

LIFE AND DEATH IN THE POWER OF ONE'S TONGUE: THE CASE OF THE SON OF SHELOMITH BAT-DIBRI

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In an earlier article, "The Folly of Impetuous Speech: Four Biblical Incidents,"¹ I demonstrated the lethal potential of words or speech – words that kill, whether literally or figuratively. The examples considered were Adam's gratuitous warnings to Eve on the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil (Gen. 2:17), Rebekah's instigation of Jacob's deception of his father Isaac (Ch. 27), and the fatal consequences of Rachel's demand '*Give me children, or I shall die!*' (30:21) combined with Jacob's unwittingly false assurances to Laban (31:32).

Here, we consider the lethal consequences of improper or foul speech, in this case the offending of God's Name, as recounted in Leviticus 24. This chapter tells of a certain man, whose name is not given, the son of an Israelite mother – Shelomith bat-Dibri of the tribe of Dan – and an Egyptian father (v. 10). This man, in the course of a quarrel with another Israelite, blasphemed in using the Divine Name. As a result, he was stoned to death by the *whole congregation*; a punishment decreed directly by God, after Moses, who had not known how to judge in this instance, sought a Divine verdict.

The text tells us that the blasphemer *came out among the people of Israel*, but *came out* of what? Some commentators take the phrase literally; the man simply came out of his tent into the public domain. Other exegetes argue that he came out of his composure and self-control, thus transgressing in a moment of impulsiveness. Still others understand that he *came* in that he left or forfeited his place in the world to come. Indeed, the rabbis teach in their discussion of the Seven Laws of Noah – one of which prohibits blasphemy or cursing of God – that violators of any of these seven laws lose their place in the world to come, Israelites and non-Israelites alike.

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Rashi understands that the man simply came out of Moses' court. But if it is so, why did this man appeal in the first place to Moses' court? It was in the aftermath of this court session that the man was drawn into a scuffle with another Israelite, a fray that would result in his swearing against God's very Name. Rashi further says that the man sought to redress his legal predicament; considering himself a bona fide member of the tribe of Dan. However, he was told by tribal leaders that according to the Torah (Num. 1:38) affiliation with any Israelite tribe was determined paternally [*le'veit avotam*], not maternally as with the Ishmaelites (Gen. 25:16).

The blasphemer found himself to be in a Kafkaesque impasse. Although he was an Israelite due to his conversion – as Rashi tells us – the man was refused a tribal affiliation since his biological father was an Egyptian. In this version, the Egyptian had, unbeknownst to Shelomith, forced her husband from the house and taken his place beside her. Hence, when Shelomith's son by the Egyptian appealed to Moses for justice he was frustrated by Moses' inability to help him.

With his tribal identity denied in Moses' court, the man felt that God's law had failed him, and fell into a deep sense of alienation from God, for it was this law on tribal affiliation that left him without a tribe and a future portion in the Promised Land.

As we were reminded in the preface to this discussion, a wrongful or impetuous use of God's name, let alone of the ineffable Name, entailed death. As with the examples of Adam, Rebekah, Rachel, and Jacob, the son of Shelomith of the tribe of Dan spoke excessively and irresponsibly. His blasphemy incurred the ultimate Divine retribution as expressed in the Third Commandment of the Decalogue: . . . *for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses His name* (Ex. 20:7). Or, in the words of Proverbs 18:21: *Death and life are in the power of one's tongue.*

NOTES

All biblical quotations come from the *New Oxford Annotated Bible* (2001).

1. *The Jewish Bible Quarterly* XXXIV: 2 (January-March 2006) pp. 16-19.