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## Quarreling

By Rabbi Joshua (rambunctiously known as The Hoffer) Hoffman

At the end of this week's parsha, we are told that the son of an Israelite woman and an Egyptian man quarreled in the camp with an Israelite man. In the course of this quarrel, the son of the Egyptian man cursed the name of God, was incarcerated, and ultimately, upon divine direction, put to death through stoning. Immediately after the Torah records the execution of this man, it presents us with the law that if someone strikes his fellow and thereby kills him, he receives the death penalty as a punishment for his crime. Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra explains this juxtaposition by saying that often, when people quarrel, they come to blows, which can result in death. Therefore, after telling us of the quarrel that took place in the camp, the Torah tells us the punishment that should be administered when a quarrel leads to murder. This suggestion, however, does not explain the connection between the sin of cursing God and the sin of murder. I would like to present two possible explanations of this connection, one conceptual, and the other historical.

In parshas Ki Seitzei (Devorim 21, 22-23) we read that if a person commits a sin for which he is punished with death, he should be hung on a beam after the execution. However, his body should not be left hanging overnight, because "because a hanging person is as the cursing of God." Rashi explains that since man is in God's image, it is a degradation of God for his body to remain hanging, and, so, it must be cut down. According to Jewish law, only those who are put to death through the most severe form of execution - *sekilah* - commonly though incorrectly explained as stoning - are subjected to this process of hanging. The two sins we are dealing with at the end of parshas Emor, cursing God and killing someone through striking them, are punishable by stoning. In both cases, the sin that was committed involves a desecration of God's name. This is of course obvious in the case of cursing God. In the case of murder, too, the murderer desecrates God's name through ending the life of one who bears His image. Perhaps, then, the reason that the punishment for murder is mentioned immediately after the Torah's account of the curser's sin and execution is to bring this point into greater relief. In both cases, therefore, the body of the sinner is hanged for a short time to indicate that he has committed an act through which God's name is desecrated.

Another reason for mentioning the sin of murder immediately after the account of the curser can be given based on the identity of the curser. Who was this man? As Rashi tells us, from a midrash, when the Jews were enslaved in Egypt, an Egyptian taskmaster entered the home of an Israelite slave and violated her. When the husband came home and discovered what had happened, the Egyptian began to beat him. Moshe, seeing this, somehow utilized the name of God to kill the Egyptian and thereby save the life of the slave. The curser, says the midrash, was the result of that illicit relationship.

Was Moshe right in killing the Egyptian? The fact that he used God's name

source?

to carry out this act would seem to indicate that God was behind it. However, there is a tradition of midrashim that faults Moshe for his act, and, in fact, views God's refusal to permit him entrance to Eretz Ysroel was a punishment for killing the Egyptian. Avigdor Shinan, in a study of the different midrashic traditions on this topic (see his article in Kedushat Ha Chaim v'Cheiruf HaNefesh, edited by Gafni and Ravitzki, Jerusalem, 1993), assumes that the midrashim which fault Moshe cannot be reconciled with those that say he killed the Egyptian through using God's name. However, it is interesting to note that another midrash, cited by Da'as Zekeinim and other commentators to our parsha, says that the curser, in the course of his quarrel, was informed that his father has been killed by Moshe through use of God's name. In anger, he went out and cursed that name. Perhaps, then, Moshe's misuse of the divine name, although it did result in the saving of a Jewish life, ultimately led to the desecration of that name by the offspring of Moshe's victim. Because of this desecration of God's name which he, in some sense, contributed to, Moshe was denied entrance to Eretz Yisroel. Even though the Torah tells us explicitly that Moshe was denied entrance to the land because of the incident at the rock, the sin involved in that incident is called, by God, a failure to sanctify His name in front of the people. The common denominator is a diminution of the honor due to God. Perhaps, then, the case of murder, which constitutes a desecration of God's name, is mentioned directly after the execution of the curser, to indicate that the death of the curser's father is what ultimately led to the son's offense.

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