

# EXTREMISM - TAKING THINGS TOO FAR

*by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann*

Towards the end of parshas Emor, we read about the Me-kalel/the blasphemer who in a moment of rage and lack of self-control cursed the Almighty. What exactly brought about this most grave of sins? The Torah is quite vague about its background:

And the son of an Israelite woman went out (he was the son of an Egyptian man) among the Children of Israel. They fought in the camp - the son of the Israelite woman and an Israelite man. The son of the Israelite woman pronounced the Name, and blasphemed, so they brought him to Moshe.

Ultimately, the blasphemer is given the death penalty. What the Torah does not describe is what the fight between the blasphemer and the Jewish man was about. Another question: What is the connection of the story of the blasphemer to this week's parsha, and specifically to the laws of the Lechem Ha-Panim (Show-bread) which immediately precedes it?

The answer to these questions is found in the Midrash (quoted by Rashi). The Torah describes the Lechem Ha-Panim, the Show-breads which were offered each week in the Tabernacle and later in the Holy Temple. Every Friday, twelve large loaves were baked. They were placed on the Shulchan (Table) on Shabbos, at which point last week's loaves were removed and divided up among the Kohanim to be eaten.

It seems the blasphemer was appalled that fresh bread was baked only once a week. He went about in the Jewish camp scoffing about the Show-bread: "Imagine!" he mocked, "A flesh-and-blood king normally insists on warm, fresh bread daily. Were they to serve him day-old bread, he would be enraged. Yet to G-d - the Almighty - fresh bread is served once a week, and left to go stale upon the Table!"

Seemingly, he was incensed that so great a G-d should be served in so disrespectful a manner. Still, an Israelite man was upset by his criticism of the Torah's law, and rebuked him for speaking so irreverently. The two came to blows, whereupon the son of the Israelite woman uttered the curse.

Remember when you were little, and the teacher would hand out a picture. "What's wrong with this picture?" she would ask. Well what is seemingly wrong with the story the Midrash tells? Something's out of place. If the man was so indignant about Hashem's honour; if he had such sensitivity for showing respect to the Almighty, then how, only moments later, when a fight breaks out, can the very same man commit the most appalling and shameful of sins - to curse the Almighty Himself?

Where's the respect? Where's the righteous zealosity?

In the famous Ner Yisroel Yeshiva of Baltimore, it was a regular occurrence that boxes and crates of books and sefarim would arrive, usually from the library of some learned man who had passed away, and the family decided to donate his collection to the Yeshiva. On one such occasion, among the books the bachurim found Graetz's History of the Jews. Knowing that Graetz had not been an observant Jew, one of the boys, in a fit of zealous rage, took the box of books and burned it. When Rav Ruderman zt"l, the Rosh Yeshiva, heard about the story, he called the boy into his office. To make a short story even shorter, he showed the boy the door out of the Yeshiva, and told him never to come back.

Among the other bachurim there was quite a tumult. While all agreed that the boy had acted brazenly by burning the books without consulting the Rosh Yeshiva, many students felt that the punishment - expulsion - was too harsh for the crime. After all, it's not like he burned a sefer Torah G-d forbid.

When the opportunity arose, Rav Ruderman explained himself, sort of. He called over a group of boys, and told them in no uncertain terms, "That boy will one day desecrate the Shabbos and eat non-kosher food. How, you ask, do I know this? He's too extreme. He went overboard about an issue which really wasn't deserving of that type of treatment. Extremism is a dangerous trait. It can not be compartmentalized." One day, the Rosh Yeshiva felt, his irrational extremism would lead him to find fault in the Torah and abandon its ways. (Indeed, that boy, who attended other Yeshivos after leaving Baltimore, eventually left the fold.) (Told by Rabbi Y. Frand)

The Show-bread, notwithstanding that it was only baked once a week, remained perfectly fresh all week. This was only one of the many miracles that took place in the Tabernacle and the Bais Ha-Mikdash. While the blasphemer ostensibly found himself caught up in a righteous fit of indignation over Hashem's honour, his extreme criticism and condemnation of the laws taught to them by Moshe Rabbeinu belied the corruption that lay beneath the veneer of his offense. Often people try to disguise their faults by outwardly putting on an overdone display of indignation at something they've seen or heard. The story of the blasphemer teaches us that, when taken to extremes, over-righteousness can lead to the gravest of sins.

Have a good Shabbos.

*In loving memory of Levi Yitzchak ben Avraham Leib.*

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