

The Blasphemer: The Difference Between an Explanation and an Excuse **Rabbi Maury Grebenau**

A few years ago my wife and I were guests at the home of a kollel couple who lived in middle America. This was a couple who frequently had guests of all stripes across the spectrum of the Jewish world. One very vocal guest from this eclectic group demanded (repeatedly) to know how Hashem could have told Moshe to kill the blasphemer (mekalel) at the end of this week's parsha, given his background. Should we not show some mercy on a poor youth who had a difficult upbringing and probably had a great deal of pent up aggression. In the years after this meal I have frequently thought about his question and I think it deserves some thought.

The Torah itself is very skimpy in terms of the details of what occurred before the actual blasphemy took place. All we are told is that there was another person involved (pasuk 10) and that the mekalel was the child of an Egyptian father and a Jewish woman named Shlomis bas Divri. The Midrash (Vayikra Rabbah 22:3) fills in some information and Rashi (Vayikra 24:11) quotes liberally from these details. Two distinct stories emerge from Rashi's explanations. One possibility is that the mekalel was mocking aspects of the Mishkan and another Jew started arguing with him. His reaction was to curse Hashem¹. The other possibility which emerges is that the mekalel was trying to pitch his tent in the tribe of Dan since that was his mother's tribe. Some of the other members of the tribe argued that he had no right to pitch his tent on their land since tribe is paternal. They went to Moshe's court to decide the matter and when he lost the case he blasphemed Hashem².

How did this situation arise? We again need to look to the Midrash to give us some details of the characters involved. Rashi quotes the Midrash which identifies the father of the mekalel as the Egyptian that Moshe killed back at the beginning of Shemos (see Rashi Shemos 2:11 and here). The Midrash tells us that the mother of this mekalel was flirtatious with one of the Egyptians. He enters her house and sleeps with her while her husband is working³ and then decides to kill her husband by beating him to death. This is when Moshe enters the picture and instead kills the Egyptian. The Kli Yakar suggests that the mekalel may have harbored a grudge against Moshe for his whole life because of this incident. The Midrashic picture seems to be one of a difficult life on the part of the mekalel. He is born from an affair with a non-Jewish man, his biological father is killed and his mother is known as the one Jewish woman who was not chaste while we were enslaved in Egypt. Even according to the commentaries which do not follow the Midrashic detail and are satisfied to identify the father as an Egyptian who converted (see Ibn Ezra and Ramban), we still have a child with a difficult upbringing. He comes from a mixed marriage and seems to have difficulty joining the rest of the Jewish people.

¹ This is the Ramban's understanding that Rashi's first two possibilities can be two halves of the same story

² See Baal HaTurim who says that this explanation is hinted to in the choice of word 'vayinatzu' (24:10)

³ There seem to be two distinct strands in the Midrash, some opinions blame her for causing this, while others seem to see it as a case of mistaken identity and do not fault her at all (see Ohr HaChayim).

We have witnessed an unfortunate blurring of the lines between an explanation and an excuse. In a world where people can be acquitted of crimes by pointing to a difficult childhood, the punishment of the mekalel seems misplaced. How could we kill such a person? Should we not look the other way when a person with such a difficult upbringing veers from the proper path? Does the Torah not acknowledge that there is ample reason for his behavior? The answer would seem to be that although the makalel's actions can be understood in the context of his life, it remains an explanation and not an excuse. Cursing Hashem is inexcusable even when a person has a difficult past. We must deal compassionately with our fellow and try to understand them. However, there are still certain limits which can't be crossed⁴. As Jews we have a tremendous responsibility to Hashem and the ideals of His Torah, irrespective of our personal pasts.

Rav Shimshon Rephael Hirsch sees a more insidious motivation for the mekalel's actions. He comments that when the Torah calls the Makalel the son of an Egyptian man, we are being told more than just his father's nationality. These words are also the motivation behind his sin. He felt that the culture of Judaism was burdensome and he wanted to define himself as the son of an '*ish Mitzri*'. He longed for the permissive Egyptian culture and its decadence. He was the polar opposite of Moshe, who had initially been identified by Yitro's daughters as an '*ish Mitzri*'. Being raised in the Egyptian palace, as Moshe was, Moshe too may have looked the part of an '*ish Mitzri*'. Moshe had distanced himself, in the extreme, from the lifestyle of the Egyptians. This mekalel longed to return to such a lifestyle⁵. Whether the makalel was venting pent up frustration, or if it was a calculated act; it was an inexcusable act. Even in the most difficult of circumstances we are expected to act responsibly and with foresight.

⁴ The Seforno repeatedly (Vayikra 24:16 & 24:23) sees the pesukim as reiterating the point that the mekalel is killed because of his sin and not because of any malice felt towards his status or past.

⁵ Perhaps this could explain why Moshe is unsure what to do with the man. Moshe wants to hear directly from Hashem the punishment to make sure that his reaction to this man is not personal.