Jewish Tribune – Emor

**Respect for all**

Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky tells of the time when Rav Yonasan Eibeschutz, the great 18th century Torah leader, was away from his home one Yom Kippur. He was forced to spend the holiest day of the year in a small town. He entered the local shul without having to reveal his identity and looked for a suitable place to daven.

His eyes fell upon a man davening fervently and gently swaying backwards and forwards with tears in his eyes. Rav Yonasan Eibeschutz sat himself next to this man, in the confidence that his neighbour’s tefillos would inspire his own davening.

The man cried softly as he prayed, tears flowing down his face. “I am but dust Ribbono shel Olam!” he wept and repeated his declarations of insignificance and lack of merit several times over the course of Yom Kippur.

Rav Yonasan Eibeschutz continued his tefilla, inspired by the sincerity of his neighbour.

All until it came to mincha, and maftir Yonah was given to a man from the front of the shul. Suddenly Rav Eibeschutz’ neighbour jumped up and charged to the bimah.

“Him!” the man shouted at the gabbe. “You give him maftir Yonah?!” The shul went silent. “I give much more tzedoko and learn twice as much as him. And I come from a much more illustrious family.”

The man stormed back to his seat. After he calmed down, Rav Eibeschutz approached the man. “I don’t understand,” he said. “Half an hour ago, you were crying about how insignificant and unworthy you are, and now you are claiming maftir Yonah instead of this person!?”

The man snapped back. “Compared to Hashem I am nothing.” Then he pointed to the bimah and sneered. “But not compared to him!”

Rabbi Kamenetzky uses this episode to explain a difficulty in this week’s parsha. We read of the sad story of the mekallel. The person who quarrelled with a fellow Jew and the left the dispute in a rage and compounded his sin by cursing and blaspheming Hashem.

Curiously, after declaring the death penalty, the Torah (Vayikra 24:15-21) continues to elucidate punishments and penalties for causing personal injury to another person.

הוֹצֵא אֶת הַמְקַלֵּל וְרָגְמוּ אֹתוֹ

Take the blasphemer out and stone him

וּמַכֵּה נֶפֶשׁ בְּהֵמָה יְשַׁלְּמֶנָּה

And one who slays an animal shall pay for it

 וְאִישׁ כִּי יִתֵּן מוּם בַּעֲמִיתוֹ כַּאֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה כֵּן יֵעָשֶׂה לּוֹ

And if a man inflicts damage on his fellow man, just as he did, so shall be done to him

Why does the Torah group blasphemy together with these more mundane crimes? Not only causing injury to human beings but even to animals! Surely, the greater crime of affronting Hashem cannot be equated with that?

Perhaps says Rabbi Kamenetzky, that is exactly the point. The Torah deliberately teaches the laws of damages to human beings and animals in direct conjunction with the prohibition of blasphemy to teach that sometimes people are careful about how they honour HKBH and even Rabbonim, teachers and mentors but are less scrupulous about how they treat other people.

Grouping the prohibitions together reminds us that we are all created b’tzelem Elokim, in the Diving image and all of Hashem’s creations should be treated with respect.

Some may show reverence to the Ribbono shel Oilam or even to famous institutions and are careful about the honour they bestow upon respected people, but do not think twice about trampling on – and even harming – lesser mortals.

Our parsha places these crimes next to each other to teach that *all* of Hashem’s creations must be treated with respect. Even animals.

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