

I want to give a trigger warning, before I talk. I'll be discussing an episode in this week's Torah reading deals with violence, and with the commentaries I'll be studying, sexual assault as well. If that is not something you want to deal with on Shabbat, I respect that, and do what you need to do to take care of yourself.

First, some context: This week's parashah, Emor, largely deals with the taboos and rituals of the priestly clan, how they offer sacrifices, which sacrifices they eat, and who gets to eat them. It then moves on to discuss the chaggim, the major holidays, and how those holy times are to be observed.

It then finishes off with a surprisingly narrative anecdote, the first since the death of Aaron's sons back in Parashat Shmini. Chapter 24, verse 10 reads: Then a son of an Israelite woman and of an Egyptian man went out among the Israelites, then a fight broke out between this son of an Israelite woman and another Israelite man. The son of the Israelite woman pronounced the divine name in blasphemy, and was brought before Moses – his mother was Shelomit bat Dibri of the tribe of Dan – and he was placed in custody until a decision should be made by Hashem.”

The text goes on, detailing the punishment for the man – stoning at the hands of the entire community, and further instructions about punishments for misdeed. Moses describes the punishment to the people, and they enact the punishment, and there the parashah ends.

There are so many questions that this text raises. First of all, in scholarly terms, it is what would be called a complete pericope – a unit of text whose narrative is so self-contained that it seems to have nothing to do with its context.

The Torah goes on with the next parashah with nary a backward look at this incident, and it practically interrupts the holiness instructions in the rest of the parashah, which, as I mentioned, is not at all narrative. So why here?

Fifteen century Spanish scholar Yitzhak Karo wrote that the severity of the crime of the blasphemer comes from the context. He writes that the whole parashah is concerned with commandments of holiness, and that the blasphemer comes in the wake of these commandments to repudiate not only those laws, but the very idea of holiness.

But what might make a person so nihilistic? Though the commentators don't ask the question in exactly those terms, (as indeed, it would be anachronistic if they had!), they are clearly troubled by the same question.

In fact, several centuries before Yitzhak Karo made his point about the blasphemer's rejection of holiness, the French sage Rashi, writing in the 11th century, offered what remains an astounding drash to identify the unnamed blasphemer. When the text describes the man as the son of an Israelite woman and an Egyptian man, Rashi comments sparsely, "it was the Egyptian that Moshe had killed."

Remember way back in Exodus, Moshe's turning point? He is a prince of Pharaoh's palace, raised by Pharaoh's own daughter, but when he sees an Egyptian taskmaster beating a Hebrew slave, he kills the Egyptian and runs away. *That* Egyptian task master, writes Rashi, is the father of the one who will go on to blaspheme the name of God.

Not only that, but Rashi offers a further comment on the fight and the blasphemy. “. . .although his father was an Egyptian, he had gone to pitch his tent in the camp of the tribe of Dan to whom his mother belonged. They said to him, “What right do you have to be here? . . . He thereupon went in to the judicial court of Moses to have the matter decided and came forth (לצד) declared to be in the wrong. He then stood up and blasphemed.”

Okay. . . Let’s unpack this. Whereas the plain text offers us perhaps an anonymous sullen teenage-type rebellion, Rashi’s commentary offers a context that makes the story both richer and more troubling.

The blasphemer becomes, with Rashi’s rendering, a character who is suffering from epigenetic trauma in multiple senses – first there is the hint that he might be the product of sexual violence, as it’s hard to imagine a relationship of consent between an Egyptian overseer and a Hebrew slave. Several other commentators more explicitly affirm that coercion was involved.

And then, as violent a character as his father was, his father is dead at the hands of Moses, the leader of the people with whom he has thrown in his lot. Or attempted to throw in his lot. For as the last midrash I quoted suggest, his mother’s people reject him, and Moses backs them, rather than admonishing them to welcome him.

Violence compounds violence, and at a certain point, there is no going back. The blasphemer is not the first and will not be the last to be a victim to intergenerational cycles of violence.

Perhaps his fate was written in the very act of his non-consensual conception. Perhaps it was written when Moses killed his father.

But I don't think Torah or our commentators actually want to suggest that. The origin stories of many noble biblical characters are just as icky, and yet they overcome their origins and arrive at different moral places. By the commentators' own accounts, this son of Shelomit bat Dibri of the tribe of Dan had in fact chosen to ally himself with the Israelite people, and was seeking to establish his place among his mother's tribe.

How differently might the story have turned out, had they been willing to welcome him, to literally let him pitch his tent among them? How differently, had Moshe been willing to take up his case? But they didn't, and by fleshing out the story in this way, Rashi cautions us to understand that where there is a lapse in an individual's holy behavior, we might look at the larger communal context. What use has a blasphemer for holiness when the very structures of holiness are in essence arrayed against him?

And so, with that nihilistic posture, the unnamed rejected child of the tribe of Dan commits an act so dangerous to society – as understood by that society – that redemption is impossible, and the offender must be removed from society for everyone's safety. Horrifying, yes, when we read it in the Bible. But as I discussed regarding Parashat Tazria-Metzora, sometimes it's useful to understand what horrifies us most in Torah as a mirror to our own society; descriptive rather than prescriptive. The blasphemer may have been the first, but certainly won't be the last person to die because it is easier to cast the problem as one of a deviant individual than it is to look at the moral failings of a collective that allows people to slip through the cracks.

And so Emor finishes with that jarring note. We can strive for holiness, but a community is only as holy as the behavior of all of its members. And when all of its members aren't behaving in holy ways, we have a choice – we can imagine that the problem is just with that person, or we can examine how our whole collective may be implicated. One of those choices is more comfortable, and it's the one we make far more often. But it is not inevitable. Rashi reminds us that there always is a more compassionate way.

Shabbat shalom.