



Where Do Sinners Come From?

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In Parashat Emor, we encounter the story of the blasphemer:

ויקרא כד:י-יא, יג-יד

¹⁰וַיֵּצֵא בֶן אִשָּׁה יִשְׂרָאֵלִית וְהוּא בֶן אִישׁ מִצְרִי בְּתוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֵּנָצוּ בַּמִּחָנֶה בֶּן הַיִּשְׂרָאֵלִית וְאִישׁ הַיִּשְׂרָאֵלִי:
¹¹וַיִּקְבּוּ בֶן הָאִשָּׁה הַיִּשְׂרָאֵלִית אֶת הַשֵּׁם וַיִּקְלַל וַיְבִיאוּ אוֹתוֹ אֶל מֹשֶׁה וְשֵׁם אִמּוֹ שְׁלֹמִית בֵּת דִּבְרִי לַמָּטָה דָּן: ...
¹³וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: ¹⁴הוֹצֵא אֶת הַמְקַלֵּל אֶל מִחוּץ לַמִּחָנֶה וְסָמְכוּ כָל הַשָּׁמְעִים אֶת יְדֵיהֶם עַל רֹאשׁוֹ
וְרָגְמוּ אוֹתוֹ כָּל הָעֵדָה:

Leviticus 24:10-11,13-14

¹⁰The son of an Israelite woman, whose father was an Egyptian, went out among the Israelites; and the Israelite woman's son and an Israelite man fought in the camp. ¹¹The Israelite woman's son pronounced the Name [of God] and cursed; and they brought him to Moshe. His mother's name was Shlomit, daughter of Divri, of the tribe of Dan.... ¹³God spoke to Moshe, saying, ¹⁴"Take the blasphemer outside the camp; and let all who were within hearing lean their hands upon his head, and let the whole community stone him."

This blasphemer undermines, degrades, and treats with levity the very foundation of the religious system—the root of faith and the bedrock of the world. Yet various *midrashim*, in



their characteristic fashion, are not satisfied with a dry, factual account. They ask one simple, even simplistic, question. The opening verses of the story describe: “And he went out... and he cursed.” Midrash Vayikra Rabbah wonders: “מֵהֵיכָן יָצָא - From where did he emerge?” This question reflects the midrashic understanding that sin does not occur in a vacuum; every action has a context, and every outburst has a narrative surrounding it.

In Vayikra Rabbah 32, three different answers are offered to the question “From where did he emerge?” These answers suggest various ways for us to understand the blasphemer, to understand the nature of a transgressor in general, and to reflect on our own responsibility toward sinners and those who stray within our society.

I. Leaving the world

ויקרא רבה לב:ג

רבי לוי אמר יצא מעולמו, כמה דאיתא אמר (שמואל א יז, ד): וַיֵּצֵא אִישׁ הַבְּנִיִּים.

Vayikra Rabbah 32:3

R. Levi said: “He went out from his world,” just as it is said, “And a champion went out” (1 Samuel 17:4).

R. Levi draws a parallel between the blasphemer and Goliath, who is depicted in the biblical verses as a Philistine warrior who curses God (see 1 Samuel 17). The curse represents a total, threatening, and degrading assault on the foundational faith of society. R. Levi understands the “going out” as an indicator of grave consequences the act of cursing holds. For one who commits such a transgression, the future is curtailed; it is even possible that no future remains for them at all, neither in this world nor in the World to Come. This offers a profound insight into the destructive power of the curse—and perhaps of transgression in general.

While the curse aims to wound its target, it effectively hollows out the curser themselves, stripping them of life in its fullest sense. Sin, in this light, is oblivion.

II. Leaving the previous verses

רבי ברכיה אמר מפךשה של מעלן יצא, אמר קתיב (ויקרא כד, ה): ולקחת סלת ואפית אתה, דרכו של מלך להיות אוכל פת חמה, שמה צוננת?

R. Berekhiah said: He went out from the preceding section. He said, “It is written, ‘And you shall take choice flour and bake it’ (Leviticus 24:5). Is it the way of a king to eat fresh, warm bread, or perhaps cold bread?”

R. Berekhiah’s starting point is the Torah text itself. He suggests that the “going out” described in the verses refers to a departure from the immediately preceding passage, which discusses the showbread (*lehem ha-panim*). This bread was baked on Friday but remained on the table for a full week, only to be eaten by the priests nine days later. The blasphemer mocks this commandment, ridiculing the ritual and questioning the way the system honors God as an act of desecration. “What king,” he asks, “would ever eat old, cold bread?” His disdain for this specific religious practice (the arrangement of the showbread) rapidly devolves into contempt for the Source of authority. According to R. Berekhiah, this illustrates how devaluing a seemingly minor detail of religious life can trigger a total moral and spiritual collapse.

III. Leaving genealogy

תני רבי חייא מפרשת יחסיין יצא, שבא לטע אהלו במחנה דן, אמרו לו מה לך לטע אהלך במחנה דן, אמר להם מבנות דן אני, אמרו לו קתיב (במדבר ב, ב): איש על דגלו באות לבית אבתם ולא לבית אמותם, נכנס לבית דינו של משה ויצא מחיב, עמד וגדף.



R. Hiyya taught: He went out from the section dealing with genealogy.¹ For he came to pitch his tent in the camp of Dan, but they said to him, “What right do you have to pitch your tent in the camp of Dan?” He replied, “I am descended from the daughters of Dan.” They told him, “It is written, ‘The Israelites shall camp each [household] with its standard, under the banners of their father’s house’ (Numbers 2:2)—and not their mother’s house.” He entered the court of Moshe and emerged with an unfavorable ruling; then he stood up and blasphemed.

This *midrash* offers a jarring explanation for the blasphemer’s “going out”: it was an act of expulsion. The blasphemer is a man caught in a housing-identity crisis. He seeks to belong to the tribe of Dan, his mother’s tribe, yet the law dictates that tribal identity is determined solely by the father. As the son of an Egyptian man, he is left without an inheritance, without a banner, and without a place to call home. In his distress, he turns to the legal system—to Moshe himself—but the answer he receives is devastating: he “emerged liable.” He is told that he does not belong and has no place, camp, or tribe. The midrashic narrative portrays his outburst as the direct result of this judicial rejection: “He stood up and blasphemed.”

This *midrash* invites us to view the blasphemer not as someone who is simply malicious, but as an individual pushed to the brink by structural injustice. His curse is not merely a religious provocation; it is the desperate cry of someone the community has cast out. This *midrash* forces us to confront difficult questions: Are there situations where strict adherence to the law produces a rejection of certain people? Are we, as a society, responsible for the curses uttered by those who have no place to pitch their tents? Ultimately, the *midrash* highlights a grave danger: when a religious community acts in a way that fosters injustice, the inevitable result is the profanation of God’s Name (*hillul Hashem*).

¹ It is not totally clear what this “section dealing with genealogy” refers to. The parallel version of this *midrash* in the earlier Sifra (Emor *parashah* 14 *ot* 1) reads “He went out from the court of Moshe.” (“R. Hiyya taught” is Vayikra Rabbah’s unique way of citing traditions from the Sifra.)



IV. Leaving Egypt

The *midrash* in Vayikra Rabbah goes even further, uncovering a narrative of profound trauma at the very core of the blasphemer's existence:

ויקרא רבה לב:ד

וְהוּא בֶן אִישׁ מִצְרִי (ויקרא כד, י) ... חַד זְמַן קָדָם נִגְשׁ גִּבִּי שׁוֹטֵר אָמַר לוֹ זֵיל כְּנוֹשׁ לִי חֲבוּרְתָּהּ, כִּיּוֹן שְׁנַכְנֹס שְׁחָקָהּ לוֹ אֲשֶׁתּוֹ ... וְהָיָה מַחֲי לִיָּה כָּל הַהוּא יוֹמָא ... מִתְכַּנֵּן בְּעֵי לְמַקְטִילָהּ.
בְּאוֹתָהּ שְׁעָה הִצִּיצָה רוּחַ הַקֹּדֶשׁ בְּמִשְׁחָה, הִדָּא הוּא דְכָתִיב (שמות ב, יב): וַיִּפֹּן כֹּה וְכֹה, מֵהוּ כֹה וְכֹה, אֶלָּא רָאָה מָה עָשָׂה לוֹ בְּבִית וּבִשְׂדֵה, אָמַר לוֹ לֹא דִּיּוֹ שְׁקָלְקֵל עִם אֲשֶׁתּוֹ אֶלָּא שְׁהוּא מִבְּקֵשׁ לְהַרְגוֹ, מִיָּד (שמות ב, יב): וַיֵּרָא כִּי אִין אִישׁ.

Vayikra Rabbah 32:4

“And he was the son of an Egyptian man” (Leviticus 24:10).... Once, an [Egyptian] taskmaster approached an [Israelite] officer and said to him, “Go and gather your work group.” [When he (= the husband) left,] he (= the Egyptian) entered and violated his wife.... [The Egyptian] then beat the husband all that day... intending to kill him. At that moment, the Holy Spirit shone upon Moshe, as it is written: “He turned this way and that” (Exodus 2:12). What is “this way and that”? It means he saw what the Egyptian had done to the man in the house and what he was doing to him in the field. Moshe said: “Is it not enough that he violated his wife, but now he seeks to kill him as well?” Immediately, “He saw that there was no man [and he struck the Egyptian and hid him in the sand]” (2:12).

The biblical text notes that the blasphemer was the “son of an Egyptian man.” The *midrash* identifies this man as the very taskmaster who beat the Hebrew slave in Egypt—the same man Moshe killed. According to this tradition, the blasphemer was conceived through the rape of Shlomit bat Divri, of the tribe of Dan, after the taskmaster tricked her husband into leaving the home. The blasphemer, therefore, is the living embodiment of violence, exploitation, and oppression. He carries the physical and psychological scars of the Egyptian bondage within

his very identity.

When we connect this *midrash* to the previous one, a tragic picture emerges. The blasphemer “goes out” to seek a place for himself—first within the tribe of Dan (his mother’s family) and then in the court of Moshe. When he goes out to blaspheme, he is voicing an entire history of injustice that has never been recognized or repaired: The physical and mental torture of the Egyptian exile, the plight of those without legal status or protection and the violence of rape and the conspiracy of silence that often surrounds it.²

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According to Vayikra Rabbah, the story of the blasphemer teaches us a profound lesson regarding crime and punishment, the nature of transgression, our collective social responsibility, and the efficacy of punishment in general—and the death penalty in particular. When we examine the sinners around us—or even our own personal failures—the *midrash* calls us to look beyond the mere label of the sin. We are challenged to ask: From where did this act “go out”? What is its context? Only then can we identify and truly understand the meaning of the sin, as well as where the responsibility for its consequences truly lies.

The blasphemer is punished; the Torah does not waive his personal accountability. Yet through the lens of the *midrash*, the Torah also places a burden of responsibility upon us—to examine the narrative, to recognize the underlying injustice, and to remember that behind the “blasphemer” may stand a person who searched for a place within his own community and found none.

² There is a striking irony in Moshe’s involvement. Moshe, who killed the Egyptian father in that ancient story of rescue, now finds himself standing before the son of that same man. While Moshe’s act of killing the taskmaster ended a specific moment of violence, it did not end the cycle of trauma. The *midrash* questions the ultimate value of capital punishment as a solution to deep-seated social and historical wrongs.

