

**Parshat Emor:  
On Embracing the Outsider**  
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In Parshat Emor we are introduced to an enigmatic character known as “the blasphemer.”

“The son of an Israelite woman went out, and he was the son of the Egyptian man among Israel.” (Vayikra 24:10) וַיֵּצֵא, בֶן-אִשָּׁה יִשְׂרָאֵלִית, וְהוּא בֶן-אִישׁ מִצְרִי, בְּתוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל; וַיִּנְצוּ, בְּמַחֲנֶה, בֶּן הַיִּשְׂרָאֵלִית, וְאִישׁ הַיִּשְׂרָאֵלִי. (ויקרא כד:י)

This man, for reasons unstated in the text, gets into a heated argument with another Israelite and blasphemes the name of God. He is brought by witnesses to Moses for adjudication, after which God instructs the people to “lean their hands on his head” and the entire nation to stone him to death.

Why did this *ben isha yisraelit*, son of a Jewish woman and an Egyptian man instigate a fight with another Jew? The Midrash (Leviticus Rabbah 32:3) presents a vivid picture of the events preceding this altercation. The *ben isha yisraelit*, whose mother was from the tribe of Dan, attempted to pitch his tent in the tribe’s quarters. He is rejected by his presumptive fellow tribesman and told that since tribal affiliation is determined through the father, he has no place amongst the tribe of Dan. Even though the *ben isha yisraelit* clearly saw himself as Jewish, others were unwilling to accept him. The *ben isha yisraelit* takes his case to Moshe, seeking out empathy from another Jew who also grew up as an outsider in Egypt. However, Moshe ruled in favor of Dan, and the *ben isha yisraelit*, angry and dejected, responds by blaspheming God’s name.

Imagine his utter disappointment in his people, in his community. He had a religious crisis and lashed out with a religious response. As a sympathetic reader, I cannot help but feel disconcerted by this narrative. I am not excusing his crime--after all, the *ben isha yisraelit* violated the prohibition of desecrating God’s name, a law stated explicitly just a few verses earlier. I am unsettled, however, by the community’s seeming lack of compassion for this outsider. And in fact, as the careful reader of this narrative will note, the Torah seems unsettled by this as well.

In announcing the punishment of the *ben isha yisraelit*, God commands *B'nei Yisrael*, “let all those who heard place their hands upon his head, and let the entire congregation stone him.” Generally, the placing of hands, *smicha*, is a symbolic gesture whereby one transfers sin onto another. Such is the case with sacrifices: “He shall place his hands upon the head of the burnt sacrifice, and it shall be accepted from him, to atone for him” (Vayikra 1:4). Similarly, on Yom Kippur the High Priest places both his hands on the head of a live goat – the scapegoat, transferring the iniquities of *B'nei Yisrael* onto its head, before it is sent to perish in the desert (Vayikra 16:21-22).

The parallel is striking. The people who witnessed the blasphemer, most likely the very people who banished him from their midst, were obligated to atone for their lack of compassion by means of *smicha*. The *ben isha yisraelit* died for his transgression, but he also became the scapegoat, sent to his death because of the sins of his neighbors.

That the community was at least partially responsible for the sin of the *ben isha yisraelit* is further evidenced by the juxtaposition of this story to the upcoming *parshiot* which describe our responsibility to help integrate the lonely and downtrodden. The Torah emphasizes our obligation to take care of the impoverished, the stranger, the widow and the orphan.

The *ben isha yisraelit* is the paradigmatic outsider. He is someone who does not fit in, someone out of sync with societal expectations and with the natural rhythms of life. The story of the *ben isha yisraelit* reminds us that our community can be a harsh place for anyone who looks out of place, who speaks a different tongue, or whose family structure is not traditional. Perhaps if the community had embraced the *ben-isha yisraelit*, rather than pushed him away--if they had welcomed him, sat next to him in *shul*, shown him the correct place in the *siddur*--he might not have been compelled to blaspheme God's name.

Each individual has immeasurable potential, and oppressing the outsider crushes potential human greatness. Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda of Berlin (the Netziv) comments on the importance of caring for the underserved (Exodus 22:20-21) by teaching that we should never underestimate the human potential of the 'stranger'; never forget that he or she could also be destined for greatness and hence, never be responsible for the suppression of another's potential. Rather, open your heart to the stranger in love so that you can enable him to flourish and realize his potential.



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