
Breaking the Teeth of the Wicked

Martin Samuel Cohen

. . . for Thou hast slapped the cheeks of my enemies
and broken the teeth of the wicked.

—Psalm 3

When modern (mostly non-Jewish) editors begin to “revise” the Book of Psalms into a useful work of devotional literature, the first passages to go are generally those that speak of the intense, almost palpable hatred the ancient poets felt for their enemies. Inspired, one can only suppose, by a sense that there is something highly inappropriate about the presence of such passages in a book designed to inspire readers to seek a life of spiritual communion with a Deity who commands the faithful to love their neighbors as themselves, the decision to edit these passages out has its own logic: what could be more potentially troubling for people grappling with their own ambivalence about religion than to read a book of antique spirituality whose authors paradoxically longed *both* to bask in the light of God’s face *and* to see the soles of their feet stained with the blood of their enemies as it flowed in sufficient quantity to turn the streets of old Jerusalem into red rivers of revenge exquisitely exacted?¹ As someone whose own spiritual life seems to become more and more rooted in the Book of Psalms with every passing year, I too have worried over those passages and wondered what, if anything, they have specifically to say to a Jew who would seek to access faith in God through the poetry of the Psalter.

The most common Hebrew word for enemy, *’oyev*, appears just over fifty times in the Torah and more or less every one of those references is to a hostile foreign nation whom the Lord is threatening *either* to use as a powerful instrument of destruction to chastise wayward Israel or to defeat as part of a vigorous, ongoing campaign for the welfare of the Jewish people.² On the other hand, that same word appears in its various permutations over seventy

times in the Psalter in some fifty different poems, and almost every single one of those references is to a personal enemy of whom the poet is terrified and for whose physical destruction many of the poets pray earnestly, yet whose intense personal animus against the individual poets whose works make up our Book of Psalms is never really fully explained.³ Part of the solution of the riddle of the “enemy” passages in the Psalms has to lie in unraveling why precisely it is that Torah and Tehivum present such different ideas of enmity. But another part must just as surely lie in wondering about the specific identity (or identities) of the enemies who so terrified and unnerved the psalmists.

The poets’ references to these unnamed, unidentified enemies fall into a number of obvious categories. In some passages, for example, the poets write about their fear of suffering violence or being imprisoned or ambushed by their foes or of being denounced by them, while in others they go so far as to accuse these enemies actually of being capable of murder.⁴ More common, however, are passages that refer to the petty annoyances of living daily life surrounded by unfriendly, unsympathetic, vaguely (or not vaguely) threatening adversaries. The poets refer to the pressure under which they lived, to the cat-calls they endured, to the fear that dominated their lives, to the enemy’s sadistic glee at every small victory against the poets’ group.⁵ They refer openly to the open hatred they felt focused on them as individuals or as members of the poetic guild, mentioning in certain passages that this hatred was not the normal antagonism of competitors in the workplace or of artists possessed of conflicting visions of the world, but rather *sinat hinam*, hatred all the more base for being baseless and all the more difficult to rationalize for being rooted in nothing more reasonable than pointless, groundless enmity.⁶

In a category by themselves are the many references to the great power enjoyed by the poets’ enemies, power so impressive that, in the end and for all the poets’ versifying, only God alone may be deemed sufficiently mighty to counter it and thus defeat the foe.⁷ As though in hopeful antiphony, these passages are supplemented by an equally long list of verses in which the poets express their confidence that, in the end, they will be triumphant, that God will help them to vanquish those who slander and oppress them, that they will overcome.⁸ There must have been small victories along the way—references do exist here and there to successes the poets had against their foes—but these have the feeling of exceptions that prove the dour fact that one of the two or three cardinal themes running through the hymnal of the Levitical singers of the Second Temple period was the fear of being insulted, denounced, overwhelmed, overpowered and even physically hurt by unnamed enemies lurking in every corner, it would appear, of the poets’ world.⁹

In one truly pathetic passage, a poet pauses to speak directly to his enemy and says, among other things, that it would have been awful enough to be oppressed by faceless hooligans, but that he finds it truly *unbearable* that his foe is a man of his own class, an erstwhile companion, someone he once thought of as a friend and with whom he had spent time in the Temple.¹⁰ (In another poem, a poet confirms this idea of the enemy being a member of his

own class slightly obliquely by painting a picture of his own children engaging the foe in debate in the city gate.)¹¹ It would seem reasonable that this notion—that the foes were colleagues with whom at least some of the poets formerly frequented the Temple’s sacred precincts—is connected with the passages that speak of those foes as enemies of God, or as hypocritical, phoney worshipers whose hearts were filled as much with arrogance and loathing for God’s creatures as they were with devotion to the formal ceremony of divine worship.¹²

For their part, the poets hated their enemies with a hatred as profound as it was eloquent. *Takhlit sin’ah snetim*, one poet writes of the enemies of God: “I hate them with ultimate loathing.”¹³ Other passages express that kind of intense abhorrence in other terms and contexts, but it is probably on the foes in their guise as The Wicked that the poets shower their most profound contumely.¹⁴

The Hebrew words *rasha’* (“the wicked individual”) or *resha’im* (“the wicked”), which appears less than a dozen times in the Torah, appear in some form or another more than eighty times in the Book of Psalms in some 45 poems.¹⁵ Some of what the poets have to say about the wicked is fairly standard fare: that they are thieves, murderers, adulterers, atheists, liars, hypocrites, sinners, evildoers, transgressors, scoffers, sensualists, buffoons, violent miscreants, murderous villains, arrogant purveyors of iniquity, haters of Zion and enemies of God. Some of the passages, however, are redolent of a kind of visceral hatred that sounds as though it runs quite a bit deeper than cliché or mere invective.¹⁶ For example, the poets—or at least some of them—appear to have no problem at all praying for the physical punishment of their wicked foes: in various passages in the Psalter, they pray that God break the arms of the wicked and smash their teeth, that their strength vanish, that the feet of the righteous be soaked with their blood, that they be blinded and made lame, that they be granted the permanence of grass, the durability of smoke and the staying power of molten wax, that they disappear, that they be denied any of life’s pleasures and, ultimately, that they die and go straight to hell.¹⁷ Nonetheless, it is the wicked, not the poets, who are portrayed as the true purveyors of hatred in the Psalms: they hate the poor, they hate the righteous, they hate the poets and, of course, they hate God.¹⁸

Nonetheless, the wicked do quite well in the poets’ world: they are favored by crooked judges when they go to court and, against all reasonableness, they are prosperous.¹⁹ Indeed, the poets appear to know all too well that they have chosen to go up against powerful, dangerous enemies: when the psalmists sputter and mutter about how the wicked will eventually get caught up in their own traps or fall into pits they themselves will have dug, it sounds like so much wishful thinking.²⁰ And when they suggest, as they do in dozens of passages, that—at least in the end—God will punish the wicked for their wickedness, their words sound just like what they are: prayers rooted in the poets’ fondest hopes for justice in an unjust world.²¹ On the other hand, when some poets declare that they themselves will be the agents of that justice, they

sound merely hopeful rather than possessed of any inside information regarding the precise way God is planning to serve the wicked their just desserts.²²

The individual poems of our Book of Psalms undoubtedly had different origins and were written, if not by a full gross of poets, then certainly by many different hands. Still, it seems quite possible to approach the book as a completed work and ask why this anthology of ancient song has the shape and character that it so clearly does possess. The question can also be focused more narrowly: if it is so that the Psalter is the hymnal of the levitical singers of old Jerusalem, as is generally assumed, then why would these particular hymns, with their intertwined, themes of persecution, terror and anticipated revenge, have appealed to the Levites enough for them to have been included in their anthology of song? It is, after all, hard to imagine the Levites actually singing songs like Psalm 37 or 58 as part of the Temple service—let alone Psalms 50 or 51, which are so frankly critical of the Jerusalem priesthood and the Temple service! On the other hand, the presence of these (and other) hymns in the hymnal suggest that these poems were all cherished by the Levites, undoubtedly copied by them, probably set to music by them and possibly sung as part of a private program of worship and meditation.²³

Since many of the poets refer to the wicked or the enemy in ways that imply, I think unavoidably, that they were thinking of specific individuals, it is not reasonable to imagine that the psalms are meant to be taken solely as meditations on the nature of evil in general or on the dangers that inevitably face all who seek to live pious lives in an impious world. Were there circles within the priestly hierarchy that looked down on the Levites as little more than servants and held their brand of neo-prophetic spirituality in open disdain?²⁴ Those passages in the Torah that refer openly to the Levites as slaves of the priests would certainly seem to suggest as much.²⁵ Were there Levites who considered the priests with similar disdain? Passages such as the one in which the poet imagines God rhetorically asking by what right, precisely, these who teach the law do so at the same time they loathe correction and ignore those parts of God's law that don't suit them certainly suggest that there were.²⁶ And the passages within the Psalter that question the efficacy of the sacrificial system are among the most potent links that connect that book to the books of the pre- and post-exilic prophets and help set the neo-propheticism of the levitical circles that produced the Psalms in its proper context.²⁷

Imagining an ancient world in which priests and Levites squared off against each other, each group possessed of its own spiritual vision and set of devotional techniques designed to make that vision a reality, is a satisfying way to envisage ancient Jewish spirituality, but the historical reality of that model is not something that can be proven with anything other than circumstantial evidence. I have come to think of the spiritual politics of post-exilic times very much according to that model, but I think the more potent spiritual lesson here is that tradition has bequeathed us a Psalter that has at its very core the idea that the path toward communion with a God Whom the

worshiper can truly feel to exist is strewn not with rose petals or the accolades of admiring (or even respectful) neighbors, but with the snares of hostile enemies seeking to deny even the possibility, let alone the reality, of any individual knowing God through his or her own personal efforts. That the enemies of whom the psalmists wrote were fellow citizens *who ought to have known better* and not alien hooligans swooping in from some foreign cultural context only makes the point more poignant, not any less sharp and certainly not any less bitter.

That embracing the quest for a life lived in God is fraught with difficulty, and frustration is too patently obvious to most people who have chosen to spend their days stumbling along that path to require much demonstration. That the world only professes to admire spiritual endeavor is another truth all too little in need of proof for most people who, to paraphrase the words of the poet, seek God with all their hearts and in every aspect of their daily lives. I obviously can't say with any certainty if the psalmists of old Jerusalem were truly taking their lives in their hands every time they ventured into the streets of the city on their own or at night, but I prefer to take the "enemy" passages in Tehillim as a kind of midrashic-poetic elaboration of certain basic truths that all who seek God must eventually accept: that the path toward God is, almost by definition, that of naked, defenseless pilgrims stumbling blindly toward a light, the existence of which they can sometimes intuit, but which they can almost never see. That a life lived in God is of necessity its own reward and can never yield any tangible benefits to the people living that life other than a palpable sense of the presence of God in their personal ambits.²⁸ That, in the end, there is no more malign influence on persons seeking spiritual wholeness than the need for the approval of the world or for the support of the world—except perhaps for the need some seekers feel to insist that their spirituality should, by all rights, garner for them the admiration of the world, and that the absence of that admiration indicates some sort of failure of the spiritual system to which they are attempting to adhere.

To live a life in God means abandoning the fantasy that real succor can ever come from the esteem or respect of others. That is one of the great lessons of the Book of Psalms, but this is another: to live a life seeking God means, no less inevitably than regretfully, learning to embrace the loneliness of the poet who wrote the following words with respect to his own personal spiritual life: Adonai, all my desire is for You, but neither are my groans hidden from before You / My heart fibrillates, my strength abandons me, my eyesight . . . they are all failing / My lovers and my friends stand apart from me now that I am sorely afflicted / Even my relatives stand afar off / My would-be murderers lay snares for me while those who wish me ill spout nonsense / They slander me all of every day / I am like a deaf person who cannot hear, like a mute who cannot speak / Truly, I am like one who does not hear, who can't even bring himself to complain / But I trust in you, Hashem / You will answer me, Adonai, my God. . . .²⁹

 NOTES

1. Psalm 58:11.
2. The largest single concentration is in Leviticus 26, where the word appears a dozen times in one form or another, but the word appears most often—some twenty-five times—in Deuteronomy. Even where the reference is a bit ambiguous, the traditional commentators have presumed a national enemy. Cf., for example, Ibn Ezra's comment to Genesis 22:17. (On the other hand, Rashi moves rather anomalously in the precisely opposite direction in his comment to Genesis 49:8, where he limits what would otherwise be a clear remark about a national, or at least tribal, foe to a reference to Saul's enmity toward David.) At any rate, the only exceptions to the general rule are within the realm of civil law; e.g., at Exodus 23:4 or Numbers 35:23, where the term is used technically to refer to a hostile neighbor. Of the other basic Hebrew words denoting the enemy, the word *son'e* appears only four times in the Torah, all in Deuteronomy, all in the context of civil legislation regarding the cities of refuge, and all denoting the hostile individual whose prior indifference to, or dislike of, his neighbor is going to be a matter of interest to the court. The word *tzar* appears a half dozen times in the Torah, always denoting the enemy nation.
3. The word *'oyev* refers to national enemies at Psalms 78:53, 81:15, 89:23 (with reference to the battles of King David) and 106:10 and 42. To these might be added the half dozen references (at Psalms 45:6, 72:9, 89:43, 110:1–2 and 132:18) to those said to be the personal foes of the king. All other attestations are to the poets' personal opponents. The references to enemies of God (e.g., at Psalms 68:2, 83:3, 89:11 and 52, and 92:10) are mostly ambiguous, but could certainly mostly be taken to refer to the poets' private enemies. Some of the references to national enemies cited above might also be read as *double entendres*, e.g., Psalm 81:15.
4. Fear of ambush or capture: Psalms 10:9, 31:9, 56:7, 59:4, 119:61 and 143:3 (where the poet reports actually having been forcibly confined); fear of violence: Psalm 25:19; fear of murder: Psalms 7:6, 41:6 (taking the second half of the verse as illustrative of the kind of remark described in the first half), 64:2, 71:10, 74:19 and 143:4; fear of being denounced: Psalm 109:2 or 119:23.
5. Pressure: Psalms 42:10 and 43:2, cf. 13:3; catcalls: Psalms 55:4, 80:7 and 102:9; fear of the enemy: Psalm 64:2 (among scores of passages); sadistic glee: Psalm 13:5.
6. Groundless hatred: Psalms 35:7 and 19, 38:20, 69:5, 109:3, cf. Psalm 35:7–8.
7. Poets turn to God to vanquish their foe or foes: Psalms 3:8, 17:13, 18:4 and 47–49, 21:9, 25:2, 27:1–2, 31:16, 35:17–19, 38:23, 41:12, 59:2, 61:4, 66:3 and 143:9.
8. Foes will eventually be vanquished: Psalms 6:11, 9:4, 18:38, 27:6, 41:3, 56:10, 138:7 and 143:12.
9. Verses in which individual poets write about having been victorious over their enemies: Psalms 3:8, 30:2 and 54:9. All of these passages, however, are at least slightly ambiguous.
10. Psalm 55:13–15. The reference linking enemy and Temple at Psalm 74:3 appears to be to an outside invader rather than to a personal opponent of the poet's, but how precisely the reference to the evil the foe perpetrated in the sanctuary would have sounded to later generations of Levitical singers—or whether such a remark would have struck them as a kind of uncanny foreshadowing of a reality they know all too well—cannot, of course, be known.
11. Psalm 127:5.
12. Cf. Psalm 74:10 and 18 or 139:21–22.
13. Psalm 139:22.
14. That the wicked are the same as the poets' enemies is clear from many passages; e.g., Psalms 3:8–9, 9:6–7, 17:9, 37:20 and 55:4.
15. The word *rasha'*, in one form or another, appears in the Torah at Genesis 18:23 and 25 (twice), Exodus 2:13, 9:27, 23:1 and 7, Numbers 16:26 and 35:31 and Deuteronomy 25:1 and 2.
16. The wicked as thieves: Psalm 37:21 and 50:18; as murderers or would-be murderers: Psalms 37:14 and 32, 119:95 and 139:19; as adulterers: Psalm 50:18; as atheists: Psalm 10:4

(and cf. 14:1 and 53:2); as liars: Psalm 31:18–19; as hypocrites: Psalm 28:3; as sinners (*hatta'im*): Psalms 1:5 and 104:35; as evildoers (*meri'im*): Psalm 26:5; as transgressors (*po-a'lei 'aven*): Psalms 28:3, 36:12–13, 92:8 and 141:9–10; as scoffers: Psalm 58:7 (taking *kefirim* as a pun, cf. Psalm 34:11, where the *kefirim* are opposed to those who seek God); as sensualists (*holelim*): Psalms 73:3 and 75:5 (cf. Psalm 5:6); as buffoons (*leitzim*): Psalm 1:1; as violent, murderous villains: Psalms 11:2 and 5, 119:61, 95 and 110 and 140:5; as arrogant individuals: Psalm 10:3; as purveyors of iniquity (*posh'im*): Psalm 37:38; as haters of Zion (*son'e tzion*): Psalm 129:4–5 and as deniers of God or God's power: Psalms 9:18, 10:4 and 13 and 36:2.

17. Poets pray that God break the arms of the wicked: Psalms 10:15 (and cf. 37:17); that He smash their teeth: Psalm 58:7 (and cf. Psalms 3:8 and 112:10); that their strength vanish: Psalm 75:11 (taking the reference to their horns being cut down as a metaphor); that the feet of the righteous be soaked with their blood: Psalm 58:11; that they be blinded: Psalm 58:9; that they be made lame (or at least as little ambulatory as a snail): Psalm 58:9; that they be as grass: Psalm 129:6; as smoke: Psalm 68:3; as molten wax: *ibid.*; that they disappear and that they be denied any of life's pleasure: Psalm 112:10; that they die: Psalms 34:22 and 37:10; that they go to hell: Psalm 31:18.

18. The wicked hate the poor: Psalms 10:2 and 9 and 82:4; hate the righteous: Psalm 37:12 and 32; hate the poets: Psalm 55:4 and 109:3; hate or deny God: see above, note 16.

19. Favored by corrupt judges: Psalm 82:2; prosperous: Psalms 10:5 (following Rashi's gloss on *yahilu* in light of Job 20:21), 73:3–4 and 94:3.

20. The wicked will fall into their own traps: Psalms 9:17, 37:15 (where the idea is that they will be slaughtered with their own swords) and 141:10.

21. The wicked will eventually be vanquished by God: Psalms 1:6, 37:34, 36, 38 and 40, 75:9, 91:8, 92:8, 94:13, 104:35, 109:7, 112:10, 119:119, 129:4, 139:19, 145:20, 146:9 and 147:6.

22. For example, see Psalms 75:11 and 101:8.

23. That the Levites had their own spiritual program is reflected in the way their *magnum opus*—which they appear also to have called their *torah*—is organized in five books just like the priestly Torah and is attributed, at least mostly, to David in precisely the same way most of the priestly Torah was attributed to Moses. Regarding the parallels between the Torah and the Book of Psalms, see my *Travels on the Road Not Taken: Towards a Bible-Based Theology of Jewish Spirituality* (London, Ontario: Moonstone Press, 1997), pp. 15–23 and 122–124.

24. The Psalter is riddled with oracular and prophetic passages, thereby implying that its authors experienced at least some kind of neo-prophetic communion with God. See my comments in *Travels on the Road Not Taken*, pp. 101–105 and 137–139.

25. E.g., Numbers 3:9, 8:16 and 19 and 18:6.

26. Psalm 50:16–17. That the poet is speaking about the priests is obvious from the preceding lines in which he denounces the sacrificial system as something that leads people away from the true worship of God.

27. Compare, for example, Psalms 40:7 with Hosea 6:6 or Psalm 51:18–21 with Jeremiah 7:21–26.

28. This is a point at which the spirituality of the Psalter differs most radically from that of the Torah, with its endless passages promising security, prosperity and fecundity to those who keep the commandments. See my *Travels on the Road Not Taken*, pp. 15–23.

29. Psalm 38:10–16.

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