

דבר אחר | A Different Perspective

An Illustration of *Kiddush Levanah*

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Seder Birkat Hamazon (Mannheim, 1736)
Scribe: Simhah Pihem
ms. 8230

The middle of this week's parashah (Lev. 23) details the cycle of the Jewish holidays. Each holiday is listed according to its month and its day. The months of the Hebrew calendar are strictly lunar, from new moon to new moon. *Kiddush Levanah*, a selection of prayers in honor of the new moon, is traditionally recited at the end of the first or second shabbat of each month.

The charming watercolor illustration of *Kiddush Levanah* above accompanies the text for this short service. It was included in an 18th century handwritten and hand-painted *Seder Birkat Hamazon* (or “*bentsher*,” as we often refer to these prayer booklets today); this decorated volume was created for a woman named Bella from Frankfurt. The inclusion of this monthly prayer in this short compendium along with the daily prayers of the Grace after Meals and the Shema recited at bedtime speaks to a symbolic significance of the moon: it waxes and wanes mirroring the fate of the Jewish nation throughout history.

Through *Kiddush Levanah*, as with reciting this chapter of parashat Emor, we reaffirm our commitment to sanctifying time and celebrating the Jewish holidays that are determined by the lunar calendar.

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Parashat Emor 5776

פרשת אמר תשע"ו



The Blasphemer's Twin

Rabbi Tim Daniel Bernard, Director of Digital Learning and Engagement, JTS

This week's parashah ends with a sin:

וַיִּקְבַּ בֶּן-הָאִשָּׁה הַיִּשְׂרָאֵלִית אֶת-הַשֵּׁם וַיִּקְלַל.

The son of the Israelite woman pronounced the name [of God] and cursed. (Lev. 24:11)

Maybe we don't need to overthink why a law code seen as given by God would determine that cursing God is problematic, but how severe a crime is this? Evidently, Moses was uncertain: the culprit was detained while Moses checked in with God (Lev. 24:12). Perhaps the negative consequence of this act seems unclear. After all, what harm can possibly come to God through human words?

In Lev. 24:14, those who *hear* the blasphemy lay their hands on the blasphemer before he is stoned to death, the same way that the high priest (in Lev. 16:21) transfers the community's sins to the scapegoat. This implies that they have been implicated in this sin just by hearing it and must take action to absolve themselves.

With *leshon hara* (speaking badly of another person)—another verbal sin—we usually focus on the relationship between the speaker and the ostensible victim, the one who was spoken about. But what about those who were told the rumor? Every time they see the person who was spoken badly of, they remember what they were told about her; they can't shake it, however hard they try. *What they heard can never be unheard.*

If someone misspeaks during prayer, such as forgetting to substitute the special ending of the third blessing of the *Amidah* for the High Holiday period, that person has a short window to “undo” this error; if he misses this opportunity, he has to go back to the beginning of the *Amidah*. The length of the opportunity to undo the error is specified in the Talmud as *tokh kedei dibur*, the amount of time it takes to say

“*Shalom, rabi*” (“Greetings, my master”)—around three seconds. And this applies for nearly every case in Jewish law when you want to take back what you said:

The law is that replacement words said within *tokh kedei dibur* are taken as replacing the original words, unless the original words were blasphemy, idol worship, betrothal, or divorce. (BT Nedarim 87a)

That is to say, some words are simply so powerful that they cannot be taken back.

Returning to our parashah, what is the effect of the blasphemous utterance on the listeners? To answer that we need to know what we mean by blasphemy. Our verses themselves make clear that two distinct elements are required: (1) using the divine name, and (2) cursing God—that is, calling for something bad to befall God (“pronounced the name and cursed” [Lev. 24:11]). This is not a statement of heresy (denying a tenet of faith, or casting aspersions on the true religion or its leaders), but an attack aimed directly at God. Biblical scholar Baruch Schwartz suggests that the essence of the crime is that the name of God is considered a sacred object, and this is a misuse of that object (the *Oxford Jewish Study Bible*, 1st ed. 268). In keeping with the themes of Leviticus, this is a serious matter: everything has its place and its order, and the holy must be protected and kept apart from the impure.

This gives us some insight into why the crime was taken so seriously, but if misusing the holy name of God were the whole story, someone who uses the ineffable name to advertise their commercial product (“The only engine oil *Hashem* would use”), or names their pet *yud-hey-vav-hey* should suffer a similar punishment. The other element—“cursing,” or direct attack—is also required.

The Babylonian Talmud sheds light on this issue while discussing how we deal with the blasphemer’s remains. According to the Mishnah, only the bodies of blasphemers and idolaters are displayed after execution (M. Sanhedrin 6:4). But the Torah states that displaying the bodies of these executed criminals *can* cause further cursing of God, and so must last no longer than until the end of that day (Deut. 21:23).

The Talmud gives two different, almost contradictory, reasons why leaving out the body of the executed causes God to be cursed.

The first explanation is that passersby will say, “Oh, look, there’s the person who said ‘_____!’” (BT Sanhedrin 45b). This suggests that the problem with

blasphemy is what it does to the relationship between people and God: if people are constantly reminding themselves that God can be insulted by humans, how can they continue to understand God as transcendent, almighty, the apex of holiness? Just as hearing of the misdeeds of one’s neighbor can affect how you think about them forever, so, too, recounting the crime of blasphemy conjures up the notion that God is less than supreme.

The second explanation, found just one page later, is related by way of a parable:

תניא אומר ר"מ משלו משל למה הדבר דומה לשני אחים
תאומים בעיר אחת אחד מינוהו מלך ואחד יצא לליסטיות
צוה המלך ותלאוהו כל הרואה אותו אומר המלך תלוי צוה
המלך והורידוהו:

It is taught: Rabbi Meir says, “They told a parable: What is this matter analogous to? To two twin brothers in a city. One of them was the king, and the other became a bandit. The king ordered that his twin be hanged. All who saw the hanged one said, ‘The king was hanged!’ So the king ordered that he be taken down.” (BT Sanh. 46b)

This parable’s use of “twins” to describe the king (= God) and the brigand (= our blasphemer) is striking. Not just lookalikes, not just siblings, but twins. It is no mere coincidence that these two are confused by the onlookers: they are identical in appearance, in lineage, even in their DNA. The lesson of the parable seems to be that divinity and humanity are inextricably connected, in such a way that they are destined to a shared dignity: where one lacks it, the other cannot retain it.

Almost paradoxically, then, we find that the crime of blasphemy is taken so seriously because to curse God is to curse all of humanity, including the blasphemer. If God can be cursed, those who hear the blasphemy will think, What hope is there for all of us, who are twinned with God?

Quite rightly, we are sometimes entreated to create a world where human dignity is paramount because we are made in the image of God. The law of the blasphemer emphasizes a slightly different side of that same challenge: to recognize that God’s dignity is of a piece with our own dignity, and insulting either one is always an offense against the other.