

Tonight's dvar Torah is going to feature one of those "uggghh" moments in Torah that we sometimes don't want to look at very closely, but then find that if we do really look at it closely, it has so much to share. So just bear with me, because it's going to be tough getting in there, but I'll get you out of there.

It's Parashat Emor, near the end of Leviticus. We describe all of the holidays and the counting of the Omer. It has the rules for maintaining priestly purity. At the end of the parashah, though, we have the episode of the *m'kallel shem Hashem* – the one who blasphemes the name of God. 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 *ben isha yisraelit* - 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 – those who heard his blasphemy should lay their hands upon his head, and then the community should take him outside the camp and stone him. There are further instructions about the consequences for other misdeeds. Moses describes the punishment to the people, and they enact the punishment, and there the parashah ends. So – uggghh.

So what we have here, at least it would seem in the basic *pshat*, the basic text of the Torah, is a problematic person who does a problematic thing, and then problem is dealt with. We probably, reading this with our contemporary sensibilities, don't love how the problem is dealt, don't feel that the

consequence is appropriate to the nature of the violation. But from a Torah narrative perspective, it's sort of, problem solved, case closed, and the narrative moves on.

But the medieval commentators do something I love – they shake out meaning from this text that seems designed to make us as readers uncomfortable.

Remember that the perpetrator is a son of an Israelite woman and an Egyptian man. Rashi teaches: “. . .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 into the judicial court of Moses to have the matter decided and came forth (אצ'י) declared to be in the wrong. He then stood up and blasphemed.”

So we get a little more context: he's not just some ruffian acting out in violence. He's someone who has sought belonging in the Israelite community, and been rejected, first informally by the people, then formally, by Moshe's court.

That was Rashi's first comment, on the first phrase. On the phrase “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. So *That* Egyptian task master, writes Rashi, is the father of the one who will go on to blaspheme the name of God.

If we go back to the text in Exodus, Chapter 2, there are some particularly disturbing parallels:

Ex. 2:11-12

When Moses had grown up, he went out to his kinsfolk and witnessed their labors. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsmen. He turned this way and that and, seeing no one about, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.

Rashi comments that what Moshe witnessed was actually the Egyptian man beating the husband of Shelomit bat Dibri, the blasphemer's mother, whom the Egyptian had just raped. And when her husband attempted to confront the Egyptian man for assaulting his wife, that's when he started beating him, that's what Moshe saw.

There are several clues to why the commentators make these parallels:

The phrase "Egyptian man" and the phrase "he went out" are repeated in both texts, but also, consider this commentary from ha'Emek Davar: He looked this way and that – seeking advice, to rule on this – and could not find anyone – to restrain the assailant.

Moshe seeks an authority figure to stop an injustice, and takes matters into his own hands after being disappointed. According to Shemot Rabbah, he actually takes matters into his mouth, and kills the Egyptian taskmaster by uttering a Divine name. Now, in Leviticus, the unnamed blasphemer, - according to Rashi – does the same: experiences injustice, brings a lawsuit to

be allowed to pitch his tent, finds no recourse, and takes matters into his own mouth – uttering a divine name, whether with violent intent or just disgust, we cannot be sure. But it seems clearly that this is a shadow story of Moshe. This is designed -a. to make us feel really uncomfortable with how we're treating *this guy* – but also perhaps to make us question Moshe's behavior in the earlier episode. It makes us ask why we condemn behaviors in some that we condone in others.

Rabbi Sara Hurwit teaches on this text, “on Yom Kippur the High Priest places both his hands on the head of a live goat – “the scapegoat, transferring the iniquities of B'nei Yisrael onto its head, before it is sent to perish in the desert “(Vayikra 16:21-22). The parallel is striking. The people who witnessed the blasphemer, most likely the very people who banished him from their midst, were obligated to atone for their lack of compassion by means of smicha. The ben isha yisraelit died for his transgression, but he also became the scapegoat, sent to his death because of the sins of his neighbors. . . .

The ben isha yisraelit is the paradigmatic outsider. He is someone who does not fit in, someone out of sync with societal expectations and with the natural rhythms of life. The story of the ben isha yisraelit reminds us that our community can be a harsh place for anyone who looks out of place, who speaks a different tongue, or whose family structure is not traditional. Perhaps if the community had embraced the ben-isha yisraelit, rather than pushed him away--if they had welcomed him, sat next to him in shul, shown

him the correct place in the siddur-- he might not have been compelled to blaspheme God's name."¹

It's a beautiful takeaway, and a little bit incomplete, because we do let some people get away with this behavior.

So whose problem is this person? While base text of Torah would imply that he is a problematic individual, our commentators build a rich case that his behavior is all of our problem. His behavior is not just about his own trauma as the progeny of violence and his rejection. He is following the example of our greatest leader, reinforced by our rejection of him. I love our commentators for the questions that they force us to face: how are we complicit in driving people to the margins, so that behavior that we think of as "beyond the pale" seems acceptable to them? What examples are we ourselves setting? And how can we catch these situations before it comes to this point?

¹ <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/423833.9?lang=en&with=all&lang2=en>