

Blasphemy

Torah text

Ex. 20:7: 7. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.

*Lo tisa et shem Adonai [YHVH] elohecha lashav, ki lo yenakkeh Adonai [YHVH]
et asher yisa et shemo lashav*

Lev. 24: 10. Now, the son of an Israelite woman, who was also the son of an Egyptian man, went out among the children of Israel, and quarreled in the camp with an Israelite man. 11. And the son of the Israelite woman pronounced the [Divine] Name and cursed. So they brought him to Moses. His mother's name was Shelomith the daughter of Dibri, of the tribe of Dan. 12. They placed him in the guardhouse, [until his sentence would] be specified to them by the word of the Lord. 13. Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: 14. Take the blasphemer outside the camp, and all who heard [his blasphemy] shall lean their hands on his head. And the entire community shall stone him. 15. And to the children of Israel, you shall speak, saying: Any man who blasphemes his God shall bear his sin. 16. And he who blasphemes the name of the Lord, he shall surely be put to death, and all the congregation shall certainly stone him; both the stranger and he who is born in the land, when he blasphemes the name of the Lord, shall be put to death.

Discussion

Why is “No blasphemy” so major a commandment?

-Not mocking ultimate authority to preserve respect for Torah?

Background

-Blasphemy (gidduf): Disrespectful or irreverent use of God's name, with or without intention to pray or speak of holy matters.

-Torah: Punishment is death by stoning (Lev. 24: 15-16).

-Mishna: Death penalty only if name of “YHVH” (not another) is used before at least two witnesses:

“The blasphemer is punished only if he utters the [divine] name [YHVH].

R. Joshua b. Karha said: The whole day [of the trial] the witnesses are examined by means of a substitute for YHVH, [e.g.] Jose. [Jose has also 4 letters like YHVH, and gematria of Elohim -- 81]

When the trial is finished, the accused is not executed on this evidence, but all persons are removed [from the court], and the chief witness is told, 'state literally what you heard'. When he does so, [using YHVH], the judges then arise and rend their garments, which are not to be re sewn. The second witness states 'I too have heard thus' [but not uttering YHVH], and the third says: 'I too heard thus'."

[Sanhedrin 7:5]

- Talmud: For other name, only corporal punishment applied [Sanhedrin 56a].
- Rambam: Blasphemy includes the erasure of God's name (e.g., on paper)
- Today's penalty is cherem.
- Shulhan Arukh: Whoever hears blasphemy, whether with YHVH or any other name, in any language, from a Jew, must rend his garment. (YD 340:37)
- Teshuva is possible.
- “No blasphemy” is one of the 7 Noahide laws (Sanh. 56a-60a).