
SCHADENFREUDE IN THE TANAK*

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ABSTRACT

There is no commandment in the Torah forbidding *schadenfreude* per se. The general impression seems to be that the Tanak views *schadenfreude* negatively. Actually, the attitude of the Tanak to *schadenfreude* is rather ambiguous. In personal interactions *schadenfreude* is censured, but in some significant many-to-many situations and salvific cases *schadenfreude* is tolerated and perhaps encouraged. This study attempts to delineate the parameters that characterise the position of the Tanak on *schadenfreude*.

INTRODUCTION

The human tendency to experience pleasure, or satisfaction, when something bad happens to someone else is common, and seems to have existed always. It is not clear, however, whether this tendency is an ingrained and inherent human trait or an acquired and learned behaviour. Psychologists are still trying to understand what triggers it, how it should be managed, and whether it is acceptable behaviour or a vice.¹ This complex but common emotion was named by the Greek *επιχαιρεκακία*, the Hebrew defined it as *לְאִיד שְׂמֵחָה* or used some equivalent phrases (Prov 17:5, 1:26 [באידיכם אשחק], Job 31:29 [אשמח בפיד]), and the German called it *Schadenfreude*, combining the two terms *Schaden* (“harm”) and *Freude* (“joy”).² The German term *schadenfreude* was adopted by the English language.

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¹ Moers (1930:126–134); Feather and McKee (2014:18–27); van Dijk and Ouwerkerk (2014:5); Feather, Wenzel, and McKee (2013:574–585); Combs, Powell, Schurtz, and Smith (2009:635–646); Leach, Spears, Branscombe and Doosje (2003:932–943); Brigham, Kelso, Jackson, and Smith (1997:363–380); Smith, Turner, Leach, Garonzik, Urch-Druskat, and Weston (1996:158–168); etc.

² Cf. Cook (1878:576) and Aristotle (350 B.C.E.: II: 6). The use of *Schadenfreude* in German goes back to the sixteenth century. I use the broader definition of *schadenfreude*: “The pleasure derived by someone from another person’s misfortune.”

In some cultures, schadenfreude has been considered particularly hateful, evil, and inappropriate behaviour. For instance, Schopenhauer (1965:135) considered schadenfreude's pleasures malicious. In his view "There is no more infallible sign of a thoroughly bad heart and profound moral worthlessness than an inclination to a sheer and undisguised malignant joy of this kind". In his (1957:23) essay *On human nature* he emphatically states: "But it is schadenfreude, a mischievous delight in the misfortunes of others, which remains the worst trait in human nature. It is a feeling which is closely akin to cruelty, and differs from it, to say the truth, only as theory from practice."

Indeed, many associate schadenfreude with sadism, arguing that both involve hate and cruelty, aggression, malice, envy, etc. In some cases this might be undoubtedly true. It seems that schadenfreude has been historically condemned because it violated a significant element of the "social contract" obligation of being compassionate toward each other. It was a moral wrong that should be avoided. At the same time it is also obvious that in many instances schadenfreude was tolerated and even praised. This ambivalence finds its expression in the colloquial German saying *Schadenfreude ist die schönste Freude*.³ German theologians and philosophers considered schadenfreude a sin, unless it was a reaction to a just punishment. However, folklore recognised approvingly the psychological gratification of the emotion.

In Portmann's (2000:18) view: "Within Judaism and Christianity, moral opposition to schadenfreude almost certainly grew from successive endorsements of compassion, which unreflectively appears to be the opposite of schadenfreude."⁴ What is the position of the Tanak with regard to schadenfreude? A number of times, the Tanak refers explicitly or implicitly to schadenfreude. The general impression is that in main it views schadenfreude negatively. However, it is also obvious that

³ A similar sentiment is expressed in Sophocles' *Ajax*. Helena asks Odysseus when she sees the crazed Ajax: "Is not the sweetest laughter to laugh at enemies?" A common saying in Sweden is "Schadenfreude is the only true joy". The Japanese say: "The misfortune of others tastes as honey"; "Next door neighbour living poor is the taste of duck"; "Food tastes good when served with the misfortune of others"; etc.

⁴ For Portmann's treatment of schadenfreude in relation to religious thought, see Portmann (2000, ch. 7).

schadenfreude is tolerated in some significant cases. Moreover, there is no commandment in the Torah forbidding schadenfreude. It appears that the Tanak, too, adopts an ambivalent position with regard to schadenfreude.

What is wrong and what is good about schadenfreude? In which cases is it censured in the Tanak and in which is it tolerated or encouraged? This paper attempts to answer these questions. In the following sections I discuss and categorise some typical views that are currently held on schadenfreude and the motives that underlie this behaviour. Then schadenfreude is analysed in the biblical context by reviewing the cases in which it occurs. Finally, some conclusions are drawn on the Tanak's position with regard to schadenfreude.

GENERAL ASPECTS OF SCHADENFREUDE

Frijda (1988:349) notes that the emotion of schadenfreude is manifested in various manners and is driven by a spectrum of motives and factors. Human perspectives on schadenfreude are naturally affected by societal considerations, psychological drives, and theological beliefs.⁵ The items included in these categories, and noted in the following sections, do not exhaust the range of factors that drive schadenfreude. They are intended only to serve as illustrations of the complexity of the emotion and its interrelatedness with basic human motives. Moreover, they provide a useful background for understanding instances of schadenfreude in the biblical context.

Societal considerations

Schadenfreude reflects asocial exploitation

Any pleasure derived from another person's misfortune, simply because one gains from it, is egocentric and asocial. It is, therefore, unacceptable and shameful. Society

⁵ Portmann (2000:42) organises his explanation of schadenfreude using four categories of causal antecedents: (a) low self-esteem; (b) loyalty and commitments to justice; (c) the comical; and (d) malice. Portmann argues that malice and schadenfreude are not synonymous. In his view, the first three categories are in some cases morally justifiable – "Only the last unequivocally calls for moral blame".

is based on compassion and empathy.

Schadenfreude reflects lack of self-control

Humans are naturally motivated by at least two drives: self-interest and concern for others. In a harmonious society, humans have to control their inner motives and find the right balance between these two drives. Schadenfreude highlights self-interest, and is therefore socially disharmonious.

Schadenfreude reflects the sense that justice was done

The desire for justice is a strong human motive. Often schadenfreude expresses a deep satisfaction that an injustice was righted. It enables us to view the *Schaden* as being educational and preserves our moral standing.⁶ Portmann (2000:xiii, 35) asserts that schadenfreude indicates a reasonable and defensible pleasure that another has received his comeuppance. He says: “It is not the suffering of others that brings us joy, but rather the evidence of justice triumphing before our eyes.”⁷ However, humans are usually biased in judging whether a person deserves the harm he has suffered, and Portmann’s assessment of the situation seems to be somewhat naïve. Because schadenfreude is often associated with disproportional punishment it is disharmonious. Schadenfreude is sometimes expressed when a person perceived as successful, prosperous, and happy stumbles or is harmed. In this case schadenfreude might emanate from the basic belief that life should present a balanced reality, and is therefore a nuance of our sense of justice.

Schadenfreude results in a victim’s sense of disappointment in society’s failure

The harm experiencing person expects support and compassion from the by-stander.

⁶ Gilmour (2006:133) argues: If justice is the outcome of suffering, this is a morally appropriate emotion because the *schadenfrohe* person is not taking pleasure in the suffering itself – “the attendant pleasure is not properly in seeing someone suffer, but in the hope that someone will learn a valuable lesson from having suffered”.

⁷ In Portmann’s (2000:9) view schadenfreude can be regarded as a corollary of justice, and “To the extent that *Schadenfreude* signifies love of justice or repugnance to injustice, this emotion is a virtue”.

However, if instead of this expectation *schadenfreude* is expressed, the victim becomes disappointed in his relationship with society. A corrosive social disturbance was generated.

From the social perspective, *schadenfreude* is a discordant reaction. It promotes discord and antagonism between people. It is harmful to interpersonal and intergroup relations and, in general, to the cohesion of the entire community. Society's defence mechanism marked it as a dangerous emotion and usually shunned it.

Psychological drives

Schadenfreude is the result of improved ranking

Humans are usually very sensitive about their self-evaluation. When their self-evaluation is undermined they are motivated to reverse the process in order to protect, restore, or improve their self-evaluation (see Taylor and Brown (1988:193–210). X feels *schadenfreude* with respect to Y because Y's harm makes him worse off than X is. Thus, X's ranking is improved (Smith 2013:xviii).

Schadenfreude is the result of shared ranking

X feels *schadenfreude* with respect to many Xs because they share the harm, and X belongs to a group sharing with it its ranking. This kind of *schadenfreude* has been encapsulated by the Italian proverb, *mal comune, mezzo gaudio* ("shared misfortune is half a joy"), and in Modern Hebrew by צרת רבים חצי נחמה. This attitude presents an optimistic perception regarding the half-full glass. While it obviously has negative psychological aspects, it is not a disturbing societal factor.

Schadenfreude expresses competitive advantage

Life is a competition between humans, a zero-sum game. Y's harm enhances X's win.

Schadenfreude expresses the joy of deliverance

When Y is struck by misfortune, X is happy because he feels protected, believing that misfortune does not strike at the same place twice. Moreover, X may feel alerted and forewarned about potential dangers.

Schadenfreude satisfies hostile feelings

When X views Y as an enemy, then any harm caused to Y, which reduces his stature as an enemy, would cause satisfaction to X. X gains confidence, because Y is a less potent enemy.

Schadenfreude occurs because envy is reduced

Humans experience envy when they desire something (superior trait, achievement, possession) that others have but they do not. If X envies Y, and Y is harmed, there is less to envy. Some scholars have doubts about the role of envy in evoking schadenfreude (see Hareli and Weiner 2002:257–277). However, conceptual analysis suggests that there should be a strong link between the two. Indeed, experimental evidence is now mounting in support of such a link.

Schadenfreude occurs because one feels that he contributed to the *Schaden* which resulted in significant good

Usually, an active personal involvement in causing the *Schaden* is not in line with fair conduct. However, there are situations in which the final goal is considered so important that active involvement in enabling this goal is the main *Freude*.⁸ Schadenfreude in this case is problematic, because it relies on the validity of the goal and the “activism” might involve “entrapment”. Moreover, though the other person might deserve misfortune, we do not have the authority to facilitate it.

Schadenfreude is a universal, even wholesome reaction that cannot be helped

Psychological studies suggest that humans are biologically programmed to take pleasure in the pain of those that they envy (see Cikara and Fiske 2012:63–71). Kushner (1981:39) writes, “[People] don’t wish their friends ill, but they can’t help feeling an embarrassing spasm of gratitude that [the bad thing] happened to someone

⁸ Portmann (2000:22, 27–28, 42) argues that schadenfreude is a passive emotion that does not usually involve expectation of suffering. Malice, by comparison, is active and not only looks for evil to befall its object, it could involve agency. This distinction is only a matter of semantics.

else and not to them.” In Ben-Zeev’s view: “Schadenfreude may not be virtuous but nor is it wicked. It is a natural expression of human nature.”

On the individual level, schadenfreude is one in a range of human emotions. It is notably qualified by such factors as the social standing of the victim, whether he deserved the misfortune, the nature of the misfortune (major, minor), and the observer’s responsibility for the misfortune. This perspective tends to soften some of its negative aspects. Yet, as we shall see, it is in the one-to-one interactions that schadenfreude is most categorically objected to in the Tanak.

Theological beliefs

God is displeased with schadenfreude.

The reason for God’s displeasure is not obvious and not elucidated. Murphy notes that “the admonition not to gloat over the fall of an enemy is motivated by the displeasure of the Lord who will punish you instead of the enemy (Prov 24:18; cf. Prov 17:5). In other words, it is only for God to pass judgment” (see Murphy and Huwiler 1999:*ad loc*). This conclusion is not in the text nor is it obvious.

God does not enjoy the downfall of the wicked

Ezekiel makes this point repeatedly: “Is it my desire that a wicked person shall die?—says the Lord God. It is rather that he turn back from his ways and live” (Ezek 18:23, cf. 18:32, 33:11). A widely quoted Midrash propagates this notions generations later (*bSanhedrin* 39b, *bMegillah* 10b): “Said R. Shmuel son of Nachman, said R. Yonatan: What does it mean ‘so that the one could not come near the other all through the night’ (Ex 14:20)? At that time the angels wanted to sing God’s praise before Him. Said to them the Holy, blessed be He, ‘My handiworks are drowning in the sea, and you would sing to me?’.”⁹

⁹ The Hebrew reads:

א"ר שמואל בר נחמן א"ר יונתן
מאי דכתיב ולא קרב זה אל זה כל הלילה. באותה שעה בקשו מלאכי
שירה הקב"ה אמר להם הקב"ה מעשי ידי טובעים בים ואתם אומרים שירה לפני.

Various versions of this Midrash abound: Yalkut Shimoni, Deutoronomy, Sec. 940, v. 28:63; Yalkut Shimoni, Exodus, Sec. 233, v. 14:20; Yalkut Shimoni, 1 Kings, Sec. 223, v.

Perhaps, the reason for this divine attribute is related to the statement that humans were created in God's image (Gen 1:23). The shameful situation, in which the defeated wicked person finds himself, reflects badly upon God.¹⁰

God loves all that He created

Since all human beings were created for a specific purpose, they are appreciated by God for serving His purpose. The medieval exegete Bachya ben Asher (1263–1340), in his commentary on Exod 34:6 notes that in the repetition יהוה יהוה the first יהוה is a noun and the second יהוה is an attribute of unconditional compassion (בלא תשובה ובלא בלא תשובה ובלא) (see Rashi *ad loc*). God has compassion for the wicked who did not repent, as it is stated “and His mercy is upon all His works” (Ps 145:9, ורחמיו על כל מעשיו), even for the idol worshippers, as the sages inferred in *bSanhedrin* 39b, and even for the animals, as it is stated (Ps 36:7, אדם ובהמה תושיע יהוה).¹¹

God wants eradication of sin rather than sinners

The Talmud (*bBerachot* 10a) tells the following story: “Thugs in R. Meir's neighbourhood were causing him much grief. R. Meir prayed that they die. Said to him his wife Bruria: ‘What is your position? Because it is said יתמו חַטָּאִים (Ps 104:35)? Does it say חוֹטְאִים (“sinners”)? It says חַטָּאִים (“sins”)! Moreover, go to the end of the verse: ורשעים עוד אינם (“and the wicked would be no more”) – once the sins are eradicated – the wicked would be no more! So, pray for mercy upon them and that they repent – and the wicked would be no more.’ He prayed for them, and they

22:36; Midrash Rabbah on Exodus, Sec. 23:8; R. Jacob ben Rosh (c. 1275–c. 1349), Ba'al Haturim, Ex 14:20; R. Bachya ben Asher (1263–1340), Rabeinu Bachya on the Torah, Exod 34:6; R. Chaim ben Attar (1881–1966), Or HaChaim, Exod13:17; etc.

¹⁰ This is also the reason for the injunction in Deut 21:23 that the hanged should be buried the same day.

¹¹ Bachya (1990:230). Bachya says:

ודע כי השם הראשון הוא עצם ולא מידה והשם השני הוא מידה
והוא מידת הרחמים בלא תשובה ובלא שאלה אלא כאב רחמן שהוא מרחם על בנו ויודע מה שהוא צריך
ונותן לו מבלי שישאל ממנו וכן הוא יתעלה מרחם הוא על הרשע אפילו בלא תשובה שכן כתוב [Ps 145:9
“ורחמיו על כל מעשיו”

repented.”¹² Schadenfreude is inappropriate because it is focused on the wrong target.

God rights wrongs

When community X defeats community Y, and the defeat cannot be understood in a rational obvious manner, it is often assumed that God intervened to right a wrong. In this case, schadenfreude can be intermixed with exultation of the divine to a degree that defies clear identification which sentiment dominates, and it is normally tolerated.

Modern psychology usually considers schadenfreude from the perspectives of magnitude (minor, major) of harm inflicted, victim's deservingness of the misfortune, observer's responsibility for the misfortune, and observer's benefit from the victim's misfortune. The role of theological beliefs, in forming our attitudes with respect to schadenfreude, has not been adequately addressed in the literature. These learned perspectives, an overlay on our natural emotions, modify and shape our views on schadenfreude and control the reactions in practical cases. This function of theological beliefs lends much importance to the understanding of the biblical attitude to schadenfreude.

SCHADENFREUDE IN THE BIBLICAL CONTEXT

According to the general beliefs in ancient times fate is always deserved. Man's misfortune is a clear indication of criminality that was not for some reason rectified. The seemingly accidental harm happening to man is actually divine punishment for some transgression that was not properly recompensed. From this perspective schadenfreude could be viewed positively by both victim and observer, because it represented some closure. On the other hand, the accidental harm also exposed an undefined covert transgression, which was humiliating, and could trigger malicious

¹² The Hebrew text reads:

הנהו בריוני דהוו בשבבותיה דרבי מאיר והוו קא מצערו ליה טובא הוה קא בעי
רבי מאיר רחמי עלויהי כי היכי דלימותו אמרה ליה ברוריא דביתהו מאי דעתך משום דכתיב "יתמו חטאים"
מה כתיב חוטאים כתיב ועוד שפיל לסיפיה דקרא ורשעים עוד אינם כיון דיתמו חטאים הרשעים עוד אינם
בעא רחמי עלויהו דלהדרו בתשובה והדרו בתשובה

rumour. Thus, it is not surprising that schadenfreude is viewed with some ambivalence in the Tanak. Pope (1986:237–238) observes that

Rejoicing at the calamity of an enemy is all too common and natural in Holy Writ and unto this day The imprecatory Psalms (e.g., lviii, cix, cxxxvii), even interpreted as directed against the heathen collectively, are full of vengeful malevolence. The opposite attitude is enjoined in Exod xxiii 4–5; Lev xix 18; Prov xx 22, xxiv 17–18, xxv 21–22.

Negative views

Interpersonal relations

Gordis (1978:352), explaining Job 31:29, which reads

Did I rejoice over my enemy's misfortune?	אִם־אֶשְׂמַח בְּפִיד מְשֻׁנְאִי
Did I thrill because evil befell him?	וְהִתְעַרְרְתִּי כִּי־מָצְאוּ רָעַ

observes that:

Job maintains that he has been free of *Schadenfreude*, gloating over the troubles of others. The Wisdom teachers warned against this deeply rooted weakness (Pr. 17:5; 24:17f.) as vigorously as they did against taking vengeance on one's enemies (Ps. 7:5; Pr. 20:22, 24:29) except in the exquisite, sublimated form of giving one's foe food and drink (Pr. 25:21f.) and helping him in his trouble (Ex 23:4f.).

Job's position reflects the general mores in the Near-East of his time. The ancients believed that schadenfreude is essentially wrong, and that they are entitled to ask gods to intervene when such a possibility arose, or was likely. For instance, a Greek tablet (circa 200 B.C.E.) has a curse against a person who "has taken off with my slaves, has led them into evil ways, indoctrinated them, advised them, misled them, he rejoiced [in my misery] (κατέχαρε), he has taken them wandering round the market place, he persuaded them to run away" (see Versnel 2013:1). It seems that schadenfreude evoked a sense of injustice and humiliation that was considered more painful than the *Schaden per se*.

In another archaeological find, a supplicant to Demeter says: “Lady Demeter, I supplicate you because I have injustice. ... O Queen, hear us who suffer and punish those who rejoice in our misery” (see Versnel 2013:2). In this case *schadenfreude* is also viewed as an injustice that warrants divine intervention. A tablet from Carthage (circa 300 B.C.E.) has: “I, Maslih, I make Emashtart melt, the place where he lives and all his belongings, because he has rejoiced at my expense about the money that I have completely lost” (Versnel 2013:4). Here the supplicant considers it reasonable to request from his god a very ruinous punishment because of *schadenfreude*. This disproportionality is typical of *schadenfreude* situations where justice was done or needs to be done. A funerary inscription from Amisos has: “If anyone has injured him or rejoiced in the event, either woman or man, may he suffer worse inflictions than the deceased” (Versnel 2013:6). The victim’s experience of *schadenfreude* was very painful, and the requests for recompense apparently took this into account. A negative attitude toward *schadenfreude* in interpersonal relations was part of the ancient Near-East cultural milieu, and was likely shared by the Jewish people.

Schadenfreude is not referred to explicitly in the Pentateuch (Torah). However, in a case where *schadenfreude* would have been most natural, the Torah commands an opposite attitude. In Exod 23:5 (cf. Deut 22:4) one reads: “When you see the ass of your enemy lying under its burden would you refrain from raising it, you must nevertheless raise it with him” (*כִּי תִרְאֶה חֲמֹר שֶׁנֶּאֱדָר רֶכֶץ פִּחַת מִשְׂאוֹ וְהִדְלִתָּ מֵעֹזֵב לוֹ עֹזֵב תִּעְזֹב*) (עמו¹³).¹³ While this commandment was variously conditioned, it is clear that the case is not an occasion for *schadenfreude*. One has to set aside for the moment the animosity in his heart and help (Targum: *יהולע דבלבד אמ קובשת קבשמ*, Hizkuni: *ומוגרתת*). This attitude would also apply to the case in the preceding verse (Exod 34:4), where *schadenfreude* would seem natural. Moreover, there is no place for *schadenfreude* when one’s enemy is burdened by circumstances that he cannot control. Indeed, one finds in Prov 25:21 (cf. Rom 12:20) the unequivocal teaching:

אם־רָעֵב שֶׁנֶּאֱדָר הָאֲכִילֵהוּ לָהֶם If your enemy is hungry give him bread to eat;

¹³ The sages of the Talmud (*bBava Metzia* 32b) deduced from this verse the general principle of not causing “suffering to animals” (*צער בעלי חיים*).

If he is thirsty give him water to drink.

וְאִם-צָמָא הִשְׁקֵהוּ מַיִם

This act has a chance of making one's enemy remorseful of his hostility, and could promote peace between the two (Prov 25:22). Desisting from schadenfreude could enhance good interpersonal relations and strengthen societal links. Moreover, if the humane gesture is not appreciated by the enemy, "God would reward it" (וַיְהִי ה' יְשַׁלְּמֶנּוּ).

It is notable in this case that the situation referred to is that of one-to-one interaction. Moreover, apparently a kinship relation is assumed to exist between the antagonists (שׂוֹנְאֶיךָ "your enemy" in Exod 23:5 but אָחִיךָ "your brother" in Deut 22:4), which might have demanded extraordinary behaviour.¹⁴ It is possible to argue that the commandment in Exod 23:5 refers only to a hostile kin, but not to any hostile person. Finally, the Torah demands not only help, but also practical cooperation with the adversary (עֲזֹב תֵּעָזֵב עִמּוֹ). Still, the Torah makes no comment on whether schadenfreude in such case is a sin.

One of the most famous and frequently quoted verses with regard to schadenfreude is Prov 24:17:

If your enemy falls do not exult;

בְּנֹפֵל אוֹיְבֶיךָ אַל תִּשְׂמַח

If he trips let your heart not rejoice.

וּבִשְׁלוּ אַל יִגַּל לְבָבְךָ

In this case the victim is one's personal enemy (a one-to-one interaction with a familiar subject) and schadenfreude is unequivocally censured.¹⁵ The author, however, felt that the prohibition requires some explanation.¹⁶ He provides theological

¹⁴ It is likely that the two versions refer to the case of a hostile relative. It is difficult to see why a non-hostile kin would not be helped.

¹⁵ See Zer-Kavod and Kiel (1983:187 note 92b). Kiel notes that the verse refers specifically to "your enemy" (אויבך *Qere*), not "enemies of your people" (אויבי עמך) or "enemies of God" (אויבי יהוה). Not only is one forbidden to take the law in his hand and harm someone who harmed him, but he is not allowed to hate his kinfolk in his heart, take vengeance, or bear a grudge (Lev 19:17–18). Schadenfreude censure is a higher rung on the ethical ladder.

¹⁶ In Job 31:29 the author assumes schadenfreude to be obviously forbidden in one-to-one interaction, as it was in the ancient Near-East. For instance, Ahikar advises: "rejoice not in the calamities of thy neighbors, if your enemy wrongs you, show him kindness." Cf. *Story of Ahikar*, 2:19, www.pseudepigrapha.com/pseudepigrapha/ahikar.htm.

rationalisation in the following verse:

Lest God sees it and be displeased,	פֶן יִרְאֶה ה' וְרַע בְּעֵינָיו
And avert His wrath from him.	וְהִשִּׁיב מִעֲלָיו אָפוּ

From this explanation one can conclude that: (1) schadenfreude, in a one-to-one interaction, displeases God; (2) God's displeasure with an observer's reaction (even if covert) would terminate the misfortune of the observer's enemy; (3) it is a disadvantage to the observer to have schadenfreude during the occurrence of the misfortune, if the victim is his enemy; and (4) no punishment is mentioned for the individual engaged in schadenfreude. Is schadenfreude permitted after the misfortune terminated? Perhaps it is. However, the prohibition eliminates the cruellest phase of schadenfreude; the enjoyment of one's suffering while it happens and its consequent humiliation.

Proverbs 17:5, though much less used than v. 24:17, points to a particularly divisive and chronic category of schadenfreude –that which is directed at the poor

He who mocks the poor affronts his Maker;	לְעַג לְרִישׁ תְּהַרֵּף עֲשֵׂהוּ
He who rejoices over another's misfortune	שִׂמְחָה לְאִיד לֹא יִנְקָה
will not go unpunished.	

This verse mentions punishment to anyone engaged in schadenfreude, but nothing is said of the manner in which it will be exacted and by whom.

The destitute might be considered a distant/strange person and the level of justice vs. injustice in the situation is not a factor. However, theological considerations are here paramount. Mocking the poor is equivalent to making negative comments about God's creation (תְּהַרֵּף עֲשֵׂהוּ “disparages his maker”). It is a presumptuous, haughty, and cruel attitude. Affront to God was a cardinal sin and its punishment severe (Job 2:9). The juxtaposing of mocking the poor, affront to God, and schadenfreude, makes schadenfreude into a major theological transgression having significant social ramifications.

One might have thought that this transgression would always be on society's agenda, and a community would always feel that it is incumbent upon it to eliminate

any humiliation of those who have not by those who have. However, the author relegates this function to the divine. Perhaps, this shift of responsibility can be justified, to some degree, by the hidden nature of schadenfreude. It is clear from the text that: (1) the schadenfreude situation discussed involves only a one-to-one interaction; (2) schadenfreude is categorically forbidden, as cursing God is; (3) anyone practicing schadenfreude towards the destitute would be punished by God; and (4) Prov 17:5 could have a more general validity; i.e., anyone exercising schadenfreude would be punished by God.¹⁷

It is possible to conclude that the Tanak strongly censures schadenfreude in one-to-one personal interactions and considers it to be improper. God's reaction to schadenfreude might vary on a case-by-case basis, but there would be always a punitive response. It seems that this tradition was continued by the Talmudic sages. One finds, for instance, such saying as “don't push a rock after one who falls into a pit” (*bKidushin 20b*: דחה אבן אחר הגופל).¹⁸

Schadenfreude vis-à-vis neighbouring nations

Another particular category of schadenfreude is that practiced by neighbouring nations (Ammon, Moab, Seir, Edom, Philistines, Tyre) against Judah. Typical of these cases are Ezekiel's prophecies in Chapters 25–26 and 35. God asks Ezekiel to make

¹⁷ See Zer-Kavod and Kiel (1983:105). Kiel takes v. 17:5 as referring to two categories (לעג לרש “mocking the poor” and שמח לאיד “shadenfreude”) which would be punished by the divine. Though I follow Kiel (relying on Prov 14:31), it is also possible that we have here three categories (לעג לרש, לעג לרש, חרף עשהו, שמח לאיד) “disparaging his Maker”, reading: לעג לרש חרף, where the prefixing was dropped by haplography. Ben Sira in 6:4 takes a neutral position vis-à-vis schadenfreude, stating: פי נפש ענה תשחית בעליה ושחמת שונא: תשיגם “Strong desire corrupts its owners, and their enemy's' shadenfreude will reach them.” A similar sentiment is expressed in Sir 23:3.

¹⁸ A seemingly opposite saying and Halakic principle is the statement “stuff the wicked so that he might die” (Mishnah Ma'aser Sheni 5:1, *bBabba Kama* 69a, *yDemai* 3:5, etc.: הלעיטוהו לרשע וימרת). The literal meaning of this statement is indifference to the fate of the wicked, and indeed encouragement for enabling the wicked to amass quickly enough sins and thereby cause his demise. In this situation we are not passive in generating the other's misfortune and the schadenfreude depends to a great extent on the success of the “entrapping”. The sages were very uncomfortable with this Halakic precept and the associated activism and schadenfreude. They tried to qualify it substantially. This saying remains problematic.

prophecies of punishment:

- to Ammon: “Because you cried ‘Aha!’ over My Sanctuary when it was desecrated, and over the land of Israel when it was laid waste and over the House of Judah when it went into exile ... Because you clapped your hands and stamped your feet and rejoiced over the land of Israel with such utter scorn” (Ezek 25:3, 6);
- to Moab and Seir: “Because Moab and Seir said, ‘See, the House of Judah is like all the other nations’” (Ezek 25:8);¹⁹
- to Edom: “Because Edom acted vengefully against the House of Judah and incurred guilt by wreaking revenge upon it” (Ezek 25:12); and “with wholehearted glee and with contempt, have made My land a possession for themselves for pasture and for prey” (Ezek 36:5);
- to Philistines: “Because the Philistines, in their ancient hatred, acted vengefully, and with utter scorn sought revenge and destruction” (Ezek 25:15);²⁰
- to Tyre: “Because Tyre gloated over Jerusalem, ‘Aha! The gateway of the peoples is broken, it has become mine; I shall be filled, now that it is laid to ruins’” (Ezek 26:2);²¹
- to Seir: “Because you harboured an ancient hatred and handed the people of Israel over to the sword in their time of calamity, the time set for their punishment ... As you rejoiced when the heritage of the House of Israel was laid waste, so will I treat you” (Ezek 35:5, 15); and,
- to enemies of Judah in general: “Because the enemy gloated over you, ‘Aha! Those ancient heights have become our possession!’” (Ezek 36:2).²²

These prophecies provide significant insights into the biblical attitude toward

¹⁹ The mocking phrase “like all the other nations” (כְּכָל-הַגּוֹיִם) probably alludes to 1 Sam 8:5–7 and Ezek 20:32 (cf. Midrash Lamentations Rabati 9).

²⁰ From the time the land was settled until the days of King Saul were there periodic altercations with the Philistines. David was able to defeat the Philistines and subjugate them (2 Sam 5:25). Only during the rule of Ahaz did they free themselves (2 Chr 28:18). They had a long standing grudge against Judah.

²¹ Tyre’s schadenfreude stems from the opportunity to exploit its enhanced position as the sole regional centre of international trade.

²² This schadenfreude is based on other nations’ envy of the mountains which offered Judah considerable protection from attackers.

schadenfreude – its display, and motivation. Overt schadenfreude was often accompanied by shouts of “aha”, clapping of hands, stamping of feet, winking, opening of mouth in amazement (Ezek 25:6, Ps 35:15–21), and probably facial expressions of joy.²³ It was apparently motivated by envy, competition, historical grievances, and relative ranking in the national narrative or region.²⁴ In particular, the national narrative must have played an important role in the relations between Judah and kin-nations such as Ammon, Moab, and Edom. These nations were considered by Judah to be genealogically inferior and unprotected by God. Thus, schadenfreude arose when Judah was defeated, the temple destroyed, and most of Judah exiled. Judah and Jerusalem benefited considerably from being on the trade route between Africa and Asia. Tyre was happy at the destruction of Jerusalem because it hoped to benefit from a diversion of this trade to her.

Ezekiel cannot tolerate the schadenfreude of the nations that neighbour Judah. It lacked self-control; was based on utter scorn (שאטך בנפש); expressed shared ranking (ככל הגויים בית יהודה); was based on vengeance (ונקמו בהם), which has been forbidden (Lev 19:17–18); involved greedy exploitation and usurpation (נתגוראת-ארצי להם למורשה); reflected competitive advantage (אמלאה החרבה); involved active contribution to the *Schaden* (ותגר את-בני-ישראל על-ידי חרב); and, implied satisfaction of envy (ובמות עולם למורשה היתה לנו). Several of the neighbouring nations were ethnically related to Judah and thus were expected to exhibit a more controlled and sympathetic reaction to its *Schaden*. This was not the case.

Obadiah, in particular, is focused on the shameful behavior of the kin-nation Edom, which joined Judah’s enemies, used its defeat for plunder, and captured its fugitives. Obadiah gives in vv. 12–13 a lengthy list of what Edom should not have done. He says:

How could you gaze with glee at וְאַל-תִּרְא בְיוֹם-אֲחִיקָה בְיוֹם נָכְרוֹ
your brother that day, on his day

²³ Some of these gestures served to express happiness or sadness (cf. Ezek 6:11).

²⁴ See Moshkovitz (1985:189) note 4c. Moshkovitz suggests that Amon’s reflects grievances from the time of David’s conquest and subjugation of Amon (1 Sam 12:20).

of calamity!

How could you gloat over Judah וְאַל־תִּשְׂמַח לְבְנֵי־יְהוּדָה בְּיוֹם אָבָדָם

on that day of ruin!

How could you loudly jeer on the וְאַל־תִּגְדֹּל פִּיךָ בְּיוֹם צָרָה

day of ruin!

How could you enter the gate of בְּשַׁע־רַעְמֵי בְּיוֹם אִיָּדָם

my people on its day of disaster, אֶל־תָּבוֹא

Gaze in glee with the others, on אֶל־תִּרְאֶה גַם־אִתָּהּ בְּרַעְתּוֹ בְּיוֹם

its misfortune on its day of אִידוֹ

disaster,

And lay hands on its wealth on its וְאַל־תִּשְׁלַחֲנָהּ בְּחִילוֹ בְּיוֹם אִידוֹ

day of disaster!

The repeated “on its day” (ביום) hammers-in the insensitivity, the rudeness, and the cruelty of Edom. Schadenfreude, when the *Shaden* occurs, is in particular painful and humiliating. It should be avoided.

As is often the case in family disputes, the occasion of the *Schaden* became an opportunity for the rectification of many previous slights/insults/gloats, leading to vicious vengeful reactions. The quoted texts indicate that God considers schadenfreude of the neighbouring nations at Judah’s defeat improper, warranting a quid pro quo punishment; i.e., schadenfreude of nation A at a major national calamity happening to neighbouring nation B is forbidden, and if it occurs, would be punished by God.

Indeed, this certitude about divine reaction serves as the rationale for schadenfreude in Lam 4:21–22. The author of Lamentations urges Edom to enjoy its schadenfreude at Judah’s fall, because he could enjoy schadenfreude when Edom would surely fall. This tit-for-tat reasoning was apparently intended to deter Edom from engaging in schadenfreude, rather than to provide a rationale for its legitimisation. The author of Lamentations, which deals with a major national disaster, is sensitive to schadenfreude and expresses his obviously unpleasant feeling several times. He says in Lam 1:7,

When enemies saw her and gloated רְאוּהָּ צָרִים שְׂחָקוּ עַל מִשְׁבֹּתֶיהָ
over her downfall

it was painful and humiliating. It underscored the unwarranted trust, false hope, and tragic miscalculation. However, the author does not say that the enemies should be punished for the gloating. With complete resignation he accepts even the schadenfreude. In this schadenfreude situation between two communities (Judah and her enemies), the enemies are not identified, but it seems that they were the conquerors (צָרִים, צָר). The context indicates that Judah considers the schadenfreude negatively, as unjustified added humiliation, but does not resist it. Indeed, it is possible that the enemy's gloating was part of the standard psychological warfare.

In Lam 1:21–22, however, the anger at schadenfreude emerges in full force and a plea for heavenly punishment is voiced. The reason for this might be the range of enemies addressed – “All my foes” (כָּל־אֹיְבֵי). Among these foes are undoubtedly included neighbouring nations. The author says:

All my foes heard of my plight כָּל־אֹיְבֵי שָׁמְעוּ רַעַתִּי שָׁשׂוּ כִּי אָתָּה עָשִׂיתָ
exalted for You did it,
You have brought on the day You הַבָּאתָ יוֹם־קִרְאָתָּהּ
threatened.
And let them be as I! Let all their וַיְהִי כִּמְנִי תְּבֹא כָּל־רַעַתָּתָם לְפָנָיִךָ
wrongs come before You,
And do to them as you have done to וְעוֹלָל לְמוֹ כַּאֲשֶׁר עוֹלָלְתָּ לִּי עַל
me for all my sins. כָּל־פְּשָׁעַי

He stresses that the national tragedy has been forewarned and inflicted by God (אתה). Indeed, because the *Schaden* is often believed to be heavenly punishment, schadenfreude usually evokes moral comparisons and raises the question of equity in divine justice. Punishment of those who exalt in Judah's plight would equalise their standing and thereby ease Judah's emotional plight. Schadenfreude in this case would result from shared ranking. A similar plea is voiced in Lam 3:64–65.

Lamentations 2:16–17 is more specific about the schadenfreude, what motivated it and how it was expressed. Again the phrase “All your enemies” (כָּל־אֹיְבֵיךָ) is used. The

author says,

All your enemies leer at you;	פָּצוּ עֲלֶיךָ פִּיהֶם כְּל־אִבִּיךָ
They hiss and gnash their teeth,	שָׁרְקוּ וַיִּחַרְקוּ-שֵׁן אָמְרוּ בְּלַעְנוּ
Say: “We’ve ruined her!	
Ah, this is the day we hoped for;	אָף זֶה הַיּוֹם שֶׁקִּוִּינָהוּ מִצְאָנוּ רְאִינוּ
We’ve lived to see it!”	
The Lord has done what He	עָשָׂה יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר זָמַם
purposed,	
He has let the foe rejoice over you,	וַיִּשְׂמַח עֲלֶיךָ אוֹיֵב
Has exalted the might of your	הַרִים קֶרֶן צָרֶיךָ
enemies.	

Schadenfreude involved leering (פָּצוּ פִּיהֶם), hissing (שָׁרְקוּ), gnashing of teeth (חָרְקוּ שֵׁן), grandstanding (בְּלַעְנוּ), and expressing satisfaction (קִוִּינוּ, מִצְאָנוּ, רְאִינוּ).²⁵ These acts correspond to schadenfreude displays mentioned in Ps 35:15–21, suggesting that schadenfreude was ritualised. It probably included derogatory and humiliating songs (Lam 3:14, 63). Enactment of the ritual, or portions of it, left no doubt regarding the intended message: the stature of the enemies has been elevated (הַרִים קֶרֶן צָרֶיךָ). Often, in the ancient Near East, a winner would boast that his gods were stronger than the gods of the defeated nation. The author seems to be sensitive to this possibility, suggesting instead that Judah’s plight is a deliberate divine act (עָשָׂה יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר זָמַם). Theodicy requires that schadenfreude be accepted with resignation, as a divine act (יִשְׂמַח אוֹיֵב), yet schadenfreude is viewed here negatively; an added burden.

Positive views

Obvious justice

In Prov 11:10 we read

When the righteous prosper the city exults;	בְּטוֹב צְדִיקִים תִּעְלֶז קְרִיָּה
When the wicked perish there are shouts of joy.	וּבְאָבֵד רְשָׁעִים רִנָּה

²⁵ Leering is also mentioned in Lam 3:46.

Schadenfreude is not usually a component of the joy associated with seeing people who deserve it prosper, though in some cases it might be. However, when wicked people perish the shouts of joy probably contain more than a grain of schadenfreude. Here, again, the verse deals with the reaction of many to the misfortune of many. One might even sense in Prov 11:10b encouragement to enjoy the fall of the wicked. Indeed, this is also the case in Ps 52:8 where the righteous are invited to rejoice in the downfall of the wicked. In these cases schadenfreude is considered a positive reaction, perhaps because no significant interpersonal relations are involved and a strong theological imperative is at play; divine justice was done and wickedness was eradicated.

Wisdom, personified as a woman, has no compunctions in expressing schadenfreude when humans do not avail themselves of her teachings. We read in Prov 1:26:

I will laugh at your calamity,	גַּם־אֲנִי בְאִיְדֹכֶם אֲשַׁחֵק
And mock when terror comes upon you.	אֲלַעַג כִּבְאֵ פְחָדְכֶם

Here, Wisdom joins others in expressing schadenfreude because a community refrains from utilising available means for self-preservation and betterment. Clearly, the verse does not refer to a one-to-one interaction. Wisdom is available to all, and being an abstract term it would not be subject to the many negative aspects that human schadenfreude is. The interaction between Wisdom and the many who do not respond to its teachings can be viewed as a many-to-many interaction, and a just educational punishment, or chastening means. Bildad's promise to Job in 8:21–22:

God will yet fill your mouth with laughter,	עַד־יִמְלֵא שְׂחֹק פִּיךָ
And your lips with shouts of joy.	וְשִׁפְתֶיךָ תְרוּעָה
Your enemies will be clothed with shame,	שִׁנְאֵיךָ יִלְבְּשׁוּ־בִשְׂת
And the tent of the wicked will be no more.	וְאֹהֶל רְשָׁעִים אֵינְנוּ

has been construed by some commentators as reflecting *schadenfreude*.²⁶ However, Wisdom teachers usually argued that having *schadenfreude* is improper. Perhaps it would be more correct to consider these verses in line with Ps 126:2, which contains similar expressions. In that case, the first two colons do not convey a sense of *schadenfreude*, but happiness in God's involvement and exacting justice.

Such keywords as פִּיד ("disaster"), בּוּז ("derision"), שֶׁאֵנָּה ("confident"), מוֹעֲדֵי רֶגֶל ("those that stumble") suggested to some commentators that Job 12:5 לְפִיד בּוּז לְעֹשֶׂתוֹת נָכוֹן לְמוֹעֲדֵי רֶגֶל שֶׁאֵנָּה נָכוֹן לְמוֹעֲדֵי רֶגֶל refers to a *schadenfreude* situation.²⁷ However, Job 12:5 is notoriously difficult. For instance, Whybray (1998:71) says: "Verses 4–6 are particularly obscure, and the Hebrew text may well be in disorder." Moreover, many rendered Job 12:5 so that it does not obviously suggest an engagement in *schadenfreude*. Typical of these interpretations is that of Kissane (1939:68): "There is contempt for calamity in the mind of one at ease, A blow for them whose foot has slipped." Because of these uncertainties, this verse should not be included among the *schadenfreude* verses.

Poetic justice

A complicated case of *schadenfreude* is that of Samson (Judg 16:23–30), because it involves *schadenfreude* that is censured and that which is justified. The Tanak does not seem to hold it against the Philistine that they were happy to defeat Samson, their great enemy, and had a big ceremonial meal (Judg 16:23–24). This was happiness of deliverance, not *schadenfreude*. However, as this celebration went on (Judg 16:25: כִּי טוֹב לָבָב "as their spirits rose") it turned ugly. Samson was ushered from his prison cell to become the subject of the celebrants' derisions (Judg 16:25: וַיִּצְחַק לְפָנָיו "let him entertain them"). This Philistinian *schadenfreude* met divine disapproval. Samson pleads that God grants him the "last laugh" (Judg 16:28). He wants *his* *schadenfreude*. Samson gets his "last laugh" but does not survive (Judg 16:30).

Soloveichik (2000:41–46) observed: "Some might respond that the raging,

²⁶ So, for instance, Pope (1986:235 note 29).

²⁷ So, for instance, Pope (1986:235 note 29); Whybray (1998:71); Good (1990:80); Reichert (1960:56); etc.

vengeful Samson is the Bible's sinful exception, rather than its rule; or, perhaps, that Samson acted in self-defense. Yet a further perusal indicates that the Hebrew prophets not only hated their enemies, but rather reveled in their suffering, finding in it a fitting justice." Indeed, Samson's schadenfreude was viewed positively, perhaps because it rectified an obvious evil.

Non-neighbouring nations

A special category of schadenfreude is that consisting of prophetic derisions of non-neighbouring nations. For instance, Isaiah's prophecy against Babylon (13:1–14:24) contains the schadenfreude observation:

How are you fallen from heaven, O Shining One, son of Dawn!// How are you felled to earth, O vanquisher of nations!// Once you thought in your heart, "I will climb to the sky; Higher than the stars of God I will set mine throne.// I will sit in the mount of assembly, On the summit of Zaphon.// I will mount the back of a cloud,// I will match the Most High."// Instead, you are brought down to Sheol,// to the bottom of the Pit// (vv. 14:12–15).

Isaiah expresses schadenfreude at the downfall of the Babylonians and their disappointment in non-attainment of the imperial aspirations that they had.

Though the schadenfreude appears here to be person-to-person (Isaiah to king of Babylon) it is actually one of a community to a community; Isaiah represents the nation of Judah and the king of Babylon represents the Babylonians. This can be sensed from vv. 13:1, 14:5–6, 10 and the expressions "ruler of nations" (14:12, חולש על-גויים), "who made realms tremble" (14:16, מרעיש ממלכות), etc. Moreover, while the schadenfreude is directed toward a known personality, there is no close personal relation between the antagonists that might affect societal cohesion, and since the two nations do not share a border there is normally little interaction between them.

Nahum concludes his book with a schadenfreude statement on the fall of Nineveh, personified by its king. He says,

No cure to your breakdown, grave [is]

אין-צֶהָה לְשִׁבְרָה נְחֻלָּה מִכָּתָד

your blow,

all who hear of you,

כל | שְׁמַעֵי שְׁמַעְדָּ תִקְעוּ כַף עָלֶיךָ

clapped hands about you,

for upon whom did not pass your

כִּי עַל־מִי לֹא־עָבְרָה רַעְתָּךְ תַּמִּיד

wickedness constantly.

The schadenfreude was overtly expressed by “clapped hands” (תִּקְעוּ כַף).²⁸ The only place in the Tanak where כַף תִּקְעוּ denotes “a gesture of triumph or approval” is Ps 47:2.²⁹ However, it is not clear from the text in Ps 47:2 what was done with the palms. Perhaps, the palm was shaped in the form of a horn and tooted. Such a toot could express triumph, glee, or derision. While the MT speaks in the singular it is obvious that the situation is that of many (כל) versus many, since the Assyrian king represents his kingdom. The schadenfreude is justified by a sense that justice was done; many nations suffered from Assyrian wickedness. As was already noted schadenfreude is often considered a reasonable and defensible pleasure when it has an obvious justification.

A number of factors combine to make schadenfreude against non-neighbouring nations acceptable. Many societies perceive outsiders, enemies and criminals beyond the “social contract” (see Portmann 2000:14). In an “us versus them” confrontation “we” are usually right and “they” are usually wrong. Thus justice is served when “they” are harmed. Moreover, harm to “them” would usually be construed as an act of the divine, which needs to be glorified. Finally, the many-versus-many situation obviates most of the social constraints for schadenfreude. This seems to make

²⁸ תִּקְעוּ, the *qal* perfect 3rd (plural) of תִּקַּע, means “they clapped, they blew, they thrust, they blasted.” The feminine noun (singular) כַף means, “hollow or flat of the hand, palm, sole of foot, pan.” In Akkadian *kappu* is “hand, pan” and *kipatu* is “hollow.”

²⁹ See Fox (1995:54). Use of כַף תִּקְעוּ in Proverbs (17:18, 22:26, 6:1), in contexts of making a solemn promise, involved thrusting a palm into the palm of another person, as in a handshake. The primary sense for תִּקַּע would seem to be “thrust”. Clapping of hands, which can express both positive and negative feelings, is described by such verbal forms as יָכַר, יִמְחָאוּ, יִסְפְּקוּ (2 Kgs 11:12, Isa 55:12, Ezek 25:6, Ps 98:8). Thus, it seems that the phrase כַף תִּקְעוּ could denote a gesture of thrusting one palm into the other akin to wringing one’s hands. It would then describe a more complex reaction, one that is a combination of dread, shock, apprehension, but also of relief. This would better fit the situation described by MT. Hearing the report of Nineveh’s fall did not bring out a simple clapping of hands in joy; it made people pensive.

schadenfreude of nation-to-nation tolerable, when the *Schaden* is inflicted on nation with which no close relations exist.

The anguished cry of the psalmist in Ps 137:8–9

O daughter of Babylon, you destroyer,	בַּת־בְּבֶל־הַשְׂדוּדָה
happy shall he be who repays you	אֲשֶׁר־יִשְׁלַם־לָךְ גְּמוּלָךְ
for what you have done to us.	שְׂגִמְלָתְךָ לָנוּ
Happy shall he be who takes and bashes	אֲשֶׁר־יִשְׂאֵחֵז וְנִפֵּץ
your children against a rock	אֶת־עַלְלֵיךְ אֶל־הַסֶּלַע

expresses hope that justice would be done, and a tit-for-tat punishment would be exacted against Babylon. The happiness would certainly contain some schadenfreude. However, in this case the schadenfreude occurs in a fantasy, where one envisions himself contributing to the *Schaden* which results in a significant good. This does not bother the psalmist. His outrage at Babylon's wanton cruelty is so intense that it dwarfs and overshadows schadenfreude considerations. In this case vengeance, rather than schadenfreude, is the dominant emotion.

Many against one

Psalm 35:15–21 gives us another glimpse on how schadenfreude was practiced. The psalmist describes how false friends quickly turn into vicious enemies, once a weakness in one was revealed. At normal times a façade of friendship and mutual concern is kept up,

15. But when I stumble, they gleefully gather;	וּבְצִלְעֵי שְׂמֵחוּ וְנֶאֱסָפוּ
Wretches gather at me, and men I don't know;	נֶאֱסָפוּ עָלַי נְכִימִים וְלֹא יָדַעְתִּי
They tear at me without end.	קָרְעוּ וְלֹא־דָמוּ
16. With impious mocking grimace	בְּחִנְפֵי לַעְגֵי מְעוּג
they gnash their teeth at me.	קָרַק עָלַי שִׁנֵּימוּ
19. Let not my deceiving enemies rejoice over me,	אֶל־יִשְׂמְחוּ־לִי אֲבִי שְׂקָר
Or those who hate me for naught wink their eyes.	שֹׂנְאֵי חֲנָם יִקְרְצוּ־עֵינַי
21. They open wide their mouth at me,	וַיִּרְחִיבוּ עָלַי פִּיהֶם

Saying, ‘Aha, aha, we have seen it!’

אָמְרוּ הָאָחָה | הָאָחָה רָאָתָה עֵינֵינוּ

In this instance the *schadenfreude* is expressed by many with regard to a single individual. The victim pleads to be justly judged by God but saved from the *schadenfreude* (Ps 35:24–25); he certainly does not like it, but still the author does not express a negative attitude towards *schadenfreude*. While *schadenfreude* of many against one was seemingly tolerated, it was a very cruel and brutal act because of its disproportionality. *Schadenfreude* resulted in a victim’s sense of disappointment in society’s failure.

Ganging-up on the incapacitated revealed ominously the predatory instincts of the gang. The psalmist highlights this aspect by repeating the word “gather” (באספו), and by noticing that even men that he does not know joined-in. A *Schaden* to a person signalled that he was not under divine protection, and therefore became a free-for-all target. The gang pulled at the victim’s clothes, made mocking grimaces, winked or rolled their eyes, grinded their teeth, and opened their mouth at him, saying the formulaic (or an equivalent) statement: “Aha, aha, we have seen it!”³⁰ *Schadenfreude* in case of many against an individual was a frightening ordeal, it was a traumatic disappointment in society’s protective and supportive functions, and a sufficient cause for the supplication “Let not my deceiving enemies rejoice over me”, but surprisingly it was not explicitly derided.

Salvific events

Schadenfreude is viewed positively, and indeed is encouraged, when God punishes the deserving wicked (Ps 68:2–3). The psalmist does not show any restraint in his description of the righteous joy (Ps 68:4), using four different words for happiness in a seven-word verse (בשמחה “with happiness”, ישישו “they will enjoy”, יעלצו “they will exult”, ישמחו “they will be happy”). In this case, too, *schadenfreude* is expressed by the many (צדיקים “righteous”) at the downfall of the many (רשעים “wicked”). Moreover, here the psalmist makes it clear that God is involved in the defeat of His

³⁰ It is possible that ולא־דָּמָו means “no blood was drawn”, and that one should read וַיִּרְהִיבוּ “and they gloated” instead of MT וַיִּרְהִיבוּ.

enemies and this involvement is obvious; the word אלהים “God” occurs in each of the verses in Ps 68:2–4.³¹ The psalm describes God’s salvific acts, His triumphant march through past history of Israel, and urges Him to take a stand in the great battle between good and evil. In this case God’s glorification and the many-to-many setting reduce the role of schadenfreude to a point of insignificant relevance. This enables schadenfreude not only to be tolerated but even to be encouraged.

A similar case is Moses’ song, which expresses schadenfreude at the defeat of the Egyptians at the Sea of Reeds (Exod 15:1–19). For instance, he gleefully juxtaposes Egyptian expectations with their fate (Exod 15:9–10), saying:

The foe said, I will pursue, I will overtake;	אָמַר אֹיֵב אֶרְדֹּף אֲשִׁיג
I will divide the spoil; My desire shall have its fill of them.	אֶחְלֶק שְׁלָל תִּמְלֶאמוּ נַפְשֵׁי
I will bare my sword, My hand shall subdue them.	אֶרְיֹק חֶרְבִי תוֹרְשֶׁמוּ יָדִי
You made Your wind blow, the sea covered them;	נִשְׁפַּת בְּרוּחְךָ כָּסְמוּ יָם
They sank like lead in the majestic waters.	צָלְלוּ כַעֲוֵפֶרֶת בַּמַּיִם אֲדִירִים

Yet, in no manner does the Tanak mark the Song of Moses with any disapproval. Indeed, a highly positive view of Moses’ song found its expression in Jewish religious ritual and Midrashic tradition. One finds in *Midrash Rabba on Exodus* (Sec. 23:8): “Said R. Yochanan: ‘The angels wanted to say their praises before the Holy, blessed be He, at that night that the Israelites crossed the sea and He did not let them. He told them: My legions are in trouble and you would sing to me? ... Once the Israelites came out of the sea, the angels wanted to precede them in singing God’s praise before Him. Said to them the Holy, blessed be He, ‘My children should be the first to

³¹ A similar sentiment is expressed by Ben Sira in 27:29. He says:

בַּפֶּחַ יִלְכְּדוּ הַשְּׂמֵחִים לְמַפְלֵת חַסִּידִים וְיִגוּן יֶאֱבָדֵם לִפְנֵי מוֹתָם
 (“in a snare would be captured those happy at disaster befalling the pious, and mourning would consume them before their death”). Indeed, Ben Sira considers it a life’s blessing to see the downfall of his enemies (cf. 25:7).

sing'.³²

It is notable that in this case Moses and all of Israel participated in the schadenfreude; the schadenfreude was of a community against an attacking army (many-to-many). The community might have felt justified in its expression of schadenfreude because it sensed that “the communal desire is as the divine will” (קול (המון כקול שדי). Moreover, the obviously miraculous nature of the event had a clear divine imprimatur, and was consequently assumed sanctioned by God. Finally, in Moses’ Song the admixture of God’s glorification with a modicum of schadenfreude dilutes its effect by measure and association.

A similar case is the Song of Deborah and Barak. It too contains a schadenfreude section (Judg 5:28–31):

Through the window peered and whined,	בַּעַד הַחַלּוֹן נִשְׁקָפָה וַתִּיבֵב
Sisera’s mother behind the lattice,	אִם סִיסְרָא בַּעַד הָאֲשָׁנָב
Why is his chariot so long in coming?	מִדּוּעַ בִּשְׁשׁ רֶכְבוֹ לְבוֹא
Why so late the clatter of his wheels?	מִדּוּעַ אַחֲרוֹ פַעֲמֵי מַרְכָּבוֹתָיו
The wisest of her ladies give answer;	חֲכָמוֹת שְׂרוֹתֶיהָ תַעֲנֶינָהּ
She, too, replies to herself:	אִף הִיא תִשָּׁב אֶמְרֶיהָ לָהּ
They are dividing the spoil they have found:	הֲלֹא יִמְצְאוּ יַחְלְקוּ שְׁלָל
A damsel or two for each man,	רַחֵם רַחֲמָתִים לְרֵאשׁ גָּבֵר
Spoil of dyed cloths for Sisera,	שְׁלַל צְבָעִים לְסִיסְרָא
Spoil of embroidered cloths,	שְׁלַל צְבָעִים רִקְמָה
A couple of embroidered cloths Round every neck as spoil.	צְבַע רַחֲמָתִים לְצוּאֲרֵי שְׁלָל

While there are indications that Jewish tradition did not wholeheartedly accept the demise of the Egyptians at the Sea of Reeds, no such sentiment was expressed with regard to the Song of Deborah and Barak.³³ The schadenfreude is focused on the

³² The Hebrew text reads:

ולא אמר ר' יוחנן בקשו המלאכים לומר שירה לפני הקב"ה באותו הלילה שעברו ישראל את הים א"ל לגינותי נתונים בצרה ואתם אומרים שירה. הה"ד ולא קרב זה אל זה כל הלילה כמ"ד (Isa 6:3) וקרא זה אל זה ואמר. וכיון שיצאו ישראל מן הים באו המלאכים להקדים שירה לפני הקב"ה אמר להם הקב"ה יקדמו בני תחלה

³³ Zedikiah son of Abraham (the Physician), שבלי הלקט (Italy, twelfth century), sec. 174.

expected loot and implicitly on the reversal of perishing in battle. Here, too, the tolerated schadenfreude is of the saved community and it addresses a single person (Sisera's mother), which was personally not known to Deborah and Barak. Current psychological research indicates that the strongest schadenfreude is experienced by observers who find *Schade* inflicted on a stranger justifiable (see Piskorz and Piskorz 2009:137–144).

It is interesting to note that Jewish tradition not only tolerated such songs as those of Moses and Deborah, which naturally included a schadenfreude section, but expected them in obviously salvific cases. We find in *bSanhedrin* 94a: “The Holy blessed be He wanted to make Hezekiah the Messiah, and Sennacherib Gog and Magog. Said the attribute of Justice to the Holy blessed be He ‘Lord of the Universe, David the King of Israel said so many songs and praises to You, yet you did not make him Messiah. Hezekiah, to whom You made all these miracles, but he did not say a song to You, would You make Messiah?’ To that He could not respond.”³⁴ Obviously, one cannot assert that Hezekiah would have included a schadenfreude section in his song of praise on the demise of 185 000 Assyrian soldiers in one night. However, Isaiah's opening statement in his message to Hezekiah, “Fair maiden Zion despises you, She mocks at you; Fair Jerusalem shakes her head at you” (Isa 19:21), makes it rather likely.

Philo (*In Fluccum*, §121) tells of a salvific prayer in which the Jews express their gratitude by saying: “We are not delighted, O Master, at the punishment of our enemy, being taught by the sacred laws to submit to all the vicissitudes of human life, but we

Zedikiah notes: והלא יום ראשון ולילו. ולמה? שמואל בן אבא אמר בנפול אויבך אל תשמח! לפי שנשבעו בו המצריים וכן אתה מוצא כל ז' ימי החג אנו גומרים את ההלל אבל בפסח אין אנו גומרים את ההלל (“For seven days of the holiday we say the prayer of Hallel but not so on Passover where we say it only on the first day. Why? Said Shmuel the son of Abba: Because then the Egyptians drowned and ‘one should not rejoice at the fall of his enemy’”).

³⁴ The Hebrew text reads:

ביקש הקדוש ברוך הוא לעשות חזקיהו משיח, וסנחריב גוג ומגוג. אמרה מידת הדין לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא: דוד מלך ישראל שאמר כמה שירות ותשבחות לפניך לא עשיתו משיח חזקיהו שעשית לו כל הנסים הללו ולא אמר שירה לפניך - תעשהו משיח? לכך נסתתם.

justly give thanks to thee, who has had mercy and compassion upon us, and who has thus relieved our continual and incessant oppressions” (cf. Yonge 1993:735b). It is not, however, clear to which specific “sacred laws” he refers. More likely he alludes to traditional customs. Horst (2006:110–111) notes “These are pious, perhaps all too pious words from the pen of Philo, for the whole second part of the book seems to be nothing else than a glaring demonstration of ‘Schadenfreude’ on his part” (see also Nikiprowetzky 1968:7–19).

CONCLUSION

There is no commandment in the Torah forbidding schadenfreude. Indeed, no verse in the Torah deals directly with schadenfreude. The negative sentiments toward aspects of schadenfreude in person-to-person situations, which are expressed in the Tanak, might have been part of the ancient Near East fabric of societal mores. The Jewish people as part of the Near East cultural world have authentic roots in the cultural background common to the entire region (Gordis 1971:74). This shared heritage is reflected in the Wisdom literature of the Tanak and became part of the Jewish moral tradition. The Tanak, a part of the Torah, strongly censures schadenfreude in one-to-one personal interactions and considers it to be improper and punishable by God.

Schadenfreude of nation A at a major national calamity happening to a neighbouring nation B is forbidden, and if it occurs, would be punished by God. In particular, when the *Schaden* is of existential proportions schadenfreude of kin-nations or neighbouring nations is bitterly resented and considered improper. It seems as though in this case the nation-to-nation relation is reduced to a one-to-one relation because it is in essence a relation between two neighbours. Schadenfreude against non-neighbouring nations is, however, acceptable.

Schadenfreude is also tolerated in salvific events, where they are overshadowed by glorification of the divine intervention. In these cases descriptions of God’s majestic acts and the many-to-many setting reduce the role of schadenfreude to a point of insignificant relevance. Schadenfreude was viewed positively, when it rectified an

obvious evil. When divine justice was done and wickedness was eradicated schadenfreude was not only tolerated but even encouraged. In this case it was in a sense a celebration of justice that triumphed. Schadenfreude is also acceptable when it has a clear educational intent.

It seems that the Tanak forbids schadenfreude in interpersonal one-to-one relations; with some exceptions, it tolerates it in many-to-many situations, and accepts it in salvific cases. Modern psychology is still undecided whether schadenfreude is a wicked or healthy emotional reaction. Van Dijk and Ouwerkerk (2014:5) say: “Concerning this moral verdict, it seems that the jury is still out. Playing devil’s advocate, we argue that whether or not schadenfreude should be regarded as a vice depends on the reason why people enjoy another’s misfortune.” This seems to be also the attitude of the Tanak. Indeed, it is likely that over time the Tanak shaped and formed Western civilisation’s attitude toward schadenfreude.

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