

Schadenfreude: Is it A Sin? Should It Be? And what is it, anyway?

Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt

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You can learn a great deal about a people, culture or nationality from its language. It is not surprising, for example, that the language spoken by Eskimos has 21 words for snow. From this scientists and linguists have concluded, after many years of extensive studies that it must mean that where Eskimos live, it snows a lot.

Yiddish writer Isaac Bashevis Singer commented that Yiddish is a language that was never spoken by people in power. In the speech he gave in Oslo when he received the Nobel Prize for literature Singer pointed out that there is no word in Yiddish for militarism. It does however have many variations of a special kind of individual. A person can be a nebbish, a klutz, a luftmensch, a shmo, a nudnik, a miskeit, just to name a few. Each one conjures up a slightly different image, has a different nuance and unique connotation. The shlemiel, for example is not to be confused with the shlemazel. The distinction being that a shlemiel is a guy who spills soup into the lap of the shlemazel.

The German language has the unique characteristic of combining several words into one to express what other languages need multiple words or an entire phrase to convey. This may explain why I remember reading a translation from German of a sentence written by Martin Buber that took up an entire page.

The German word zeitgeist, for example, which has become part of the English language means the general intellectual, moral, and cultural climate of an era. Another example is when the words wander and lust, both of Germanic origin are combined to form the word wanderlust, which the dictionary defines as a strong innate desire to rove or travel about.

Linguist and humorist Ben Schlott has compiled a book of German words he has invented that don't exist, but should, single words to describe complex human actions or emotions. Here are three of my favorites:

Perhaps you have experienced something he labels as "Tageslichtspielshock", (tah-gness-licht-shpeel-shock)? It means the sensation one has of being startled when leaving a movie theater in broad daylight. One German word captures a whole experience.

Here is one we all have probably experienced – "Eisenbahnsscheinbewegung" (eye-zen-bahn-shine-beh-veh-gung) – the false sensation of movement you feel when you are on a stationary train and see another train moving, and you think you are the one who is moving. There definitely should be a word for that, don't you think?

Then there is "Zeigarnikfrustration" (tsay-gar-nick froo-strah-tsyohn)– it means exactly what it sounds like. The frustration that comes from knowing that there is a partially eaten snack lying around.

I share these with you to introduce the granddaddy of them all, the one that actually is a real German word, the one that inspired his work, is the title of his book, and the subject of my sermon this morning: Schottenfreude, which has entered the English lexicon as schadenfreude.

This one is real. It isn't fictitious or made up. As Lisa Simpson explained to her father Homer after he expresses delight that Ned Flanders' business is failing, "It's a German term for shameful joy, taking pleasure in the suffering of others."

Although the concept itself has probably been around since the first cave man laughed when he saw a guy he despised slip and fall on a banana peel, until recently the term was relatively unknown. It cannot be found even once in The New York Times prior to 1980. By 1995 it had appeared 7 times, and by the early 2000's, its use had become recognized and commonplace, causing some to wonder if there is an increasing outbreak of schadenfreude, or are we just more aware of it now?

To understand how widespread it is, just think, not even of the jokes, but at the reaction of the audiences to late-night comics when they made jokes and references to Anthony Weiner or former Governor Elliott Spitzer. Recall how people reacted when Martha Stewart went off to jail a number of years ago. It can all be explained as and attributed to schadenfreude.

Many first encountered the word when it appeared as the name of a hit song in the off-Broadway musical that opened in 2003, "Avenue Q". The melody is not quite as catchy as "Sunrise, Sunset" from Fiddler, so we won't sing it this morning, but here are some of the lyrics. The character sings, "Right now you are down and out,... and when I see how sad your are, it sort of makes me happy." Anyone who has seen the show knows these are about the only words from the song and the show that I can say on the bema. In fact, I omitted the word in the song that rhymes with *happy*.

Although I was introduced to the concept and word when mentioned by Rabbi Harold Kushner in his book "When Bad Things Happen to Good People", the first time I recall reading anything in depth about schadenfreude and became interested in the subject was when I read an article in The New York Times in 2002 and saw that psychologists, scientists and neurologists were studying it. The article came in the wake of the downfall of a number of public figures and explored why it seemed that more and more people were taking such joy in the misfortunes of others.

It opened by telling of a stressed out carpenter whose grandmother was living in an assisted living center and whose life savings had been almost depleted by losses in the stock market. Despite his woes and the tsoris he and his family were dealing with, the one thing that made him happy was hearing that some high-faluting, high paid executives were being investigated, indicted, arrested or put in jail for their crimes. None of this affected or changed his life, but knowing that people responsible for the collapse of Enron were going to suffer and pay the price for their misdeeds improved his mood and lifted his spirits and gave him a sense of poetic justice.

How to explain the sensation? One of Shalom Aleichem's Yiddish stories offers an insight. A character in one of his stories says that when he goes to the market and doesn't sell any of his wares, he tells his friends when he returns home that he had a great day. But if he does really well and sells out of everything he brought with him, he tells his friends that he did not do well at all. That way he explains if he didn't do well, but says he did, he is happy knowing that his friends are miserable over his supposed success, and if he comes back empty-handed, even though he didn't earn any money he is happy knowing that his friends are miserable thinking how well he did.

Scientific and psychological studies seek to study the phenomena, to ascertain if it is an ingrained and inherent human condition, or if it is an acquired, learned behavior. They are trying to figure out what triggers or causes it, and whether it is possible or even necessary, desirable or advisable to control and suppress the tendency.

A study conducted by Richard Smith, a professor of psychology, found that people felt envy when shown a video of an aspiring successful medical student who had it all -- a BMW, an attractive girlfriend, and so on, as well as images of another med student of modest means with no girlfriend or fancy car. When told that both had been arrested and thrown out of medical school for stealing amphetamines from a school lab, people reacted very differently to the two, leading Smith to conclude that the source of *shadenfreude* must be envy.

Professor Norman Feather suggests it is generated not by envy, but by resentment towards people who individuals feel do not deserve good fortune. Another study says we secretly delight in the fall of others because it gives us a chance to feel superior. Those who study human behavior suggest that those who always compare themselves to others will feel better when they learn of the misfortunes of others, even if they do not know the person. All of the findings are based upon a theory developed in the 1950's called "Social comparison theory" which holds that humans evaluate how they feel about themselves by comparing their lot in life to people around them rather than by objective standards.

This may be one reason why the way people feel about their salary is often dependent upon how much someone else makes. By any objective standard it does not have any impact on what we can or cannot afford, but it has an impact on how we feel about whether we are adequately compensated or not and if the income is appropriate and adequate or not. The research indicates that envy, resentment and low self esteem may be the source of *shadenfreude*.

So much for scientific findings. As Joan Rivers used to say, "Can we talk?" Let's be honest, at one time or other, we probably have all taken a little bit of satisfaction when something bad happens to someone else. The question is -- is that a bad thing? Should we feel guilty about it? What if anything does Judaism have to say about all this, and what does it have to do with Yom Kippur? After all, the last time I checked it does not appear in the list of sins we ask forgiveness for, not even in our new prayer book. Although there is no Hebrew or Yiddish word for *shadenfreude* the concept, *tzrat ayin*, literally "narrowness of the eye", meaning jealousy comes closest and is in the *Al Chet* confessional prayer.

Nevertheless, on this day when we are encouraged to be introspective and strive to think about how we can be better people I think it is important to reflect on the concept and to see what insights Judaism may have to offer, for it does have something to say about envy, jealousy and resentment, as well as how to find happiness.

While Judaism is far more concerned with our actions than inner private feelings, there are two commandments which have to do with emotions, and which may relate to the subject at hand. In Leviticus 19, the Holiness Code we are told not to hate your brother in your heart, one of the few instances when the Torah seems to command feelings rather than to regulate behavior. And the 10th commandment, commands us not to covet, meaning not to envy or desire that which does not belong to us, in large part because of concern for what it may lead to. Furthermore, God commands that if we see that the animal of our enemy has fallen by the side of the road, we cannot just gloat over our enemy's misfortune. We must stop and lift up the animal.

Shmuel haKatan is quoted in the Mishnah as telling us "*binpol oyevecha, al tismach*: "Do not rejoice when your enemy falls." And Proverbs continues, "let not your heart be glad when he stumbles." We are given these injunctions precisely because they go against our natural instinct. Indeed, avoiding *shadenfreude* may be one of the most difficult of mitzvot to fulfill.

A story is told about two guys who had been feuding with each other for years. The rabbi called them together to his office just before Yom Kippur to tell them the time has come to make up and put aside their differences. Reluctantly, but moved by the rabbi's personal plea, and the spirit of the holiday, they hug and agree to let bygones be bygones and to end their feud.

After the Kol Nidre service one of the men goes over, extends his hand, wishes the other a Shanah Tovah and says to him, "I want you to know this year I prayed for you everything that you prayed for me." Upon hearing this the other guy, gets visibly upset, drops his hand, and angrily says, "What, you're starting up again?"

A midrash says that the angels began to rejoice and lift up their voices to praise God when they saw the Egyptians, the enemies of the Jewish people, who had enslaved His beloved people drowning in the Red Sea. But God admonished them, saying, "My handiwork is drowning in the sea, yet you want to sing before me." The sages say that they were also God's creations, and therefore their death should not be celebrated. This is why we diminish our cup of wine at the Passover seder, so that we will acknowledge the death of those who oppressed and sought to kill us.

This admonition may help us to understand other Biblical anomalies as well, including this afternoon's haftarah reading, the Book of Jonah. Jonah does not wish to go to Nineveh to warn the city of its impending doom. My theory is that perhaps he is experiencing his own *shadenfreude* moment, because he doesn't want them to be spared God's wrath. Ultimately, however, God insists that he carry out his mission to warn the people that they must repent to avoid doom. Although he is successful in his mission, he is unexpectedly unhappy. We read, that when God renounced His punishment because they turned from their evil ways, "this displeased Jonah greatly." Scholars and commentators have long pondered the meaning of this and the section that follows. But I would suggest today that the only way to understand Jonah's reaction was because of *schadenfreude*. His gloom comes from being denied the joy of seeing the downfall and destruction of Nineveh. God responds by telling Jonah that He cares about all people, implying so should he, meaning, so should we.

Understanding things in light of this phenomenon could also explain why God did not want Lot's wife to turn around when they left the city of Sodom and Gomorrah. As you may recall from the original story in the Bible, (or from the movie), Lot and his family were told by God to leave Sodom and Gomorrah because of all the sinfulness of the city. They were warned to keep walking and not to turn around or look back on the destruction of the city. Lot's wife looked back and saw the city go up in flames, and for this she was turned into a pillar of salt.

Whenever I lead a group to Israel and we pass the Dead Sea Symcha asks me to tell comedian David Steinberg's version of why Lot's wife turned into a pillar of salt. According to his rendition, when they left the city, she was nagging her husband about why they had to leave. She protested and lamented all the wonderful parties she enjoyed going to, and which she would no longer be able to attend. Lot tried as best as he could to ignore her, and kept walking, doing as God commanded, looking forward, never turning around to look back.

But his wife just kept kvetching every step of the way, trying to get him to return to the city they had just left. Even though she knew it and all its inhabitants were about to be destroyed by an earthquake, she was sad to leave. Finally Lot couldn't take the non-stop persistent pestering and nagging any longer, so he told his wife, "Dear – God told me to tell you – Turn around and look back." And with that, she turned into a pillar of salt.

I would like to offer my own original midrashic interpretation, as to why God did not want her to look back on the city. I would suggest the reason God did not want her to look back was for fear that she would gloat and delight in seeing the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. He was trying to save her from having a schadenfreude moment.

Our tradition encourages us to define our happiness and not to base our feelings about our lot in life in comparison to others, but as measured by our own inner feeling of satisfaction. There will always be someone who appears better off or wealthier. Our sages remind us that happiness comes from within and from the gratification that comes from what we do for others, not what we do to others. We find meaningfulness and purpose by in the words of the prophet Micah, "doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with thy God."

At this time of year, when the baseball playoffs are here, and the World Series is not far behind, and the football season is underway, we know that sports can bring out the best or the worst in individuals. Some competitors are so intent on winning that they will do anything to take their opponents down, even career ending hits to the head. Others approach their sport like a craft, and appreciate the gracefulness and ability of their opponents. They respect, admire and appreciate their opponents, and realize they are not adversaries. Not coincidentally, these are the heroes we look up to, people such as Derek Jeter, Cal Ripken, and others.

Fans can be as guilty as the players. Many years ago, when my youngest son Noam was little I took him to a Ravens game in Baltimore. He was enjoying the game and rooting for the home team. Then in a moment I will never forget, the Redskins score was flashed on the screen and announced. The Redskins were losing by a wide margin, and the crowd cheered that the Redskins were losing. At that moment, Noam stopped rooting for the Ravens. He didn't know it at the time, but he had just had his first contact with shadenfreude, which is why it left him feeling bad, and why he hasn't been back to Ravens Stadium since then.

In one of his books Ron Wolfson tells about the hiring process for flight attendants at Southwest Airlines. Several candidates are led into a room filled with customers and human resource staff. One of the candidates is invited to take a seat at the head of the table and asked: "What was the most embarrassing thing to ever happen to you?" As the candidate begins to speak, the people doing the hiring are not focused on the person telling the story. They are looking at the other candidates for the job to watch their reactions. If they exhibit an outward display of schadenfreude, there is no chance of them being hired. This is because it turns out that empathy is the most important characteristic for a flight attendant stuck in a crowded silver tube traveling at five hundred miles per hour at thirty thousand feet.

To be honest, I am not sure if schadenfreude is a sin for which we should repent. But I do know that the opposite of schadenfreude is empathy and compassion, and that our tradition emphasizes these qualities. So while there may be an element of schadenfreude in each of us, and it may not be something

we can so easily overcome, we are encouraged to be ba'alei rahamim, compassionate people and that we should strive to live our lives with compassion for others.

One of my favorite passages from the Talmud captures how we should look upon ourselves and others. We are told that a favorite saying of the rabbis of Yavneh was:

“I am a creature of God and my neighbor is a creature of God. I work in the city and he works in the country. I rise early for my work, and he rises early for his work. Just as he cannot excel in my work, I cannot excel in his work. Will you say that I do great things and he does small things? We have learned that it does not matter whether a person does little or much, as long as he directs his heart to heaven.”

So may we strive to live our lives in the New Year.

*Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt
Congregation B'nai Tzedek
Potomac, MD
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potomacrebbe@bnaitzedek.org*