

Shelah Lekha 5781

שלח-לך תשפ"א



Contempt for God's Word?

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Numbers chapter 15, having set forth instructions for how to atone for unintentional sins, next turns its attention to deliberate transgressions (30–31):

But the person who transgresses with a high hand, whether native or sojourner—he reviles the Lord, and that person shall be cut off from the midst of his people. For he has shown contempt for the word of the Lord [*devar adonai bazah*], and God's commandment he has violated. That person shall surely be cut off, his crime is upon him.

In the biblical context, “has shown contempt for the word of the Lord” clearly means intentionally and brazenly violating one of God's commands. But rather typically, the rabbinic tradition attributes several different meanings to the phrase (BT Sanhedrin 99a). Here are among the alternatives offered for what constitutes “contempt for God's word”:

- Saying “There is no torah [i.e. instruction] from Heaven”
- Epicureanism [for the Rabbis, one who denies divine providence]
- One who exposes [presumably, to public derision] certain facets of the Torah
- [Rabbi Meir's view]: One who studies Torah but does not teach it to others
- [Rabbi Nehorai's view]: One who has the time and ability to delve into Torah study but does not do so
- [Rabbi Ishmael's view]: One who engages in idolatry

But the definition of “contempt for God's word” that is most far-reaching, and thus most raises the eyebrows, is this:

An alternative teaching [*tanya ideikh*]: Contempt for God's word applies even to one who concedes that the whole Torah comes from Heaven, but makes an exception for one particular verse of the Torah, saying

that the Holy One did not pronounce that one verse, but rather Moses did so on his own. Moreover, even one who makes no exception for any of the verses in the Torah but does make exception for one or another grammatical inference, or logical deduction, or *gezerah shavah*,¹ saying that they are of human origin—such a person has shown contempt for God's word.

This expresses a stunningly maximalist and far-reaching point of view that, although it is brought here as “another teaching,” became all too mainstream in Jewish thought through the ages, to our own day. The idea is this: What makes inferences and deductions valid is not that they are the products of sound human reasoning, but rather because they have been transmitted to us by authoritative texts or teachers. This is a form of what is called fideism, the doctrine that faith is far more the guarantor of ultimate truth than is human reason.

A particularly crisp example of this is found in a “confession” by the late Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, who was the head of the Har Etzion Yeshiva in Gush Etzion. In it, he recalls how in his teenage years certain biblical passages troubled him greatly because they seemed so clearly unethical. He specifically mentions the command to annihilate every last Amalekite indiscriminately. But then he remembered something about the venerated Rabbi Chaim of Brisk. It was said that women who gave birth to unwanted children knew that they could leave those children at night on the doorstep of Reb Chaim's house, and that they would be taken in and cared for. Lichtenstein wrote:

I then recalled having recently read that Rabbi Chaim Brisker would awaken nightly to see if someone hadn't placed a foundling at his doorstep. I knew that I slept quite soundly [i.e., not worrying about the woes of others], and I concluded that if such a paragon of *hesed*

¹ An inference that starts with different occurrences of the same word, and then transfers contextual details from one occurrence to another.

The standard rabbinic view reflected here is that these all go back to Sinai and cannot be initiated on one's own authority.

coped with these laws [e.g., the annihilation of the Amalekite children], evidently the source of my anxiety did not lie in my greater sensitivity but in my weaker faith. And I set myself to enhancing it.

Build faith, and trust in it, rather than in the sensitivity born of one's reasoning. But in sharp contrast to this, consider a remarkable contemporary midrash that takes issue with the rabbinic interpretation of a biblical law that in its own way sacrifices children on the altar of religious piety and fealty. It is the law of *mamzerut*, a biblical injunction that, according to rabbinic understanding, stigmatizes for life as ineligible for marriage a child whose conception was the result of a severe sexual infraction by its parents. What makes this midrash especially remarkable is that it was written by an Orthodox woman, Rivkah Lubitch, who has standing in rabbinic courts in Israel to advocate for women's rights.²

There are five who weep over *mamzerim*, and those tears make their way to God's Throne of Glory. They are:

- The *mamzer* whose status is known to all
- The *mamzer* who alone is aware of his *mamzerut*
- The woman who knows that her child is a *mamzer*
- The father who cannot make himself known to his own child as his father, without revealing a status that the child does not know
- The woman who aborted her fetus because she knew it would be born a *mamzer*

And some add a sixth who weeps: that very fetus that was never born, who cries out each day and says, "Mommy, mommy, why did you not give birth to me?"

Tanot³ was asked this question: What does God do when a *mamzer* is born and the community brands him or her for life—and for subsequent generations—as such? And she answered as follows: "At such moments, God cries out with a loud wailing: 'These things you are doing in My name never entered My mind; they never entered My mind.'"⁴

² Lubitch is the daughter of Professor Charles Liebman z"l, a Visiting Professor at JTS. The midrash was published in *Dirshuni*, Vol 2 (Yediot, 2018)

³ Tanot is the imagined spirit of Jephthah's daughter, who lost her

Noteworthy here is that by saying that the biblical verse, or even just the rabbinic interpretation of it "never entered God's mind," the condemnation of the "alternative teaching" must inexorably follow: it is contempt for God's word!

Perhaps the strongest contrast, however, to the "alternative teaching" and to Lichtenstein's fideism appears in a brief story that Martin Buber told about a conversation he had with a deeply observant Jew. They were discussing the story of the prophet Samuel telling King Saul that he has lost God's favor for not having completely annihilated Amalek. Buber said that he was unable to accept this as a message from God. His interlocutor challenged him with a fiery glance and said "What do you believe then?" And Buber said "I believe that Samuel has misunderstood God." And then the story continues in this perhaps unexpected way:

The angry countenance opposite me became transformed, as if a hand had passed over it, soothing it . . . "Well," said the man with a positively gentle, tender clarity, "I think so too." ("Autobiographical Fragments," *The Philosophy of Martin Buber*)

Portrayed here is a man who was tortured by two beliefs: (i) that it was his religious duty to believe that everything in scripture was the word of God, and (ii) that Saul received an unfair punishment for having shown mercy and not cruelty. But then came Buber's suggestion that one did not have to believe that God commanded cruelty; instead, consider that we humans can misunderstand God. That explains why the strain in the face of Buber's acquaintance became relaxed and at ease. God was "off the hook" and did not have to be thought of as making unethical demands.

One can follow the "alternative teaching" and ascribe every passage—even those that offend our moral intuitions—to the divine will, or we can recognize that fallible humans writing of God may mistake the intentions of the God of goodness and mercy. And so, the stark question poses itself: Which of these is truly to invite contempt for God's word?

life because of her father's blind insistence on fulfilling a rash and ill-conceived vow.

⁴ In Jeremiah 19:5, God uses these exact words to denounce religious piety that entails the sacrificing of children.