

Emor

“There came out among the Israelites one whose mother was Israelite and whose father was Egyptian. And a fight broke out in the camp between that half-Israelite and a certain Israelite. The son of the Israelite woman pronounced the Name in blasphemy, and he was brought to Moshe—now his mother’s name was Shelomith, daughter of Dibri of the tribe of Dan...”
(Leviticus 24:10-11)

In *Parshas Emor*, we read the account of the blasphemer who publicly defamed God’s sacred Name. The narrative stands out for several reasons. Why does the Torah detail the blasphemer’s lineage so carefully? What is the significance of the circumstances which led to his infamous deed--his public dispute with an unnamed Israelite man? Why were foolish words of blasphemy sufficient to require stoning at the hand of the entire nation; and conversely, if they were, why were the people unsure of how to treat him until they received a direct commandment from God to stone him?

It seems evident that the mention of the blasphemer’s paternity is intended to highlight his status as an outcast, an excluded and shunned man in limbo. Indeed, the *Midrash Rabbah* (32:3) states: *‘And the son of an Israelite woman went out’*: From whence did he go out?... R. Chiya taught: He removed himself (lit. *went out*) from the matter of lineage. For he had arrived intending to pitch his tent in the encampment of [the tribe of] Dan. They said to him, ‘What do you intend by pitching your tent in the encampment of Dan?’ He said to them, ‘I am of the daughters of Dan.’ They said to him, ‘It is written: “Each man by his banner, according to the sign of their fathers’ houses,” and not their mother’s houses.’ He entered the court of Moshe and exited having lost his case; [subsequently,] he stood up and blasphemed.

This, then, was the nature of the dispute, and the subject of the frantic blasphemy. The *midrash*, however, raises more questions than it answers. For it is evident that the blasphemer was held liable for his own shunning: *“He removed himself from the matter of lineage.”* Why is this so? Furthermore: it seems that his anger should have been directed against Moshe and his court. Why was his reaction to Moshe’s ruling against him to rage against God?

It seems that the blasphemer accepted Moshe's authority, but could not accept the dominion of God. Perhaps this point is best illustrated with another *midrash* (ibid. 32:11).

Another explanation: '*And the son of an Israelite woman went out*': This is what is written (Ecclesiastes 4:1), '*I further observed all the oppression*'--Daniel the Tailor explained the verse in reference to *mamzerim*--'*and behold, the tears of the oppressed*'--the fathers of these [*mamzerim*] were sinners. Why are these unfortunates held liable? His father had forbidden sexual relations. How did [the son] sin, and why is he liable?--'*and there is none to comfort them*'--rather--'*and the power of their oppressors*'--by the power of the Great Sanhedrin of Israel, which acts upon them by dint of the verse (Deuteronomy 23:3): '*No mamzer shall join the congregation of God.*'--'and there is none to comfort them.' The Holy One, Blessed be He, says: 'It falls upon me to comfort them, for in this world they are sullied, but in the next world...they are all pure gold.'

At first glance, it is not entirely clear what the connection to our *parsha* is. However, when taken in context, the cryptic words of the *midrash* fall into place. The mysterious Daniel the Tailor gives poetic voice to the age-old dilemma of theodicy. How can it be that innocent children born illegitimately must suffer for the sins of their fathers? He even goes so far as to point an accusing finger at the Sanhedrin themselves! This can be understood as a reference to "the court of Moshe" mentioned earlier. But God Himself, omniscient above all, says that the suffering of the innocent is only temporary, and some greater, mysterious purpose of ultimate good awaits them in the World to Come.

This, then, was the grave sin of the blasphemer. He accepted Moshe's authority, he accepted the ruling of his court as binding. What he could not reconcile himself to was the unfairness of his existence, his suffering seemingly unrelated to his own actions. He cursed God for having placed him in a position over which he had no control, in which he had no recourse to resolve his unfortunate dilemma. By doing this, he demonstrated his lack of faith in the central tenets of Judaism: God's ultimate righteousness, and the World to Come. This was a sin of unfathomable gravity. He was held responsible for this ugly highlighting of his unfortunate plight: "*He removed himself from the matter of lineage.*"

The indecision of the people in condemning him to death illustrates the poignancy of the first part of

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the words of Daniel the Tailor, giving voice to the plight of all who suffer in this world. How indeed can one refrain from bursting out in rage against the injustice of it all? God's answer, mandating seemingly cruel punishment, is in truth the expression of the second half of the *midrash*: While in this fleeting existence suffering is painful, in the ultimate culmination of the Divine plan all will be made right. Faith in this precept is so essential to Judaism that its public repudiation can only result in death.

“For after all, the best thing one can do when it is raining is let it rain.”

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Shabbat Shalom

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