Parshat Emor portrays the scathing blasphemy of an unnamed Jew whose pedigree was questioned. This desecration of G-d’s name threatens communal sanctity and the offender is publicly stone. This entails the first moment a Jew willingly “abandoned“ religion. In the supernatural context of the desert this decision is jarring, as it is difficult to envision willfully ignoring the great miracles and revelations while challenging Divine authority. However, this experience may help us better understand the general phenomenon of a person “walking out” on religion- a phenomenon which unfortunately has become more and more common in the contemporary setting. On the surface it may appear that people abandon religion due to deep philosophical questions; in reality, there are multiple other forces which drive the process.

1. Meaninglessness of Religious Practice

Based on the juxtaposition between the blasphemy story and the details of the Shulchan (ceremonial table in the mishkan) Chazal claim that this blasphemer was perplexed by the ritual of the lechem hapanim; these breads were only refreshed weekly rather than daily. He was riled by the concept of stale bread as a reverential symbol. In truth, the bread remained miraculously fresh, but the schedule of replacement still seemed illogical to him.

When religious ritual or religious actions seem meaningless or appear arbitrary, religion, to some, feels nonsensical and irrelevant. Dissatisfaction with the “meaning” of religious practice often yields deep questioning of G-d’s authority or His interest in our ritual experience. Human beings feel humiliated when performing senseless activities which, to them, carry no discernible meaning or symbolism. People are especially alienated when the activities seem contrary to basic human interest and moral values.

Our generation has witnessed a phenomenal advance in the spread and intensity of religious practice but a dramatic retreat in both the discussion of logical basis for mitzvot as well as the broader philosophical underpinnings of religion and belief in general. There may be merit to this “intellectual” retreat, but it certainly invites the risk that Judaism will be viewed by some as a spiritless and illogical system of pantomimes. Religious observance without coherent meaning may be completely unpalatable and inevitable discontent may provide an invitation for religious abandonment.

1. Communal Exclusion

Of course, at a literal level, the trigger of the blasphemy is the denied entry into the Jewish camp for this partially-pedigreed Jew whose father was Egyptian but whose mother was Jewish. Though legally Jewish, he was legally rejected for admission into the desert encampment. Having been excluded from the community, he found it more difficult to maintain his religious identity. Communal identity is a powerful element of Jewish experience and if communal belonging is denied, often, that sense of identity is blurred - especially within people already struggling with religious practice.

For communities, it is difficult to strike the balance between establishing communal standards and creating inclusive communities. Embracing “all” regardless of behavior, threatens to efface all standards and expectations and create religious free-fall. However, too inflexible a policy of exclusion may alienate sincere Jews who are engaged in authentic struggles to remain connected to G-d by retaining communal bonds.

Whatever communal policies are adopted, they must be implemented with sympathy and compassion rather than callousness and derision. The Torah describes hostilities which erupted between this non-pedigreed Jew and another anonymous “opponent” who was militantly opposed to the former’s inclusion. Presumably, part of the blasphemer’s alienation stemmed from the aggression and disdain he faced. Had the guidelines and halachot been calmly explained, and had creative solutions been mutually brainstormed, perhaps he wouldn’t have responded so vehemently. Often, it is “language” and not just “policy” which drives people away from communal belonging and, ultimately, from religion. Alienation may be reduced if our desire to include is evident- even if that desire may be impractical or suspended for broader, long-term communal concerns.

1. Emotional anguish

Chazal identify the Egyptian father as the Egyptian man who was buried in the sand after having been slain by Moshe Rabenu. Of course, this father was far from innocent, as he had raped the Jewish mother of this blasphemer and proceeded to mercilessly torture her husband. Yet any personal loss causes pain and emotional anguish which can’t be dismissed simply because the deceased was guilty. This blasphemer lost his own father and, undoubtedly, the trauma he suffered erupted into open rebellion. Often emotional pain and long-term psychological stress vents itself as religious doubt and religious questioning. We are emotional beings and when we experience deep and prolonged grief or distress, we often wonder about our Creator who inserted us into these emotionally challenging circumstances. Religious identity cannot be built upon brittle emotional identity. Without nurturing genuine emotional happiness and self-esteem, religious identity will ultimately suffer.

1. Mixed Messages

Though Chazal identify the blasphemer’s father as the executed Egyptian, the simple reading suggests that his father was an ordinary Egyptian who, evidently, partially influenced his child’s development. Apparently, this blasphemer received mixed messages at home, as the cultural divide between his father and mother proved unbridgeable. Children look to parent’s for clarity and confidence and if they sense confusion or conflict about religion, it is often difficult for them to feel religiously anchored. Ideally, parents must showcase idealism, passion and self-sacrifice for religion. Parents are primary transmitters of our tradition but if this transmission contains too much static it may not be sufficiently received.

Though the blasphemer episode can provide general profiles about religious struggle, it is crucial not to oversimplify a complex situation. As human beings are complex individuals driven by a range of motivations and emotions, simplistic profiles of human decision making- and certainly something as complex as religion – are disrespectful to human individuality. Likewise, the complexity of decision making makes it impossible to determine direct cause and effect. Sometimes the decision to leave religion arouses deep-seated guilt among family and community members: “what could we have done differently? “. Given the lack of direct “cause and effect” we should be exceedingly careful about assigning blame. These profiles are only helpful in a proactive and, hopefully, partially preventative manner- by helping us better understand potential triggers.

Afterward:

In 1888 the first Kol Nidre Ball was held in London. As its name suggests, it was an attempt by counter cultural Jews to create a sacrilegious desecration of the solemnity of Yom Kippur. Some anarchist Jews opposed these events being scheduled specifically on the night of Yom Kippur which is “just like any ordinary night”. Evidently, even the proponents of the Kol Nidre Ball, who sought to break with religion till appreciated to magic of Yom Kippur, were still engaged with Yom Kippur even in their moments of rebellion.

Even when people are angry with G-d, and even when they “blaspheme” their fury still connects them with Yom Kippur or with G-d. Sometimes as life unfolds, and with patience and forbearance, anger may yield to awe and alienation to connection.