

## One Hit Wonder

### Vayishlach - 5782

Until his death in 1706, Johann Pachelbel was one of the most popular composers of his day. He had numerous pupils, composed voluminous works for keyboard and other instruments, and many religious works as well. Yet now, he is known for one and only one composition- Pachelbel's Canon in D Major, and even that is only half of a larger piece. It is the staple of weddings and funerals all over the world. Joining Pachelbel as a one-hit wonder are athletes like Buster Douglas, who has done virtually nothing of note since handing Mike Tyson his first loss, or Harper Lee, author of *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

In Jewish history, there are also "one-hit wonders," and I'd like to tell you about two of them. The first is the prophet Ovadia was an Edomite convert who is often identified as the same Ovadiah who saved hundreds of prophets from the evil clutches of the wicked queen Jezebel<sup>1</sup>. Following the model of Yaakov, who in our Parsha split up his family as an insurance policy against the murderous designs of his brother Esav, Ovadiah divided the prophets into two groups and put them in two different caves, nourishing and sustaining them at his own expense. His only prophecy is just 21 verses long, and is read as this morning's Haftarah. In this short prophecy, Ovadia rebukes his former nation for their evil treatment of the Jewish people, foretelling their demise through a fiery judgement by the Almighty.

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<sup>1</sup> | Kings 18:3-8

The second one-hit wonder is someone who was considered, in his day, one of the greatest sages of his generation. Just to illustrate how great he was, the Yerushalmi<sup>2</sup> tells us that there were only two sages worthy of experiencing the divine spirit (*ruach hakodesh*): Hillel the Elder and this man, whose name was Shmuel HaKattan, or Shmuel the Small. Aside from his spiritual abilities, what do we know about him? Virtually nothing, except that he composed the 19th blessing of the Amidah, the blessing of ולמלשינים, the one that prays for all informers and evildoers to perish.

These two figures, Ovadia the prophet and Shmuel HaKattan share a deeper link besides being “one-hit wonders.” According to Yeshiva University Professor Rabbi Dr. Moshe Sokolow, the very language used in the composition of the ולמלשינים prayer was lifted directly from the *nevuah* of Ovadiah.

(ג) זָדוֹן לִבְךָ הַשִּׁיאָךְ - *your insolence has beguiled you*

The root of the word, *zadon*, is repeated in the final sentence of the prayer against enemies of the Jewish people- שׁוֹבֵר אוֹיְבִים וּמַכְנִיעַ זֵדִים - God is the one who breaks our enemies and brings low evildoers. Professor Sokolow notes that, though this prayer has undergone numerous revisions throughout the millennia due to censorship and fear of reprisal, these final words have always remained intact.

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<sup>2</sup> Sotah 9:13

If you could have only one prophecy, or only one prayer to compose, what would it be? Would you choose to condemn others with scathing words of rebuke, curse your enemies and pray for their demise? Or would you offer an uplifting, hopeful message of repentance and optimism? To be sure, Ovadia and Shmuel HaKattan might not have been aware that this was their only shot at immortality. But it still begs the question- why are these two great individuals remembered solely for such pessimism and negativity?

The answer might be understood from the only other time we encounter Shmuel HaKattan. It is a passage in Pirkei Avot<sup>3</sup>

• שמואל הקטן אומר: "בְּנִפְלֵ אוֹיְבֶךָ אַל-תִּשְׂמַח, וּבְכִשְׁלוֹ אַל-תִּגַּל לְבָבְךָ. כֹּן-יִרְאֶה ה' וְרַע בְּעֵינָיו, וְהָשִׁיב מֵעֲלִיו אָפוֹ.

*Shmuel haKatan stated: "Do not rejoice in the downfall of your enemy."*

Unlike the majority of the Sages in Pirkei Avot, he is not even saying anything original; he is merely quoting a verse in Proverbs. Yet the fact that he cites the verse implies that it is his "bumper sticker phrase"- and was the reason he was chosen as the author of the prayer against heretics, informants and other enemies of the Jews. Anyone can offer criticism, particularly when railing against despicable behavior that everyone should condemn. And yet, the Talmud<sup>4</sup> describes the search for an appropriate author, as if it were an impossible task:

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<sup>3</sup> 4:19

<sup>4</sup> Berachot 22b

אמר להם רבן גמליאל לחכמים: כלום יש אדם שיודע לתקן ברכת המינים? עמד שמואל הקטן ותיקנה"

Rabban Gamliel asked the Sages, "Is there anyone who knows to compose a blessing against heretics?" Shmuel the Small arose and did so.

What was difficult was not to offer condemnation, but to do it from a place of pain. Shmuel HaKatan lived by the words "Do not rejoice in your enemy's downfall." Therefore, only he could be the one to compose it; anyone else may have derived pleasure from the task of rebuking evildoers. At the same time, Shmuel Hakatan did not allow his own pain and reticence to prevent him from speaking truth to power, and criticising his native community. That is a fine line that few in a generation can walk; it's no surprise he was a one-hit wonder. With this understanding, we can appreciate the other one-hit wonder who served as Shmuel HaKattan's inspiration- the *nevuah* of Ovadia. Here was a man who came from the wicked nation of Edom; there were other prophets who rebuked Edom, but none of them were former Edomites. Ovadia's words are legendary, and indeed, are quoted by us during davening every single day of the year<sup>5</sup>.

וְעָלוּ מוֹשְׁעִים בְּהָרִי צִיּוֹן לְשַׁפֵּט אֶת־הָרֵר יַעֲשֹׂו וְהָיְתָה לִיהוָה הַמְּלֹכָה:

For liberators shall march up on Mount Zion to wreak judgment on Mount Esau; and dominion shall be the LORD's.

Because when God went out in search of a prophet who knew how to formulate a reprimand against Edom, it took someone who was personally invested. No doubt it pained him to be

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<sup>5</sup> Verse 21

called upon to rebuke his former nation, but he answered the call of duty nonetheless. What remarkable restraint! And what admirable courage! He took no joy in the downfall of his enemies, and yet understood the need to call them out.

When salacious news is passed around about scandals, you will often hear the expression bandied about “it gives me no joy” to share this information. Secretly, it actually gives the teller *abundant* joy, whether because they enjoy the drama or because they want to see the subject of the scandal brought low. Recently, a horrifying story broke about Chaim Walder, a children’s author in Israel. It is hard to overstate Walder’s influence in Israeli society; he was a pioneer in contemporary chareidi literature, who wrote stories about real people with real emotions and struggles. Through his “Kids Speak” series, children from every shade of Torah Judaism found someone who really understood them, and his columns provided children and adults alike with guidance. His high profile and deep insight allowed him and the center he founded to be the primary address for struggling chareidi families and individuals, and earned him the trust and approbation of leading Rabbis. His popularity was such that one of his stories was even the basis of a plot arc in the most recent season of *Shtisel*. Unfortunately, his popularity also gave him access to the young people he wrote for- and who, according to more than 20 women, he allegedly sexually abused. It was the efforts of persistent lay leaders and activists that broke the story, in the aftermath of which publications like Yated Neeman and the radio station Radio Kol Chai have removed Walder, at least temporarily, from their lineup; Eichler’s in Boro Park issued a press release saying that they stopped carrying his books. Navigating these kinds of stories should not be undertaken lightly; On the one hand,

there is the temptation to be overenthusiastic, even gleeful, when we reveal yet another respected person who isn't worthy, and when we uncover yet another charlatan and hypocrite whose dark secrets have finally burst into the open.. On the other hand, we cannot remain silent; in the face of these kinds of allegations, the Talmud tells us that we must act as if they are true<sup>6</sup>. Yes, we must interrogate our motives when involving ourselves in communal matters such as this one. Even Rabban Gamliel himself worried that maybe no one was fitting to compose the prayer condemning our enemies. Yet if we are too meek- if we get hung up on the purity of our motives- it leads to problems being swept under the rug and allows evil to flourish.

We are approaching the first yahrtzeit of the great posek, Rabbi and Dayan Rav Gedalia Dov Schwartz zt"l (the Av Beth Din of the Chicago Rabbinical Council). Rabbi Yehiel Poupko, his nephew shared the following experience/observation:

*"I vividly remember circumstance after circumstance over many decades in which I would call my uncle in the morning to see how he was doing, or just to talk with him. On some occasions it was very clear from his voice, as he would say, "איך דאב א נאכט ניט געשלאפען" -I didn't get a good night's sleep." I knew what he meant. I said, "You're dealing with a very difficult shayla in Halakha, over which a person, a family, a community, or a synagogue has much pain." He would acknowledge that. He had fear and pain when there were difficult cases and he had not yet arrived at a decision as to how to alleviate that pain. He was someone who was at one with the pain of the community and the pain of the individual."*

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<sup>6</sup> Niddah 61a

Rav Schwartz routinely had to render decisions that had eminently real consequences for real people- and as a person of unimpeachable integrity and moral toughness, he took unpopular stands regardless of who would find them upsetting, and when it was clear that someone was in the wrong, it did not matter how popular, wealthy and influential they were. But he didn't relish the opportunity; he wasn't spoiling for a fight. This is the definition of courage, the kind shown by our one-hit wonders like Ovadia and Shmuel HaKattan, who were unique in their generation and therefore could rebuke their communities. They defined for us what it means to be courageous- someone who is humble, who ruminates over difficult questions at night, who feels the pain of his community, who can honestly say "it gives me no joy" but also knows she cannot remain silent. Let us follow the example of these courageous leaders and, despite the pain, let us be courageous Jews.