

BLASPHEMY HAPPENS

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The Torah reading of this week concludes with a discussion of the sin of blaspheming the name of God. The Torah places this prohibition within an anecdotal context, describing an event that occurred in the camp of the Jewish people in the desert of Sinai. Two Jews had a quarrel that rapidly disintegrated into a public fight. The quarrel originally had to do with the ancestry of one of the Jews. When the quarrel between the two Jews finally went out of control, the act of blasphemy of God's name took place. There is, in my opinion, a strong connection and lesson involved in the juxtaposition of these events.

Anti-God utterances and events, so to speak, are rarely if ever, occasioned in a vacuum. It is usually the behavior or speech of a human that evokes a response that eventually refers to God. There are events in life, tragedies or inexplicable events, that may trigger such a response as well. But, overwhelmingly, blasphemy of God's name occurs when human behavior towards other humans is involved. And this is especially true when the subject matter of the dispute between the people involved is connected to matters of religion, ritual, faith and belief. This was the case in the dispute recorded in the Torah reading of this week and it was the insulting of one Jew by another that became the direct cause of the blasphemy of God's name that followed. Bad and false ideas, distortion of laws and tradition, improper behavior, are all entitled to direct and forceful criticism. However, personal demonization and venomous insults, even if allegedly made in the name of a just cause, lead eventually to a desecration and blasphemy of God's name.

There is much shouting and quarrelling in the Jewish world today. The noise is so great that we can no longer hear each other, let alone attempt to understand the other person. And each side feels justified in its pursuit of the quarrel, for there are major and fundamental life issues involved. But when the matter gets out of hand, when it is personalized and is no longer a matter of issues but of people, the blasphemy of God's name is never far distant. Much of our present quarrelling has become institutionalized. It is organizational. There are political parties and social and religious groups within the Jewish people today whose sole apparent purpose is to oppose and personally demonize other Jewish groups and people. That is not much of a *raison d'être* to exist. Negativism breeds negativism, hatred breeds hatred, and all of it leads to the cardinal sin in Judaism - the desecration and blasphemy of God's name. We should attempt at all costs to avoid falling into this failing and communal trap. It can, as it did in the case of the original blasphemer recorded in Emor, lead to, God forbid, death and destruction.

Shabat Shalom.

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