

This past Sunday night, United Airlines Flight 990 took off from Dulles International Airport in Washington bound for the overseas destination of Ghana. Shortly after take-off, a passenger reclined his seat. You may know that it can reduce your space when the person in front of you does so, and the man sitting behind Reclining Man was clearly in no mood to have his personal space violated by the back of Reclining Man's seat. He expressed his displeasure by violating Reclining Man's personal space, not by means of a seat back, but by means of a smack in the head. Reclining Man took umbrage at being smacked in the head by Head-smacking Man and a fistfight broke out between the two of them.

The pilot made the decision not to continue to Ghana, but to return to Dulles. When the air traffic controller asked if the offending passenger, Head-smacking Man, had been "secured," the pilot responded that he was not secured, that he had calmed down but that an assault had occurred and the passenger was not secured.

As an overseas flight, Flight 990 had a great deal of fuel on board. The pilot had to circle to burn off much of the fuel as a precaution before landing at Dulles. I don't know if that was always standard procedure in such circumstances before September 11, 2001, but I do know this: Flight 990 was escorted back to Dulles by a pair of F-16 fighter jets. We all know that would not have happened on September 10, 2001. That's what happens in the post-9/11 world.

That's what happens now because of Islamic extremism and terrorism in general; it's what happens because of groups like al-Qaeda, and it's what happens in no small part because of Osama bin Laden. I'm coming back to the subject of the killing of bin Laden because there is something new I have to share with you.

I spoke on this same topic the Friday after bin Laden was killed. In part, I said the following:

*I found that many people were conflicted about how to react to the killing of bin Laden. There was a part of them that was glad he had been killed, and another part that wondered if it was right to be happy over the killing of any human being.*

*For me, this is an important issue. I am glad that something inside of people said that we are not the kind of individuals, nor the kind of society, that holds street parties because of a death. However, we should not ignore the fact that we are not talking about an average human being. We are talking about one of the most evil and vile individuals to ever walk the earth. Did I run around joyously singing "Ding dong, the witch is dead?" No. But I am glad bin Laden was killed, [and] I am proud that it was our military that got him...*

Since then, I read a powerful article by Dennis Prager. He cited three Jewish texts, only the first of which I thought about when I wrote my

previous talk: The biblical Book of Proverbs: “When your enemy falls, do not rejoice, and when he stumbles, let your heart not exult.”

Dennis brings to the table the fact that the Talmud also states, “When the wicked perish from the world, good comes to the world.” And the Book of Proverbs that I did cite also says, “When the wicked perish, there is joyful song.”

I saw those statements from Proverbs as contradictory. Dennis, with his incredible sense of nuance, sees no contradiction. I now realize that Dennis is right. As he points out, when the Bible says not to rejoice at the fall of my enemy, it is talking about *my* enemy, my personal enemy. Just because I do not get along with someone does not make that person evil. The vast majority of our personal enemies are not evil. To rejoice at the downfall of someone I dislike is one thing. To rejoice at the fall of someone who set himself up as the enemy of all that is good and decent is another matter entirely.

Here are the two paragraphs of Dennis’s article that really grabbed me. He said, *“It seems to me that if one does not celebrate the death of a truly evil person, one is not celebrating the triumph of good over evil. I do not see how one can honestly say, ‘I am thrilled that bin Laden can no longer murder men, women, and children, but I do not celebrate his death.’”*

And just a bit later he wrote, *“Celebrating the death of bin Laden is a moral imperative. The notion that Islamists who celebrated 9/11 are morally*

*equivalent to Americans who celebrated bin Laden's death is the essence of moral confusion. It equates the killing of 3,000 innocents with the killing of the person responsible for those 3,000 murders.”*

My friends, I think my sermon on reactions to bin Laden's death was a good one. I think my own reaction was pretty much on target, but my friend Dennis has hit the moral bullseye. I am passionate about moral clarity. Dennis has achieved it here, and I share it with you in his name, and in the hope that it will be all the more meaningful to you when we bring this extraordinary man to Shaarey Tefilla.