead of losing an eye]? The Merciful One said “Eye for an eye.” [Therefore] we should say it is really an eye. Don’t let this thought come to your mind since it is taught, “It is possible [to think] that if he blinded someone’s eye, the court blinds his eye. If he cut off someone’s hand, the court cuts off his hand. If he broke someone’s leg, the court breaks his leg.” [In order that you not think this is the case] the Torah teaches, “One who strikes a person, one who strikes an animal...” (Vayikra 24:21). Just as one who strikes an animal is obligated to pay a monetary fine, so too someone who strikes a person is obligated to pay a monetary fine.</p>	<p>אמאי (שמות כא:כד) עין תחת עין אמר רחמנא אימא עין ממש לא סלקא דעתך דתניא יכול סימא את עינו מסמא את עינו קטע את ידו מקטע את ידו שיבר את רגלו משבר את רגלו ת"ל (ויקרא כד:כא) מכה אדם ומכה בהמה מה מכה בהמה לתשלומין אף מכה אדם לתשלומין</p>

- Here the Talmud suggests not measure for measure retaliation, but rather monetary compensation. Do you think this is fair? Do you think it's just?
- What are the negative implications of following this law? What are the positive implications?

Deuteronomy 24:16	דברים כד: טז
<p>¹⁶Fathers shall not be put to death because of sons, and sons shall not be put to death because of fathers; a man should be put to death for his own sin.</p>	<p>טז לא־יוֹמְתוּ אָבוֹת עַל־בְּנֵי וּבְנֵי לֹא־יוֹמְתוּ עַל־אָבוֹת אִישׁ בְּחַטָּאוֹ יוֹמְתוֹ</p>

- In stories of revenge, even those in the Torah, we often see revenge played out with family members or even communities. Do you think this advice from Deuteronomy is practical?

<p>Maimonides, <i>Mishneh Torah, De'ot 7:7</i> (paraphrased)</p>	<p>משנה תורה הלכות דעות ז:ז</p>
<p>Taking revenge is an extremely bad trait. A person should be accustomed to rise above his feelings about all worldly matters; for those who understand [the deeper purpose of the world] consider all these matters as vanity and emptiness, which are not worth seeking revenge for.</p> <p>Rather, if someone who has wronged you comes to ask a favor, you should respond "with a complete heart." As King David says in the Psalms, "Have I repaid those who have done evil to me? Behold, I have rescued those who hated me without cause" (7:5).</p>	<p>הַנוֹקֵם מִחֲבֵרוֹ עוֹבֵר בְּלֹא תַעֲשֶׂה שְׁנֵאמַר לֹא תִקֵּם. וְאַף עַל פִּי שְׂאִינוֹ לֹקֵה עָלָיו דְּעָה רָעָה הִיא עַד מְאֹד. אֲלָא רְאוּי לוֹ לְאַדָּם לְהִיּוֹת מִמְעַבֵּיר עַל מִדּוֹתָיו עַל כָּל דְּבָרֵי הָעוֹלָם שֶׁהִכַּל אֲצֵל הַמְּבִינִים דְּבָרֵי הַבֵּל וְהַבְּאִי וְאִינּוֹן כְּדָאֵי לְנִקָּם עֲלֵיהֶם. כִּי־צַד הִיא הַנְּקִימָה. אָמַר לוֹ חֲבֵרוֹ הַשְּׂאִילְנִי קִרְדָּמָה, אָמַר לוֹ אִינִי מִשְּׂאִילָךְ. לְמַחַר צָרִיךְ לְשָׂאֵל מִמֶּנּוּ, אָמַר לוֹ חֲבֵרוֹ הַשְּׂאִילְנִי קִרְדָּמָה, אָמַר לוֹ אִינִי מִשְּׂאִילָךְ כְּדָרְךָ שְׂלֵא הַשְּׂאִלְתָּנִי כְּשִׂשְׂאִלְתִּי מִמֶּךָ, הֲרִי זֶה נוֹקֵם. אֲלָא כְּשִׂיבּוֹא לוֹ לְשָׂאֵל יִתֵּן בְּלֵב שְׁלֵם וְלֹא יִגְמַל לוֹ כְּאֲשֶׁר גָּמְלוֹ. וְכֵן כָּל כַּיּוֹצֵא בְּאֵלוֹ. וְכֵן אָמַר דָּוִד בְּדַעוֹתָיו הַטּוֹבוֹת (תְּהִילִים ז-ה) "אִם גָּמַלְתִּי שׂוֹלְמִי רַע וְאַחֲלָצָה" וְגו'</p>

Maimonides suggests that a person's should "rise above his feelings. Is this always possible? There is an idea that one should be especially kind to one who has hurt them, perhaps "killing them with kindness." Can you see yourself going out of the way to show kindness to someone who has hurt you? What might be your motivation? What do you think the result might be?

<p><i>Shulchan Aruch HaRav</i> of Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi 156:3</p>	<p>שולחן ערוך הרב קנו:ג</p>
<p>One should erase any feelings of revenge from one's heart and never remind oneself of it.</p>	<p>ימחה הדבר מלבו ולא יזכירנו ולא יעלה על לב לעולם וצריך כל האדם ליזהר בזה</p>

Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi (1745-1812) was the first Rebbe (spiritual leader) of Chabad. He believed that the mind should rule over one's emotions. *Shulchan Aruch HaRav* is his version of the *Shulchan Aruch*, the major text of Jewish law from the 16th century. *Shulchan Aruch HaRav* provides both laws and the reasons behind the laws.



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- Do you think that the advice of these two great thinkers is reasonable?
- Is it possible to rise above or forget feelings of revenge? Is it wise?

Sefer Chinuch 241:3	ספר החינוך רמא:ג
<p>One of the roots of this commandment is that a person should know in his heart that all that happens to him, whether good or bad, is because it is God's will that it happen to him... It was God who wished this to happen, and one should not consider taking revenge from the other person, because the other person is not the reason for what happened.</p>	<p>משרשי המצוה. שידע האדם ויתן אל לבו כי כל אשר יקרהו מטוב עד רע, הוא סבה שתבוא עליו מאת השם ברוך הוא. ומיד האדם מיד איש אחיו לא יהיה דבר בלתי רצון השם ברוך הוא, על כן כשיצערהו או יכאיבהו אדם ידע בנפשו כי עונותיו גרמו, והשם יתבדך גזר עליו בכך, ולא ישית מחשבותיו לנקם ממנו, כי הוא אינו סבת רעתו, כי העון הוא המסבב, וכמו שאמר דוד עליו השלום (שמואל ב טז יא) הניחו לו ויקלל כי אמר לו יי. תלה הענין בחטאו ולא בשמעיו בן גרא. ועוד נמצא במצוה זו תועלת רבה להשבית ריב ולהעביר המשטמות מלב בני אדם, ובהיות שלום בין אנשים יעשה השם יתברך שלום להם.</p>

Sefer Ha'Chinuch (also known simply as the Chinuch) is a 13th-century work that discusses each of the 613 mitzvot and their applicability. There is some debate about who wrote it, though there is a consensus that it was written by a father to his son on the occasion of the son becoming bar mitzvah.

- Do you agree or disagree with this statement?

Though some Jewish texts are against vengeance, especially against fellow Jews, there are some traditional texts where vengeance is featured.

Numbers 31:2-3	במדבר לא:ב-ג
<p>²Take vengeance on the Midianites for the Israelites. After that, you will be gathered to your people."</p>	<p>בְּנִקְם נִקְמַת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאֵת הַמִּדְיָנִים אַחַר תִּאָסֵף אֶל־עַמֶּיךָ</p>



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<p>³So Moses said to the people, “Arm some of your men to go to war against the Midianites so that they may carry out the YHVH's vengeance on them.</p>	<p>יִנְדְּבֵר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־הָעָם לֵאמֹר הִחַלְצוּ מֵאֵתְכֶם אֲנָשִׁים לְצָבָא וְיִהְיוּ עַל־מִדְיָן לְתֵת נִקְמַת־יְהוָה בְּמִדְיָן:</p>
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- According to this text, vengeance is appropriate at times. What might those times include?
- Here, people are asked to carry out God's vengeance. Do you believe that you can, or should, carry out vengeance on behalf of another person or entity? Are you permitted to carry out your own vengeance?

<p>Psalms 94:1</p>	<p>תהלים צד: א</p>
<p>The LORD is a God who avenges. O God who avenges, shine forth.</p>	<p>אֵל־נִקְמוֹת יְקֹוֹק אֵל נִקְמוֹת הוֹפִיעַ:</p>

Here, God is asked to enact vengeance on behalf of the people. Do you think it appropriate to ask God to act on the emotions or desires of a person?

<p>Nachum 1:2-3</p>	<p>נחום א: ב-ג</p>
<p>YHVH is a zealous and vengeful God; YHVH is vengeful and full of wrath; YHVH is vengeful to his adversaries and reserves hostility for his enemies.</p>	<p>בֵּאל קִנּוּא וְנִקָּם יְקֹוֹק נִקָּם יְקֹוֹק וּבְעַל חֲמָה נִקָּם יְקֹוֹק לְצָרָיו וְנוֹטֵר הוּא לְאֵיבָיו</p>
<p>YHVH is slow to anger, but has great power and will not absolve evil</p>	<p>יְיָהוָה אַרְךְ אַפִּים וְגָדוֹל [וְגָדוֹל] כֹּחַ וְנִקָּה לֹא יִנָּקֶה יְקֹוֹק בְּסוּפָה וּבְשִׁעָרָה דָּרְכוּ וְעִנּוּ אֲבָק רַגְלָיו</p>

- At various times in history, Jewish people have desired, and reveled in, a jealous, vengeful God. Can you think of a reason why the Jewish people would want a vengeful God? Can you think of reasons they wouldn't?
- Whom would you consider to be God's enemies? Is this a fair question -do we want human beings to decide whom God's enemies might be?

<p>Psalms 58:11-12</p>	<p>תהלים נח: יא-יב</p>
<p>¹¹The righteous man shall rejoice when he sees vengeance. He shall wash his feet in</p>	<p>יִישָׁמַח צְדִיק כִּי־חָזָה נִקָּם פְּעָמָיו יְרַחֵץ בְּדָם הַרְשָׁע</p>



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the blood of the wicked.	
¹² And mankind shall say, 'Truly there is a reward for the righteous. Truly there is a God who judges on Earth.'	יְיָ יֹאמֵר אָדָם אֲדֹכְרִי לְצַדִּיק אֵל :יֵשׁ-אֱלֹהִים שֹׁפְטִים בְּאָרֶץ

- According to these verses, why does a person rejoice when he sees vengeance?
- Does watching a "wicked" person being punished help to justify the actions of a person who has done the right thing?

The following passage is found in the traditional Haggadah. It was written in the Middle Ages, during the Crusades, a dark period in Jewish history. It was recited (some say shouted) from the doorways of Jewish homes as they opened them to welcome Elijah. The text is made up of a number of Bible verses: Psalm 79:6-7, Psalm 69:25 and Lamentations 3:66. It is not in all haggadot today as some editors have deemed it unnecessarily inflammatory.

The Passover Haggadah

“Pour out Your fury on the nations that do not know you, and upon the kingdoms that do not invoke Your name, for they have devoured Jacob [the Jews] and destroyed his home. Pour out Your wrath on them; may Your blazing anger overtake them. Pursue them in wrath and destroy them from under the heavens of the Lord.”

- What is the criteria given for vengeance in this case?
- Can you think of a situation in which it would be appropriate to punish or take vengeance on a whole group of people or community at one time?
- If you were creating a new haggadah today, would you include it?