

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Emor
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Emor – Hurt people hurt people

Right at the end of this week's Parasha of Emor, we read the enigmatic story of the blasphemer. A man pronounced the ineffable Name of Hashem and blasphemed. The people were not sure what his punishment should be so they placed him under guard until they could clarify the law. Hashem told Moshe that the blasphemer should be put to death by stoning. So the blasphemer was taken outside of the camp and stoned to death.

Though the Torah doesn't provide the surrounding circumstances of this incident, the Midrash¹ fills in many details. Two versions of the story are presented by the Midrash. Let's analyse each version in turn.

Version 1

Rabbi Berachiah says that the blasphemer went about in the camp mocking the show-bread. As we learn in the passage immediately preceding the story of the blasphemer, part of the regular service in the Mishkan (and later in the Bet HaMikdash) was to prepare the weekly show bread. Twelve loaves were baked each week and placed in two stacks of six on the special golden table that was placed on the Mishkan. The loaves were not allowed to be chametz, but they did not look like the matzot that we eat on Pesach. They were elaborately shaped loaves that were baked by specially skilled artisans. They were placed on the table for the entire week and then eaten by the Kohanim who were on duty the following Shabbat. Each week the loaves were replaced. Mystical commentators explain that this service was the channel through which Hashem's blessing for prosperity and wealth flowed into the world.

The blasphemer mocked the show-bread, saying that a king normally eats freshly baked bread. Yet the kohanim ate the show-bread when it is more than a week old!² The blasphemer questioned – how can we serve Hashem with stale bread? However, if the blasphemer would had patience and waited until the end of the week, he would have seen that the bread stayed warm and fresh miraculously.³ The Midrash teaches us that another person rebuked the blasphemer, the two got into a fight and it was then that he uttered his blasphemy.

Incidentally, I remember hearing a shiur many years ago from someone who said that he never understood this Midrash. The show-bread was matza and we know from experience that matza does not become stale after a week.⁴ Perhaps we can answer that even though the show-bread was matza, it was soft matza. Matza does not have to be crisp to be kosher for Pesach.⁵

Version 2

The Midrash brings down another version of this story. According to the second version, the blasphemer was the son of a Jewish woman from the tribe of Dan and an Egyptian man. The commentators point out

¹ Vayikra Rabbah 32:3 and brought by Rashi.

² The show-bread was normally baked on a Friday. If a Yom Tov fell on Friday, then it was baked before Yom Tov.

³ Chagigah 26b.

⁴ We stock up on matza and we continue to eat it for months after Pesach. It always tastes pretty much the same, regardless of how old it is. (Although if you freshen it up in the oven it does taste a bit better.)

⁵ Indeed, some communities use soft matza to this day. However, I am not suggesting that one should eat soft matza on Pesach unless they have a clear tradition to do so. Eating chametz on Pesach is a very serious transgression and one should not treat this matter lightly.

that this was the only such case of mixed parentage from the entire time that Bnei Yisrael were slaves in Mitzrayim, which is very praiseworthy. And even this case was not a clear case of inappropriate behaviour by a Jewish woman. The Egyptian man snuck in to the house at night pretending to be the woman's husband. The Midrash explains that even though the woman's behaviour was not impeccable, it was certainly not a clear case of adultery.

The blasphemer had tried to pitch his tent amongst the tribe of Dan because that was his mother's tribe. The people of Dan asked him to leave because he was not a Danite - one's tribe follows one's father and his father was Egyptian.⁶ They took the matter to be judged by Moshe and the blasphemer lost the case. He then stood up and uttered his blasphemous comment.

We have seen two separate explanations for why the blasphemer did what he did. Perhaps they are both true. Let us try to merge the two stories together and get a deeper understanding. What prompted the blasphemer to criticise the show-bread? It didn't occur in a vacuum. We can suggest that the blasphemer was hurt and upset because he was rejected by the tribe of Dan and was forced to pack up his tent and move out. As a response to that feeling of hurt, he lashed out blindly at an easy target – in this case the show-bread.

There is a saying: "hurt people hurt people" – people who are themselves hurt tend to lash out and hurt others.⁷ Why do they do that? We can leave that question to the psychologists, but it seems that they are somehow trying to protect themselves and avoid emotional pain and anguish. Their behaviour might not make sense, and it might even be counter-productive, but human beings don't always act logically.

With this insight, we have a deeper understanding of the blasphemer's behaviour. He was hurt and therefore he lashed out. Clearly his behaviour was not justified or excusable. After all, he was found guilty and punished with the death penalty! But his behaviour is at least understandable and we can see where it stemmed from.

There are two very important lessons that we can learn from the above analysis.

From the perspective of the person who is hurt and feels the need to lash out at someone else:

It can be difficult to regulate our response when we are angry or in emotional pain. But it is well worth making the effort to do so. If one is not careful, they can act in a self-destructive manner and they will regret their behaviour when they calm down. Remember what happened to the blasphemer – he was punished with the death penalty! There are a number of practical suggestions as to how one can achieve this (e.g. relaxation techniques, deep breathing, counting to 10 before responding etc.). We each need to find a technique that works best for us.

From the perspective of someone who bears the brunt of a hurt person who lashes out:

It can be very helpful to realise that the person's behaviour should not be taken personally. They are not necessarily "out to get you". They are just angry and you happened to be the closest or easiest target. This knowledge alone can help to defuse the situation and help you to respond in a less emotional manner.

Let's try something this week:

1. If you are hurt, try hard to remember the lesson of the blasphemer and resist the temptation to lash out at someone else.
2. If someone is lashing out at you, try to remember that their attack is not necessarily personal. This may help you to respond in a more rational and less emotional manner.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

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⁶ As noted above, his mother was Jewish so he was also Jewish. It is only his tribal membership that was in question.

⁷ In the first case, the word "hurt" is used as an adjective. In the second case it is used as a verb.