**Blaming the Blasphemer**
*Parshat Emor* 5774

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*The first time we met Rabbi Beller after making aliya from London, we knew we had encountered a leader who understood how to walk the fine line between commanding and comforting. He was unafraid of setting boundaries for his community — and did so with love and true simcha. He could be hilariously funny and solemnly serious, and in both registers it was his authenticity that made him so extraordinarily alive. Even now, it is impossible to think of him as gone — his spirit simply refuses to be dulled. He was equally unafraid of confronting the challenges that Judaism places before us today. He believed in a bold, unapologetic Orthodoxy — one that spoke to our moment without losing its reverence for the past. He spoke to every person at eye level. It was impossible to walk away from a shiur, a speech, or a Shabbat morning with him without having been genuinely infected by his passion. For me personally, he taught me not to be afraid of the moments when Judaism does not sit comfortably with our modern moral and philosophical instincts. He taught me — as I have tried to share in this essay — that when contradictions make us uncomfortable, the answer is not to skim the surface but to jump into the deep end and grapple. Because that, ultimately, is where real relationship happens — with Torah, with God, and with each other. May his memory be a blessing.*

We live in a culture saturated by blame. It is far easier to shift responsibility onto others —our parents, the system, God — than to accept it ourselves, or to acknowledge that life at times is simply unfair.

Two major figures in modern psychology, Sigmund Freud and Alfred Adler, disagreed fundamentally on this issue. Freud's deterministic worldview saw the past as a defining force in human behaviour. Adler, his student, argued for the ongoing agency of the individual — the power of people to make conscious choices in the present, irrespective of their past.

The Jewish people in general, and modern Israel in particular, exemplify this Adlerian spirit. Emerging from the horrors of the Holocaust, they did not remain victims. They became builders, dreamers, and architects of a new future — channelling the weight of the past not into paralysis but into purpose. It is a posture we are witnessing once again in the shadow of October 7th.

This tension — between blaming the past and building the future — finds its sharpest expression in one of the Torah's most unsettling narratives: the story of the blasphemer that takes place in *Sefer Vayikra* in *Parshat Emor*, a *parsha* that is preoccupied with precision and sanctity. Its laws — the priestly blemishes that disqualify a Kohen from service, the animals fit for sacrifice, the sacred calendar of the Chagim, the prohibition against desecrating God's name — all orbit a single animating question: what does it take to become a vessel through which the divine can be encountered? Every person, animal, and moment must meet an exacting standard — not out of cold legalism, but because the relationship between human beings and God demands to be calibrated with extraordinary care.

Into this world of order and sanctity, a story breaks through (*Vayikra* 24) — one of only two narrative interruptions in the entire book of *Vayikra* — and it does so with a force that is striking in both tone and content.

A man, the son of an Israelite mother and an Egyptian father, gets into a fight and blasphemes the Name of God. He is brought to Moshe and, after divine instruction, is taken outside the camp and stoned to death by the congregation.

Questions abound. Why is this story placed here? What does it have to do with the themes of *Emor*? Why are we told his mother's name — Shelomit bat Divri? And why such a severe punishment?

Commentators and midrashim offer a range of interpretations. *Midrash Vayikra Rabbah* (32:3), cited by Rashi (Lev. 24:10), describes the blasphemer attempting to pitch his tent within the tribe of Dan but being rejected because tribal identity follows the father. Other traditions in *Midrash Tanchuma* (Emor 23) and *Yalkut Shimoni* suggest the humiliation and exclusion he experienced preceded the blasphemy. While the Torah itself identifies the central offense as the blasphemy of the Divine Name (Lev. 24:11; Sanhedrin 56a–60a), some commentators note that the episode begins with violence in the camp (Lev. 24:10), suggesting that the conflict itself formed part of the moral breakdown.

The blasphemer is, as the midrash portrays him, a man with nowhere to pitch his tent — suspended between identities, claimed by neither tribe nor lineage. His story does not begin with blasphemy. It begins with exclusion. And when belonging collapses, language is its first casualty — words stripped of sanctity become weapons. The Torah frames this episode not merely as a legal violation but as a moral warning: when our sense of belonging and the foundations of community erode, language is the first casualty and violence the natural outgrowth. Empathy and human dignity soon lose their moral power.

A close reader might notice a powerful parallel to Moshe's life both thematically and linguistically. Consider how the episode of a young Moshe leaving the palace, witnessing injustice, and acting to remedy it mirrors our story in *Vayikra*:

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| **וַיֵּצֵא**, בֶּן-אִשָּׁה יִשְׂרְאֵלִית<br>וְהוּא בֶּן-**אִישׁ מִצְרִי**, בְּתוֹךְ **בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל**<br>**וַיִּנָּצוּ**, בַּמַּחֲנֶה<br>**10** And the son of an Israelitish woman, whose father was an **Egyptian**, went out among the children of Israel; and the son of the Israelitish woman and a man of Israel **strove together in the camp. 11** And the son of the Israelitish woman **blasphemed the Name, and cursed**; and they brought him unto Moses. And his mother's name was Shelomith, the daughter of Dibri, of the tribe of Dan. **12** And they put him in ward, that it might be declared unto them at the mouth of the LORD | וַיִּגְדַּל מֹשֶׁה **וַיֵּצֵא אֶל-אֶחָיו**, וַיַּרְא, בְּסִבְלֹתָם<br>וַיַּרְא **אִישׁ מִצְרִי**, **מַכֶּה אִישׁ-עִבְרִי** מֵאֶחָיו<br>וַיִּפֶן כֹּה וָכֹה, וַיַּרְא כִּי אֵין אִישׁ ; וַיַּךְ, אֶת-הַמִּצְרִי, וַיִּטְמְנֵהוּ, בַּחוֹל. **יג** וַיֵּצֵא בַּיּוֹם הַשֵּׁנִי, וְהִנֵּה שְׁנֵי-אֲנָשִׁים עִבְרִים **נִצִּים** ; וַיֹּאמֶר, לָרָשָׁע, לָמָּה תַכֶּה, רֵעֶךָ<br>in those days, when Moses was grown up, that he **went out unto his brethren**, and looked on their burdens; and he saw **an Egyptian** smiting a Hebrew, one of his brethren.<br>13 And he went out the second day, and, behold, two men of the Hebrews were **striving together**; and he said to him that did the wrong: **'Wherefore smitest thou thy fellow?'** |

The linguistic and thematic parallels are striking — and I think they invite us to read this narrative in a more radical way. The parallel words – ויצא – to go out, מצרי (Egyptian) and עברי (Israelite), וינצו/ניצים strife/violence suggest that these two stories center around the experience of alienation, fractured identity and conflict.

Moshe, raised in Pharaoh's palace yet drawn to his Hebrew brothers (*Shemot* 2:11–14), is repeatedly identified as both insider and outsider — called an "Egyptian man" by Yitro's daughters even as he seeks to defend Israel (*Shemot* 2:19). The blasphemer occupies a similar liminal space: "the son of an Israelite woman and an Egyptian man" (*Vayikra* 24:10), the midrash suggests he was a mamzer, born of a relationship that was either illicit or violent. A man with no clear tribal home, belonging fully to neither world. Yet the two men respond very differently to this tension. Moshe channels his marginality into moral courage, eventually transforming from one who claims to be "not a man of words" (*Shemot* 4:10) into the leader whose final speeches form the entire book of *Devarim* (literally: words). The blasphemer, by contrast, turns alienation into corrosive speech by weaponizing language against God. Their responses to exclusion shape their legacies: Moshe becomes the voice of covenantal leadership; the blasphemer remains a cautionary tale about the destructive power of grievance and words.

It is hard not to feel the pull of sympathy to this man. His pain is real, his circumstances beyond his control. And yet the Torah suggests something more is at play here. Something that transcends the grammar of modern moral reasoning. The book of *Vayikra* asks not only what is right and wrong, but what is **holy**. There are laws in *Vayikra* that disturb our modern sensibilities: about blemished priests, disqualified sacrifices, and illegitimate children. The text does not apologise. It sets boundaries that are often hard to accept. Holiness, it suggests, is not always aligned with fairness as we understand it.

As Jonathan Haidt argues in *The Righteous Mind*, sanctity is a powerful moral foundation in its own right — rooted not in logic or fairness, but in our deep psychological need to preserve what is sacred, to guard against spiritual or moral contamination. While modern liberal ethics tends to prioritise harm and justice, religious systems often emphasise sanctity because it helps bind communities and elevate life with meaning. Violations of sanctity feel viscerally wrong—not because they hurt someone, but because they desecrate something we feel must remain untouchable.

The term קדוש means to separate because sanctity, by the terms of its own definition, requires — indeed mandates — **boundaries**. And as we know, to our postmodern sensibilities, boundaries can make us deeply uncomfortable. They suggest exclusion, hierarchy, limitation. Yet in the biblical worldview, boundaries are what protect and sustain the sacred. They define the contours of holiness, shaping the spaces, times, and behaviours through which the Divine becomes accessible.

To engage with the Divine requires the human being to meet certain conditions of purity, presence, and preparation. Language, time, space, even lineage, are part of that architecture. Misusing any of these, particularly the Divine Name, is seen not just as a moral transgression but as a rupture in the fabric of sacred relationship.

Postmodern culture has a story it tells about freedom: that it means the removal of constraints, that the loving parent is the permissive one, that rules crush rather than cultivate. But this story is incomplete. Children without structure do not flourish, they flounder. Relationships without limits corrode. The boundary is not the enemy of the self. It is the condition for it.

The garden only works because of the tree. Eden was not a space of pure unbounded possibility — it was a garden, which is to say, a cultivated and bounded space. And at its centre stood a tree that could not be touched. That limit was not an act of divine cruelty or arbitrary restriction. It was the very thing that gave the garden its meaning, that gave human choice its weight, that

made freedom real rather than merely theoretical. A world without limits is not paradise — it is the world of *taavah la'einayim*, of desire dressed up as freedom, of immediate gratification mistaken for flourishing. It is, in the end, not liberation but chaos.

Freedom, in the deepest sense, is not boundlessness. It is knowing which boundaries are required in order to flourish — as individuals, in our relationships, and as a society. This is what *Vayikra* understands that our therapeutic culture often misses: that freedom is the first step and holiness its culmination. Holiness is not repression, it is precision. It is the careful calibration of a life in which every vessel — every person, every moment, every word — is shaped toward encounter with something greater than itself.

That does not mean we must be comfortable when that boundary shakes our ethical equilibrium. Quite the opposite. Our discomfort is itself a sign of moral alertness. *Vayikra* dares us to hold the tension between our inner moral intuition and the Torah's sacred categories. We are asked not to resolve the discomfort, but to live within it — to seek God not only in what we understand, but precisely in what we do not. It invites humility — stepping into a dimension we cannot discern through reason alone. We understand why time must be set apart for encounter with the divine. We understand why language — the very medium through which we sanctify God's name — cannot be turned against Him. We understand less easily why a Kohen with a physical disability cannot enter the sanctuary, or why a *mamzer*, born of no fault of his own, carries the mark of an unholy union into every generation. And yet all of these laws sit within the same *parsha*

, within the same discussion of *kedusha*. They demand to be held together, even when we cannot fully understand them.

This is where empathy enters. Not as a soft sentiment. As a moral necessity.

The good and the holy are not always congruent. It is precisely because they are not that we continue to fight for the *mamzerim,* for the *agunot*, for those who seem to have been dealt an impossible hand by the very laws we hold sacred. The moment we feel nothing for that man in our narrative — the moment his pain becomes merely a legal category — is the moment we have lost something essential about ourselves.

Moshe understood this in his bones. The root תרא — to see — echoes through his story again and again. Like the women who raised him, he does not merely observe. He sees into things. וַיֵּצֵא אֶל-אֶחָיו וַיַּרְא בְּסִבְלֹתָם (*Shemot* 2:11) — he goes out to his brothers and sees not just their labour, but into their suffering. That preposition בְּ — into — is everything. It is the difference between sympathy and empathy, between witnessing and being changed by what you witness. Moshe spends his entire life learning what this kind of seeing demands: that law and empathy, justice and compassion, cannot always be reconciled in this world. Only in a transcendent realm can they work in perfect unison. Here, we must hold both — without abandoning either.

That, perhaps, is why the Torah takes such care to tell us that the people stoned the blasphemer not out of hatred, but in obedience to God's command. The Ramban reads that seemingly redundant phrase — "and the children of Israel did as God commanded Moses" (*Vayikra* 24:23) — as a moral instruction: they did not act from vengeance or contempt for the son of an Egyptian. They acted from solemn, painful responsibility. Justice and empathy, held together in a single terrible moment.

A midrash on *mamzerim* captures this paradox with devastating honesty:

*"The tears of the oppressed, with no one to comfort them… their mothers sinned, but what did these children do? The Holy One says: It is for Me to comfort them."* (*Vayikra Rabbah* 32:8)

There are moments when only God can offer the comfort that justice cannot. Our task is to carry out what is asked of us — and to weep while we do it.

And here we return to the garden. Freedom, we said, is not boundlessness. The garden only works because of the tree (*Bereishit* 2:9, 2:17). A world without limits is not paradise. It is chaos. And a Judaism without sanctity - without the laws that trouble us is not a more compassionate Judaism — it is a thinner one, stripped of the very tension that generates moral seriousness.

The blasphemer's tragedy is precisely this: he experienced the boundaries as oppression rather than as the architecture of a life oriented toward the sacred. His pain was real. His exclusion was genuine. But his response, cursing the Name, the very source of holiness of ultimate meaning and possibility, was a refusal of the framework within which his pain might have found its place, and even its redemption. The contrast with Ruth the Moabite is instructive. She too lived under the shadow of exclusion — a Moabite, forbidden from joining Israel — and yet her response was not to curse the framework but to embrace it, to choose loyalty over resentment. And it is she, the ultimate outsider, who births the line of redemption.

We return, in closing, to Viktor Frankl, who built his life's work on the insight that even in Auschwitz — perhaps especially in Auschwitz — human beings retain one irreducible freedom: the freedom to choose how they respond to suffering. That choice, he taught, is the seat of human dignity. As Jews, we are mandated to respond to injustice, to pain, to the incomprehensible — not by cursing God, not by making a *chillul Hashem* — but by sanctifying life, by choosing destiny over fate, by refusing to let our wounds become our identity. The boundaries of Torah are not the walls of a prison. They are the walls of a home — the home we build together, within which both justice and empathy, both holiness and humanity, must dwell side by side.

This is the legacy we inherit. Not blame, but responsibility. Not the denial of pain, but the courage to work through it — with empathy, with purpose, and with faith that the boundaries which sometimes distress us are also, in ways we cannot always see, the very conditions of our flourishing.

May we, like Moshe, learn how to navigate that tension. And may we find the courage to teach our children to do the same.