

A short narrative at the end of this long parashah discusses a “blasphemer” and sets forth laws to deal with this serious infraction. The son of an Israelite woman and an Egyptian man quarrels with others, and “pronounced the Divine Name and cursed. ... His mother’s name was Shelomith, the daughter of Dibri, of the tribe of Dan.” (24:11) It is noteworthy that what is important here is the cursing, not the pronouncement of the Divine Name (יהוה). “You shall not take the name of the Lord, your God, in vain, for the Lord will not hold blameless anyone who takes His name in vain.” (Exodus 20:7) Obviously the Torah does not prohibit us from pronouncing the Name, at least in part, since many Hebrew names contain *yah* or *yahu*, and the Name was also pronounced by the High Priest on Yom Kippur. The Mishnah even recommends using the Name in greeting: “The Sages also instituted that one should greet another in the name of God, ... And lest you say that mentioning God’s name is prohibited ... it is occasionally necessary to negate biblical precepts in order to perform God’s will, and greeting another is certainly God’s will.” (Tractate Berakhot 9) But later, the Talmud establishes the custom of substitution, such as “G-d,” “Elokim or HaShem, and using the Name gradually disappeared. After the destruction of the Temple the correct pronunciation of the Name was lost, which has given way to speculative pronunciation attempts such as *Jehovah* or *Yaweh*. Therefore, the man’s sin was not using the Name, it was using the Name in a curse. The story is jarring, not only because certain fundamentalist groups still invoke its laws today, but also because of how Midrash Leviticus Rabbah characterizes the parents. “Her name denotes that she was a chatterbox [always going around saying] ‘Peace be with you! Peace be with you [men].’ She would chatter about with words, greeting everyone. ... The daughter of Dibri denotes that she was very talkative [*m’daberet*]. That is why she fell into sin.” The midrash goes on to say that his father was none other than the taskmaster whom Moses killed. “On one occasion a taskmaster paid an early visit to an (Israelite) officer and told him to assemble his group. When he entered, the man’s wife smiled at him. He thought, ‘She is mine.’ So he went out and hid behind a ladder. No sooner had her husband gone out than he entered and misconducted himself with her. The other turned around and saw him leaving the house. When the taskmaster realized he had been seen, he went to him and kept beating him all day, saying, ‘Work hard, work hard!’ The reason was that he wanted to kill him. ...” Another midrash tells us that the two Israelite men Moses attempted to dissuade from fighting were Dathan and Aviram, the troublemakers later involved in the Korach rebellion, and that Dathan was the officer whose wife the taskmaster raped. Finally, Midrash Leviticus Rabbah teaches that the quarrel originated when the Danites refused to let the man pitch his tent in their camp because only his mother was of that tribe. And the Zohar recounts that it was the son of Dathan, a Reubenite, who provoked him, calling his mother a whore who betrayed his father with an Egyptian, the man that Moses killed. Assuming that Moses would never defend him were he to bring charges, he pronounces the Name in helpless rage. Reading these midrashim, I feel pity for this unfortunate man, whose social standing seems to be determined by his origins. Were they written to justify capital punishment for the sin of blasphemy? This is, by the way, the first time the Torah mentions it. Were they a polemic against mixed parentage, implying that the man was sinful by nature? Or are they an anti-Christian polemic? The passage about blasphemy in Mark 14:62-64 is reminiscent of the story in our parashah. “The High Priest questioned him: ‘Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed one?’ Jesus said, ‘I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated on the right hand of God and coming with the clouds of heaven.’ Then the High Priest tore his robes and said, ‘Need we call further witnesses? You have heard the blasphemy. What is your opinion?’ Their judgment was unanimous, that he was guilty and should be put to death.” Since much of the Talmud originated during the rise of Christianity, and the Zohar appeared in 13th century Spain during the Christian *Reconquista*, I believe that these stories are part of the body of anti-Christian works circulating at the time. Sadly, these Gospel verses have been the source of deep misunderstanding and enormous tragedy, and not only for Jews. Laws against blasphemy, as well as “anti-profanity” laws in the USA date back to colonial times, and were enforced in some states until 1928. Amazingly, a new law enacted in Pennsylvania in 1977 prohibiting corporations from using names containing words that “constitute blasphemy, profane cursing or swearing, or that profane the Lord’s name” was finally overturned in a lawsuit in 2010. And just last August a man stabbed Salman Rushdie multiple times as he was about to present a lecture. He was acting in accordance with Ayatollah Khomeini’s 1988 *fatwa* calling for the death of Rushdie and his publishers. This and other cases involving radicals of all religious persuasions illustrate the calamities that can, and all too often still do occur when freedom of speech and religious fundamentalism clash. How can we balance freedom of thought and speech with respect for the religious beliefs of others? What role should governments play, and how can we as responsible citizens of our own countries and representatives of our own religion find ways to counteract extremism and foster understanding amongst our increasingly polarized fellow humans? There are few answers, but perhaps we can derive some guidance from the story of the blasphemer and the midrashim it inspired.

Shabbat shalom!