

ONE WHO CURSES THE NAME OF G-D IS NOT AN ATHEIST

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Emor

One Who Curses The Name of G-d is Not An Atheist

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 811 - Is Adultery Ever Permitted? Good Shabbos!

The end of Parshas Emor contains the unusual story of the Blasphemer. This son of a Jewish mother and an Egyptian father cursed the Name of G-d. He was brought to Moshe, but Moshe did not initially know what the appropriate punishment was for such a sin. He was told by the Almighty that such a person is deserving of Stoning, the most severe of all forms of the death penalty. Moshe publicized this Divine ruling to the Children of Israel and the Blasphemer was in fact stoned.

However, in relating this whole narrative, the Torah seems to contain a redundancy. The final pasuk of the Parsha reads: "Moshe spoke to the Children of Israel and they took the blasphemer to the outside of the camp, and they pelted him with stones; and the Children of Israel did as Hashem commanded Moses." [Vayikra 24:23] This last phrase repeating the fact that "the Children of Israel did as Hashem commanded Moses" seems entirely superfluous.

Furthermore, Chazal are bothered by the introductory phrase to the story: "And the son of an Israelite woman went out" [Vayikra 24:10]. The Sages want to know "Where did he go out from?" There is a very enigmatic Medrash containing several opinions quoted by Rashi: Rabbi Berachya taught that he "came out" from the immediately preceding parsha in the Torah relating to the Lechem HaPanim [Show Bread]: He scoffed and said, "On the Sabbath day he shall arrange it". It is the practice of the king to eat warm, fresh bread every day. Might a king eat cold, nine-day old, bread?"

Every week, the Jewish people were instructed to take twelve loaves of bread and place them on the Shulchan [Table]. The bread would stay on the Shulchan for an entire week. After the week was over, they would bring in new bread. The Kohanim were then allowed to eat the bread from the previous week. The Blasphemer was ostensibly disturbed at the fact that the Kohanim were eating stale bread. This idea bothered him so much that he went out and cursed the Name of the Almighty. Does this make any sense at all? Would this be a person's biggest complaint against Judaism - that

the Lechem HaPanim sits on the Table a week before it is consumed? This is what caused him to Blaspheme? What is the meaning of this?

I would like to share an explanation I saw from the Tolner Rebbe. As a preface, we must understand that Medrashim speak in a different language than the Shulchan Aruch. Medrash speaks in the language of codes and metaphors. Words allude to various things and cannot always be taken literally.

In Medrashic literature, bread more than just flour, water, yeast, and salt. Bread is symbolic of the sustenance that a Jew receives from the Almighty. When the pasuk says "For not by bread alone will man live, rather by that which is uttered by the Mouth of G-d will man live" [Devarim 8:3], it is referring to bread as the symbolism for the sustenance received from Heaven by every single Jew.

This can help us to understand a Gemara in Tractate Sanhedrin 102. Rav Ashi was sitting with his disciples and he told them "Tomorrow we are going to discuss our friend Menashe." (Menashe was one of the most wicked Kings in the history of the Davidic Dynasty). That night, Menashe appeared to Rav Ashi in a dream and told him, "You call me 'friend'? You consider me to be your equal and colleague? You are not in my league at all! You do not come to my ankles! I will prove it to you. I will ask you a halachic question and let's see if you know the answer: From where is bread cut?"

Rav Ashi admitted that he did not know. Menashe told him the halacha that bread is cut from the place that is most well baked. Then Menashe blasted Rav Ashi: "How can you call yourself a Talmid Chochom? How dare you refer to me as 'your colleague'? You don't know simple Halachos!"

Then Rav Ashi turned the tables and started asking questions to Menashe: "Menashe, if you are such a scholar and so expert even on the laws of breaking bread, then how could it be that you are an idolater? How can you reconcile that?"

Menashe responded, "If you would have been there in my era when the evil inclination for idolatry was so great, you would have tripped over your coat running towards the idols to worship them. Do not ask me about Avodah Zarah, you cannot comprehend how strong the urges were to worship them!"

The Maharal in Netzech Yisrael, asks on this Talmudic story - why of all the questions in Halacha that might be posed, did Menashe specifically ask about where was the proper place to cut bread? He explains that Menashe was trying to tell Rav Ashi "I believe in the Ribono shel Olam. I know that there is a G-d and He provides 'Lechem' -- sustenance, livelihood - to everybody; but the yetzer harah [evil inclination] for Avodah Zarah [idolatry] was so great that I could not contain myself.

Livelihood [parnassah] came to Klal Yisrael through the Lechem HaPanim. The conduit, the pipe, through which the Almighty funneled parnassah to Klal Yisrael when the Basi HaMikdash was standing, was the Lechem HaPanim. That is why (the Gemara tells us this in Tractates Shabbos and Menachos and the Rambam rules this way in practice) they did not merely remove the old loaves

and put down new loaves. There needed to be bread on the Shulchan constantly. The Kohanim slid the old loaves off simultaneously while they were sliding the new loaves on. If for a moment, the Shulchan would remain without Lechem, the conduit of Parnassah to the Jewish people would be broken. This is what Lechem HaPanim is all about.

The Blasphemer looked at the Lechem HaPanim and asked "What kind of business is this? The Almighty has stale bread?" The Blasphemer was not bothered by hot and cold bread. He was bothered by what he thought was "this baloney about the Almighty providing our sustenance". He felt that this was not true. "There may be a G-d, but if you think that He is interested in ensuring that you receive your paycheck, you are crazy!" There may be a G-d, but He does not bother himself with such mundane tasks as providing paychecks to people. The symbolism was "Look the bread is hot one week, but by the time you get to it, it's cold. There is no direct connection."

The Gemara says that the Blasphemer was wrong. The bread was not removed from the Shulchan cold a week later, but rather "as it was placed on the table so was it removed." One of the miracles of the Lechem HaPanim was that it remained warm and fresh the entire week. There was constant Providence and the hot bread symbolized the fact that the Almighty does in fact not let it become cold and He does not let the world run on its own. He is involved in people's making a living.

The Blasphemer cursed the Name of G-d. One who curses the Name of G-d is not an atheist. One who curses the Name of G-d is saying there is a G-d but I just do not believe that He is involved.

With this we can understand the question of the apparent redundancy that we questioned at the beginning. The Jewish people stoned the Blasphemer as they were told. But the question is, did he have an effect? Did the Blasphemer perhaps cool down the people's faith in Divine Providence (Hashgocha Pratis)? Did he perhaps cause people to doubt whether maybe HaShem is not involved in guaranteeing the livelihood of every single Jew? In order to answer this question, the Torah 'repeats' - "and the Children of Israel did as Hashem commanded Moses". This teaches that the Blasphemer did not have an effect on them. They continued to believe that the Almighty provides their parnassah and they continued to believe in the lesson of the Lechem haPanim.

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