

Compassion in Kentucky
Emor 5782
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It's likely that you read this story already, as it went viral this past week¹. This past Sunday, a student at the University of Kentucky was at a party celebrating his impending graduation. Standing on the porch of the house where they were celebrating, he looked next door, and saw a man with a beard, kippah and tzitzis- and greeted him by yelling "Kill The Kikes!" The target of his hateful slur was Rabbi Shlomo Litvin, Co-Director of Chabad of the Bluegrass in Lexington, and Chabad representative to the University of Kentucky. It's not clear what reaction the mystery anti-Semite, who retreated into the house immediately, hoped to elicit from Rabbi Litvin. What is clear is that he was messing with the wrong kike. Rabbi Litvin went over to the neighbors and described, in a series of tweets, described what unfolded next...

The book of Vayikra contains only two narratives, and neither of them are positive or uplifting. The first was the untimely demise of Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aharon and the second is the narrative in this morning's Torah reading, that of the *Mekalel*, the blasphemer. The Torah does not really give much background on the incident, but it does tell us a little bit about who he was.

וַיֵּצֵא בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אִשָּׁה בְּנוֹת אִישׁ מִצֵּיטְרֵי בְּתוּלָה בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּנָּצְרִי בְּמַחְזֶה בֶּן הַיִּשְׂרָאֵלִית וְאִישׁ הַיִּשְׂרָאֵלִי:

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=3093680424276388&set=a.1522713434706436>

There came out among the Israelites a man 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.

וַיָּקֹב בְּיָדָאִשָּׁה הַיִּשְׂרָאֵלִית אֶת־הַשֵּׁם וַיִּקְלָל וַיָּבִיאוּ אוֹתוֹ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְשֵׁם אִמּוֹ שְׁלֹמִית בַּת־דִּבְרִי לְמַטֵּה־דָן:

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—

וַיִּנְיָחֻהוּ בַּמִּשְׁמָר לְפָרֹשׁ לָהֶם עַל־כֵּי יְהוָה: {פ}

and he was placed in custody, until the decision of God should be made clear to them.

What was it that caused this man to blaspheme? The text describes some kind of altercation between this man, who was of mixed parentage, and a man who was Jewish on both sides.

While the text does seem to indicate that this fight was a proximal cause of this man’s cursing, it also stresses that this man “left.” What, indeed, did he leave? The Midrash Rabbah² points out that it wasn’t the camp that he left; after all, the altercation took place in the camp itself. The “leaving” must therefore be metaphorical, perhaps connected to the subject of the altercation. The Midrash offers three different opinions.

1. **Rabbi Levi** said that he left his share in the world to come.
2. **Rabbi Chiya** attributes his blasphemy to a disagreement the man had with the elders of the tribe of Dan. He asked to be affiliated with the tribe, because his mother was a

² Vayikra Rabba 32

Danite woman. They responded that while *Jewish* status is matrilineal, *tribal* status is patrilineal. They brought the matter to Moshe to decide, and he ruled in favor of the tribe of Dan- whereupon the man cursed God.

3. **Rabbi Berechiah** connects this section with the previous one, which discusses the *lechem hapanim*, the show bread. This was the bread that was placed on the *shulchan* in the Mishkan every Shabbos, and remained miraculously fresh until the next one, when it was replaced. As an aside, there are brands of Challah these days that more or less fit the same description, through preservatives, not providence. But I digress. This individual had a serious philosophical issue with the *lechem hapanim*. How can you disrespect God like this, by placing stale bread in front of him? A king of flesh and blood would have fresh bread every day! He was so frustrated, it seems, that he cursed the name of God.

I can understand the first two opinions. This man rejected the World to Come- and the related belief in reward and punishment- because he wanted to live a hedonistic life focused on the here and now. On the way out, he cursed out God. I can also understand why a person would feel deeply disappointed at being denied membership in a tribe- after all, that was the cornerstone of one's identity among the Jewish people. So he lashed out against the religious establishment that was denying him his wish, and against the God who ordained the system they were upholding. But the *lechem hapanim*? He didn't understand something about Challah...so he cursed the very God whose honor he was defending?!

I'd like to suggest that this man displayed a fundamental character flaw that informed his entire world view, and colored every one of his interactions: he was angry and extreme, and expressed himself accordingly about every subject. It is what led him to lose any sense of self control or proportion. He was worked up into such a frenzy about something that made him confused, angry and frustrated that he ended up cursing that which he tried to defend.

I think the lesson of the *mekalel* is one we all need to learn, because we live in a time- and in a country- where extreme expression is the primary mode of communication. Who among us *hasn't* expressed ourselves intemperately on issues we feel passionately about, or situations that make us upset? I know I have. It feels good to unload, verbally or in writing; expressing ourselves emphatically and passionately carries our point across and is easy to rationalize, because keeping that kind of negativity bottled up can be toxic. But there is a difference between losing control *on occasion* and making extreme pronouncements as a matter of course. Nowadays, it is the most radical viewpoints, expressed in the most strident ways, that are given "air time." No one wants to hear that people and issues are complex; it doesn't "sell" to acknowledge that others can take a different position from ours yet still be good and well-intentioned people; it is no longer possible to make a mistake and still deserve a second chance. Instead, we unleash, we demonize and we cancel; In short, we are *mekalel*. Usually, it is not God we curse, but it is His creations, hurling the most offensive language at the objects of our disagreement, which now equals disdain. Ask anyone who has served in any type of Jewish communal capacity what they have been dealing with for the past two years, and they will tell you that they have been on the receiving end of the most extreme forms of verbal abuse by people on every side of many of the many issues they've had to deal with. When

everyone speaks in extreme ways, when nuanced thinking and expression is dead, when everyone says out loud what should be quiet- that's when hateful speech of the kind perpetrated by the young man in Kentucky becomes socially acceptable. It's no wonder that the Torah stresses that the *mekalel* was the child of an Egyptian man and a Jewish woman; The Torah wanted us to know that he **was** a Jew, but that he acted in a way that was deeply un-Jewish. It is also no wonder that the Medrash describes an act of blasphemy that was actually the end result of an expression of religious fervor, of connection to God. Extreme expressions like this always lead to destruction, to us undermining the causes we feel passionately about because of the way we speak about them.

When walked next door, it was with the intention of having a word with the young troglodyte. The neighbors, he said in his post, are good kids he loves and respects, and they were deeply ashamed and apologetic. But they didn't want to make a fuss, and they tried to encourage Rabbi Litvin to leave. Of course, he wouldn't budge. He assured them that he knew their guest did not represent their views, but that he wasn't going anywhere until he could speak with perpetrator. It took an hour for the young man to come out; no doubt he was experiencing a mixture of embarrassment and defiance. Rabbi Litvin asked the young man to repeat what he said, and then asked if he knew the blood-stained history of those words. Of course, the young man did not. He didn't really know any Jews at all. Rabbi Litvin gave him a crash course on the history of anti-Semitism, and the short distance between anti-Semitic words and the death of Jews to this day. The young man apologized profusely

and tearfully, and Rabbi Litvin asked for his assurance that he would never use such language again. An invitation was proffered to drop by the Jewish Student Center for a coffee and further study- about Judaism, antisemitism and the power of words.

Rabbi Litvin is an inspiration to us as well. Reb Nachman of Breslov often said³

אם אתה מאמין, שיכולין ללקלק, תאמין שיכולין לתקן

If you believe it is possible to destroy, believe as well that it is possible to repair.

If extreme words can be destructive, words can be *constructive* as well. Let us use our words wisely- not to curse, but to bless the world around us and everyone we connect with.

³ Likkutei Moharan 1:112