

Parshat Behar – 5771

This past Shabbos, our Torah portion ended with the incident of the Blasphemer, the man who cursed God, and was stoned to death by Bnai Yisrael. It's a complicated story, and in light of this week's Torah portion, I wanted to frame the incident of the Blasphemer in a much different way, based on the traditional commentaries and midrashim.

A young man, we're told, curses God's name – committing a dreadful sin, breaking one of the Ten Commandments. Yet, when we read through the midrashim, there appears to be sympathy towards him, at least initially, since he apparently committed the act out of frustration. The Torah refers to him as a Ben Ish Mitzri, the son of an Egyptian Man – it's not only that he was the product of an intermarriage – what made matters difficult for the Blasphemer was that he had no tribal inheritance, and therefore no place to call home. When everyone else could simply look back on their family tree to know where they belonged, he had no place to go. When he imagined the twelve showbreads on the Shulchan of the Mikdash, he was reminded that he had no place among the tribes of Israel.

And this, according to the Midrash, is what brought him to the High Court, the Bet Din on that very day...to plead his case for some land and for a sense of belonging...but he lost his case and in addition, was reprimanded, attacked, made to feel inferior by those outside the Bet Din, and these actions helped lead him to curse the name of God.

As we read last week, the Blasphemer is stoned, and that's how Parshat Emor ended. But his punishment was unique. Just before the execution, all of the people who heard him curse had to lay their hands upon his head. It was a moment of collective responsibility – a moment where Bnai Yisrael were challenged to ask, how is it that someone from amongst us reached this point of desperation?

How could one of us come to curse God? It was a moment of self critique, reflection, and somberness. As the blasphemer is killed, there was no rejoicing.

Comes along Parshat Behar, with the laws of Shemittah, the Sabbatical year, and the chorus of the words *V'Chi Yamuch Achicha*, if your brother is downtrodden, waxen poor, in trouble, *V'Hechzakta Bo*, support him, hold him up, help. (quote, repeated)

The connection is so obvious. The placing of the hands of Bnai Yisrael on the head of the Blasphemer was to drive home the point that everyone shared some responsibility for his actions and everyone was accountable regarding his fate. Yes, ultimately it was one man who cursed God and deserved the punishment, but to a certain extent, the entire nation shared some of the burden.

And that's why this Parsha brings us back to Har Sinai. Mah Inyan Shemittah Etzel Har Sinai? Rashi asks why the sudden return to Mount Sinai? The entire book of Vayikrah had been broadcast from the Ohel Moed, the Tent by the Tabernacle...now God has us back at Har Sinai...(hence the name of our Parsha, BeHar).

And the reason is, we failed. According to the sources, it seems the story of the Blasphemer wasn't the failure of one individual among a nation of two million. It was the failure of a people to act like a people. It was the failure of individuals to figure out what it must be like to not have a tribal inheritance – it was the failure of Bnai Yisrael to not only empathize, but to act, to solve, to reach out, and to show love.

And this is exactly what the Shemitah is doing here. The shemitah laws are here to say: hey you, you missed the point, You messed up. You didn't figure out how to help this person ...and look what happened.

Shemitah is the way the Torah teaches each and every person in the land of Israel to know what it feels like not to have land. The irony is that during Shemitah, you were allowed to take food from everyone else's field except your own. Shemitah puts us in the shoes of the Blasphemer, the Ben-Ish Mitzri, the young man who had no sense of belonging and was tormented when he asked for help.

And that is why the phrase V'Chi Yamuch Achicha, when your brother is downtrodden, plays so prominently in our Parsha. We now know what can happen if we don't help, if we don't pay attention, if we look the other way.

I can tell you much it inspires me to see the people in our Shul reaching out to those in need, out of their comfort range, looking beyond their social milieu, outside of their religious comfort zone:

The man at minyan preparing the page in a siddur for someone who just doesn't fit in. A couple in Shul offering to pay for the education of a waxen poor student. An individual stepping up to ask how she can help bring joy to someone who seems depressed. These are the actions that our Torah challenges us to take. These are the actions that will diminish Blasphemy in the word and help grow the love for God and for the Torah and for each other.

Let today's Parsha be a reminder to reach a little further, to step out of our comfort zones, and to truly help those in need. If you need suggestions of how to do this, please call me, email me, or set up some time to get together.

This is what our Torah is all about – and regardless of our Jewish background, or knowledge level, or economic resources, we can all play a role in making the entire world a place not only of peace, but a place of great kedushah, spiritual beauty!