

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [303]

What Do You Have to Pitch Your Tent in the Camp of Dan? Insights into Leviticus Rabbah 32:3-4



Background to Our Story

Leviticus 24:10-23

10 There came out among the Israelites one whose mother was Israelite and whose father was Egyptian. And a fight broke out in the camp between that half-Israelite and a certain Israelite. 11 The son of the Israelite woman pronounced the Name in blasphemy, and he was brought to Moses — now his mother's name was Shelomith daughter of Dibri of the tribe of Dan — 12 and he was placed in custody, until the decision of the Lord should be made clear to them.

13 And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: 14 Take the blasphemer outside the camp; and let all who were within hearing lay their hands upon his head, and let the whole community stone him.

15 And to the Israelite people speak thus: Anyone who blasphemes his God shall bear his guilt; 16 if he also pronounces the name Lord, he shall be put to death. The whole community shall stone him; stranger or citizen, if he has thus pronounced the Name, he shall be put to death.

17 If anyone kills any human being, he shall be put to death. 18 One who kills a beast shall make restitution for it: life for life. 19 If anyone maims his fellow, as he has done so shall it be done to him: 20 fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. The injury he inflicted on another shall be inflicted on him. 21 One who kills a beast shall make restitution for it; but one who kills a human being shall be put to death. 22 You shall have one standard for stranger and citizen alike: for I the Lord am your God.

23 Moses spoke thus to the Israelites. And they took the blasphemer outside the camp and pelted him with stones. The Israelites did as the Lord had commanded Moses.

? What question is left unanswered in the above biblical story?

Exodus 2:11-12

¹¹ One day, after Moses had grown up, he went out to where his own people were and watched them at their hard labor. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his own people. ¹² Looking this way and that and seeing no one, he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.

? What question is left unanswered in this short biblical story?

Numbers 2:1-2

2 The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, 2 "The people of Israel shall camp each by his own standard, with the banners of their fathers' houses.

What Is a Mamzer?

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JEWISH LEARNING

A mamzer (plural: mamzerim) is a child born of a forbidden sexual union. Although commonly translated as "bastard," the term is defined in rabbinic literature as a child born of incest or adultery. Traditional Jewish law prohibits a mamzer from marrying into the Jewish community, a restriction that poses a significant ethical quandary, since the mamzer is effectively punished for a crime they didn't commit. Both the Reform and Conservative movements have dispensed with the problem, but it remains an issue in the Orthodox world.

The source of the mamzer prohibition is biblical. Deuteronomy 23:3 states the following: "No one misbegotten shall be admitted into the congregation of the Lord; none of his descendants, even in the tenth generation, shall be admitted into the congregation of the Lord."

The biblical reference is vague and leaves the particulars undefined. The rabbis brought more precision to the matter. According to the Mishnah, a mamzer is the offspring of any prohibited sexual union that is punished by death or [karet](#), a biblical penalty known as "excision," or being cut off from the Jewish people. A mamzer is thus anyone born to an incestuous union or to a woman legally married to a man other than the father. The second part of the biblical prohibition is understood by the rabbis to bar only marriage between a mamzer and a Jew, though marriages are permitted between a mamzer and a convert or another mamzer. Some authorities have historically prescribed more extensive shunning of the mamzer than what rabbinical law required.

The ethical challenges posed by these laws are considerable — most significantly that it punishes children for the sins of their parents. Moreover, in the modern era, the consequences of enforcing the ban on mamzerim have grown considerably as the ranks of individuals who might technically qualify as a mamzer under traditional understandings of Jewish law have swelled. Anyone who divorced and remarried without following the traditional requirements of Jewish law would technically give birth to a mamzer. The offspring of such a person would also be considered mamzerim. The large-scale immigration

to Israel of groups of Jews whose practice of Judaism had been severely curtailed for generations further exacerbated the challenge.

In 2000, the Conservative Movement's Jewish law authorities addressed the problem by declining to accept evidence that would establish someone as a mamzer, thus effectively rendering the laws of mamzer inoperable while declining to formally abrogate them. Reform Judaism has abandoned the concept entirely.

In Orthodox Judaism, mamzer remains an operative category, and is closely related to the problem of the [agunah](#) — a so-called chained wife whose husband refuses to grant her a religious writ of divorce. Were such a woman to have a child with another man while still religiously married to her former husband, the child would be considered a mamzer. Some Orthodox rabbis will go to great lengths to avoid establishing someone as a mamzer — say by finding grounds to religiously invalidate the earlier marriage so that the subsequent child-producing union is no longer considered adulterous. But no universally accepted solution has yet been offered. The issue tends to be particularly problematic in Israel, where the Orthodox rabbinate controls marriage and will not authorize a union between a Jew and someone deemed a mamzer.

The Text: Leviticus Rabbah 32: 3-4

וַיֵּצֵא בֶן אִשָּׁה יִשְׂרָאֵלִית, מֵהֵיכָן יֵצֵא...

תני רבי חייא מפרשת יוחסין יצא, שבא לשע אהלו במחנה דן, אמרו לו מה לה לשע אהלו במחנה דן, אמר להם מגנות דן אני, אמרו לו פתיב (במדבר ב, ב): איש על דגלו באחת לבית אבתם ולא לבית אמותם, נכנס לבית דינו של משה ויצא מחיב, עמד וגדה.

והוא בן איש מצרי (ויקרא כד, י)

רבנן ורבי לוי, רבנן אמרי אף על פי שלא היו ממזרין באותה שעה, הוא היה ממזר. רבי לוי אמר ממזר ברור היה, פיצד נוגשין היו מצריים ושוטרים היו ישראל, נוגש היה ממנה על עשרה שוטרים, ושוטר היה ממנה על עשרה בני אדם, נמצא נוגש ממנה על מאה בני אדם, חד זמן קדם נוגש גבי שוטר אמר לו זיל פגוש לי חבורתך, פיון שונכנס שחקקה לו אשתו, אמר דהדין גברא היא, יצא והטמין עצמו לאחורי הסלם, פיון שיצא בעלה נכנס וקלקל עמה, הפך לאחוריו וחתמיה נפיק מן גו ביתא, פיון דידע דחתמיה נפק לגביה והוי מחי ליה פל ההוא יומא, ואמר ליה לעי טבאית לעי טבאית, מתפון בעי למקטליה, באותה שעה הציצה רוח הקדש במשה, הדא הוא דכתיב (שמות ב, יב) ויפן פה וכה, מהו פה וכה, אלא ראה מה עשה לו בבית ובשדה, אמר לו לא דיו שקלקל עם אשתו אלא שהוא מבקש להרגו, מיך (שמות ב, יב):

"And the son of an Israelite woman came out" — From where did he go out?

[Surely not from the camp, since the text "and a fight broke out in the camp"]

...

Rabbi Chyia taught: he came out (יצא) with an argument from the section regarding family connections.

He had gone to pitch his tent in the camp of the tribe of Dan. They told him: what claim do you have to pitch your tent in the camp of Dan?"

He replied: I am from one of the daughters of the tribe of Dan.

They said to him: It is written (**Numbers 2:2**) "Every man of the children of Israel shall encamp by his own banner, that bears the signs of their father's house" - and not the mother's!

He went in to the judicial court of Moses to have the matter decided and came out (אצ'י) declared to be in the wrong.

He then stood up and blasphemed.

...

"And he was the son of an Egyptian man" (Leviticus 24:10)

The Rabbis and Rabbi Levi discussed this issue. The Rabbis said: Even though there were no *mamzerim* in Israel at that time, [this son] was a mamzer.

Rabbi Levi said: He was a clear *mamzer*.

How did this event come about?

The taskmasters were Egyptians, and the guards were Israelites.

Each taskmaster was appointed over ten guards, and each guard was appointed over ten people (Israelites); it emerges that each taskmaster was appointed over a hundred people.

One time, a taskmaster came early in the morning to a guard and said to him, "Gather for me your group." When [the taskmaster] entered the guard's house, [the guard's] wife jested with him.

Consequently, [the taskmaster] said to himself, "She is mine."

He [the taskmaster] left the guard's house and hid himself behind a ladder.

Then, when her husband (the guard) left, he entered and sinned with her.

[The Israelite guard], who was still nearby, turned around and saw [the taskmaster] emerging from inside the house.

When [the taskmaster] realized that [the guard] had seen him, he went out toward him and was striking him the entire day and saying to him, "Work well, work well!" [The taskmaster] was intending to kill [the guard].

At that time, the Divine Spirit became enkindled in Moses. Thus it is written (Exodus 2:12): "[Moses] turned this way and that and saw that there was no man, so he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand."

What is the meaning of *this way and that*?

But the explanation is: [Moses] saw what [the taskmaster] did in the [guard's] house with the guard's wife, and what he was going to do to him in the field.

[Moses] said to [the Egyptian], "It is not enough that he sinned with [the Israelite's] wife that now he seeks to kill [the Israelite]?!" Thereupon (Exodus 2:12): "[Moses] turned this way and that and saw that there was no man, so he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand."



Explaining the Story - What is going on in our story? (Explain the sequence of events)

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? Why did the blasphemer go to the camp of the tribe of Dan to pitch his tent?

Extra Bonus ? Why was the blasphemer turned down?"

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Answer 4 _____

Answer 5 _____

Answer 6 _____

Bonus ? Why did the blasphemer go to the judicial court of Moses?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Answer 4 _____

? Why did Moses rule the way he did (declaring the blasphemer in the wrong)?

? How did the blasphemer become a *mamzer*?

Extra Bonus ? Why did the guard's wife (Shlomit) jest with the taskmaster?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Answer 4 _____

Answer 5 _____

Extra Bonus ? What do we learn from the fact that the taskmaster hid before entering the guard's home?

? Why did the taskmaster intend to kill the guard?

Answer.1 _____

Answer 2 _____

One More Analysis Questions

Extra Bonus ? Why did the blasphemer pronounced the Name in blasphemy according to our story?

"The Twist" – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from These Texts

! A sad story, with a sad beginning, and a sad end waiting to happen.



Children who grow up being rejected and who cannot find their place in life, will -most likely than not, become sad and bitter adults. The nameless hero of our story, called by his sin, "the blasphemer," had a terrible childhood, not a product of his own fault. When he grew up, he continued to face rejection and insult, and when this rejection and insult became part of the official policy (Moses' Torah), he couldn't take it any longer and his anger burst out against God, whom *our blasphemer* felt was the ultimate responsible for his misery.

While the society as a whole cannot tolerate blasphemy and the blasphemer will be punished, the reader of our story cannot help but feel compassion for him.

At the same time, our story is a reminder to all of us, that baseless rejection begets sadness, bitterness, and hatred, which has the potential to burst out, affecting our entire society.