

THE PROHIBITION OF BLASPHEMY

The Obligation to Respect G-d's Name, and What is Forbidden as Blasphemy

1. Gentiles are warned against “blessing G-d’s Name” (the term is euphemistic, and means cursing¹ G-d), and they are liable for this. Adam, the first person, was warned about this, as it is written,² “And the L-rd G-d commanded [upon] Adam ...” This means that G-d commanded His Divinity and authority upon Adam. The three meanings of this statement are:

“I am G-d; do not exchange Me” – for another G-d, this being the prohibition of idolatry.

“I am G-d; do not curse Me” – this being the prohibition of blasphemy.

“I am G-d; the fear of Me shall be upon you” – this being the obligation to fear G-d. Fearing G-d is a part of the general commandment to guard one’s self against committing blasphemy.

This prohibition was again commanded explicitly in the Torah regarding Gentiles, as it says,³ “*Any man* who will blaspheme his G-d shall bear his sin, and one who pronounces blasphemously G-d’s Name shall be put to death [by an empowered *Beit Din* court, which does not exist in our times] ...”⁴ Thus Moses received and transmitted additional details and clarifications about this Noahide prohibition.

2. What is the definition of “pronounces blasphemously G-d’s Name” in the above-cited verse, which refers to the Explicit Name of G-d?⁵

The Explicit Name of G-d is *either* the Tetragrammaton (which is

¹ I.e., stating that G-d should harm Himself (G-d forbid).

² Genesis 2:16.

³ Leviticus 24:15-16. This verse refers to the Explicit Name of G-d, which He revealed when He spoke at Mt. Sinai.

⁴ See Tractate *Sanhedrin* 56a: “*Any man* who will blaspheme – this comes to include Gentiles ...”

⁵ The Hebrew word used in the verse, “one who pronounces blasphemously (*v’nokev*) G-d’s Name,” literally means both to clearly pronounce the Explicit Name, and to curse it; see Rashi on Leviticus 24:16.

represented by Y-H-V-H) or the Name *Ado-nai*⁶ (meaning “L-rd” in Hebrew, in the literal sense of Supreme Rulership). (Even though their articulations are different, these are two alternative expressions of the Explicit Name.⁷)

The capital sin of blasphemy is committed if a person clearly requests (with his mouth) a curse from G-d upon the Explicit Name. How? By invoking one of the holy Names of G-d, or one of His attributive names, against the Explicit Name (i.e., that G-d, as He is called by one of His Names, should do such-and-such a harm to Himself, as He is called by the Explicit Name).⁸

(See topic 3 below, about forbidden speech that is not a capital sin.)

One is liable if this is stated in a way of “May Yosai strike Yosai.”⁹ (The nickname “Yosai” is used as a euphemism, to avoid explaining this with the actual Explicit Name in such a negative context; using a euphemistic name in order to explain precept does not carry any liability.) Equally forbidden are blaspheming in a way of “May Yosai curse Yosai,” or “May the Merciful One (or Compassionate One, etc.) curse Yosai” (i.e., using an attributive name along with one of the expressions of the Explicit Name). This obviously applies if one cursed G-d’s Explicit Name with the same Name, such as *Ado-nai* with *Ado-nai*.

What is considered a holy Name (other than the Explicit Name), and what is considered an attributive name? The holy Names of G-d (specifically in Hebrew) are those that are forbidden to be erased after they are written down in a permanent fashion.¹⁰ In addition to the Explicit Name (Y-H-V-H or *Ado-nai*), these Names are *Ai-l*, *E-lohim*, *E-loha*, *Sha-dai*, *Tziva-ot*, *Ehe-yeh* and *Y-ah*, as well as any other variation of *E-lohim*, such as *E-lohehah* (“your G-d,” if “your” is singular), or *E-lohaihem* (“your G-d,” if “your” is plural), or *E-lohainu*

⁶ Rambam, *Laws of the Worship of Stars [and Idols]* 2:7.

⁷ Rambam, *Laws of the Foundations of Torah* 6:2, states that, “The Name written Y-H-V-H is the Explicit Name, and is [also] written *Ado-nai*.”

⁸ Rambam, *Laws of Kings* 9:3.

⁹ Based on Rambam, *Laws of the Worship of Stars [and Idols]* 2:8.

¹⁰ *Editor's Note:* Text characters encoded electronically, or projected optically or electronically on a screen, are not permanent forms of writing.

(“our G-d”) – all these ¹¹ have the same holiness as the Name *E-lohim*.

The attributive names are “the Merciful One,” “the Compassionate One,” “the Creator,” and the like,¹² and any other attributive name (**including a name in any language other than Hebrew**) by which a person clearly is referring to G-d, Who is the Creator of the universe.

3. If one cursed against any name of G-d, even the Explicit Name, without invoking against it another name of G-d, he is not liable for capital punishment by a court of law (although it is still forbidden).¹³

If one cursed against a holy Name (that is forbidden to be erased) other than Y-H-V-H or *Ado-nai*, with another holy Name (for example, by saying “*Sha-dai* should hit *Tziva-ot*”), or if one cursed against another of the holy Names by invoking the Explicit Name (for example, by saying, “*Ado-nai* strike *E-lohim*”), he is not liable for punishment by a court.

These curses against G-d are all forbidden to be said. But there is no capital sin for a Gentile to warrant a capital punishment unless one curses against the Explicit Name by invoking a name of G-d.

4. One who curses the Explicit Name by invoking against it a name of G-d in any language (whether with a translated name of G-d or His attributes, and likewise the wording of the curse may be in any language), is liable for a capital sin. If the words of the language he uses are clearly calling on G-d¹⁴ to harm the Explicit Name, he is liable according to the definition of blasphemy. In particular, one is not liable

¹¹ Rambam, *Laws of the Foundations of Torah* 6:2.

Editor's Note: These are the Names of G-d in Hebrew (which is the “holy language”), with which G-d was called by the Israelite prophets through Divine inspiration, as recorded in the words of the Hebrew Bible.

¹² It is apparent from Rambam, *Laws of Kings* 9:3, that for cursing the Explicit Name with one of the other holy Names that may not be erased, a Jew is nonetheless liable. Thus, the only difference between the liability of Jews and Gentiles is regarding a “*kinuy*” (attributive) name, such as the “Compassionate One,” the “Merciful One,” and the like (as expressed by Rambam, *ibid.*, in that Gentiles are liable for blaspheming with a “*kinuy*” in any language, for which Jews are not liable).

¹³ Rambam, *Laws of Kings* 9:3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

unless he pronounces the object of the curse in correct Hebrew pronunciation, as Y-H-V-H or *Ado-nai*.

However, if a person translates this object of the curse into another language, he is exempt from punishment.¹⁵

5. If someone curses G-d in the name of idolatry (by saying, “May such and such an idol strike Yosai”), he is not to be judged or punished by a court, but he is still committing a grave sin, for which he will be punished by Heaven.¹⁶

6. All the above explains when one would be liable in a *Beit Din* court. However, it is obvious that it is always forbidden to curse G-d in any other way, since that is included in the general sense of “blasphemous speech,” and one who does so has committed a grave sin that is punishable by the Heavenly court, as it says, “*Any man who will blaspheme his G-d shall bear his sin ...*”

Moreover, it is forbidden to speak of G-d in any degrading way, and this is also included in the general prohibition against blasphemy.¹⁷

Even if one says unclear words that may or may not be understood by others, if he intends it as a disgrace to G-d, it is forbidden, and he is liable to be punished from Heaven for this.¹⁸

7. Likewise, it is forbidden for one to write words of blasphemy or other insults towards G-d, which is included in the general prohibition of blasphemy.

¹⁵ This is because by definition, the “Explicit Name” implies the way that it is explicitly pronounced in Hebrew, the holy language. But a name for G-d in another language is only an attributive name.

¹⁶ Rambam, *Laws of the Worship of Stars [and Idols]* 2:9.

¹⁷ *Editor's Note*: Nevertheless, one should always be assured that through sincerely repenting to G-d and striving to correct his ways, he can be granted atonement for sins.

¹⁸ In *Mitzvot HaShem*, p. 375, Rabbi Yonatan Shteif explains that a Gentile is judged from Heaven for his thoughts as well as for his actions.

Obligations to Honor and Fear G-d

1. Gentiles are commanded to fear and honor G-d. This is included in the Torah's prohibition of blasphemy, as G-d commanded Adam (Genesis 2:16):

"I am G-d" – do not curse Me;

"I am G-d" – the fear of Me shall be upon you.¹⁹

It is obvious that the primary reason for the prohibition of blasphemy is the obligation to honor and fear G-d. Thus in the explanation of the verse,²⁰ "You shall not curse G-d," the Hebrew word for "curse" has the same root as the term for "disgrace."²¹

From this it can be understood that any action that causes a desecration of G-d's Name, and the opposite of bringing honor to His Name, is forbidden. For this reason, the particular prohibitions discussed in this chapter are branches of the prohibition of blasphemy, although they were not spelled out explicitly for Gentiles in the Hebrew Scriptures.

2. One who swears falsely in G-d's Name²² also desecrates His Name, as it says,²³ "You shall not swear in My Name falsely, and desecrate the Name of G-d; I am G-d," for by doing so one denies the truth of the One whose Name he swears by, since he effectively is saying that just as his words are false, so is the existence of G-d false.²⁴ It is likewise forbidden to lie, or to falsely deny that he had promised or made an oath. Furthermore, one who changes his word is considered as if he serves idols²⁵ (except with justified need).

¹⁹ Tractate *Sanhedrin*, 56b.

²⁰ Exodus 22:26.

²¹ Rashi, on Deuteronomy 21:23.

²² This is forbidden based on logic, since swearing in G-d's Name in vain, and needless to say doing so falsely, is a disgrace to His Name, worse than uttering a Divine Name in vain. Therefore, oaths that are a disgrace to His Name are also forbidden.

²³ Leviticus 19:12.

²⁴ Rambam, *Laws of Oaths* 12:1.

²⁵ Tractate *Sanhedrin* 92a.

3. It is even forbidden to swear in G-d's Name in vain, i.e., to swear about something for which an oath is unnecessary, since it is a disgrace to the honor of His Name to mention and swear by His Name in vain.²⁶

Whether one swears by one of the Names of G-d, or by one of His attributive names, it is the same, as long as he clearly intends to mention G-d by this – for example, one who swears “by the One Whose name is the Compassionate,” or “by the One Whose name is the Merciful” and the like, whether in Hebrew or in any way these attributive names are translated in other languages. This is considered a vow in G-d's Name,²⁷ and if one does so falsely or in vain, he profanes G-d's Name.

4. Any mention of G-d's Name for naught is also forbidden, since this disgraces the honor of G-d, and one receives punishment from Heaven for this. Regarding this it is written,²⁸ “You shall not take the Name of G-d in vain; G-d will not hold guiltless one who takes His Name in vain” – meaning that a person remains guilty of this sin until he is punished by Heaven for profaning G-d's Name.²⁹ It is also said,³⁰ “To fear the honorable and awesome Name” – since from the obligation of fearing G-d, it is prohibited to mention His Name for naught.³¹

This applies specifically to the holy Names specified for Him (which may not be erased, listed below in topic 11), and even His names in other languages (e.g., the name “G-d”). But there is no prohibition of mentioning G-d's attributive names in vain, such as “Compassionate,” “Merciful,” and the like, or other “shared” names (such as the English name “L-rd” which can also refer to a person, e.g., members of the British House of L-rds), since they are not exclusively denoting G-d.

5. What is meant by mentioning G-d's Name “in vain”? This means saying a Divine Name for no need at all. However, to mention it in a way of praise or prayer is permitted. It is likewise permitted to bless

²⁶ Ramban on Exodus 20:7.

²⁷ Rambam, *Laws of Oaths* 2:2.

²⁸ Exodus 20:7.

²⁹ Rambam, *Laws of Oaths* 12:1.

³⁰ Deuteronomy 28:58.

³¹ Rambam, *ibid.*

someone with G-d's Name, by saying "G-d bless you," and the like.

Therefore, one who erred and mentioned G-d's Name for no reason should immediately praise and give honor to Him, in order that the mentioning of His Name should not be in vain. For example, if one said "G-d," he should immediately say, "Blessed is He forever," or "Who is great and very exalted."³²

6. A person should always honor G-d's Name, in any language. When one does mention His Name, one should think about the reason and purpose for mentioning it, in order that it not be mentioned in vain.

When one wishes to bless and thank G-d, one should direct his thoughts and words in order to say words of thanks and praise to honor G-d's Name. In this way the result will be that the Name of G-d is exalted, and not disgraced.

We see that Joseph acted in this way, where it says,³³ "And G-d was with Joseph and he was successful ... And his master saw that G-d was with him, and all that he did, G-d made successful." Rashi explains how Joseph's master saw that G-d was with him:³⁴ "The Name of G-d was fluent in Joseph's mouth," – i.e., he would constantly credit his success to G-d and publicize His Name, as Joseph said to Pharaoh,³⁵ "G-d will give Pharaoh a favorable answer."

This was also the way of Abraham, to teach all the nations that it is fitting to praise and bless G-d's Name alone, as it says,³⁶ "and there he proclaimed the Name of G-d, G-d of the universe" – meaning that he caused all people he encountered to call (i.e., to pray and praise) in the Name of the Holy One, blessed be He, and he taught every person to pray to G-d and praise the Name of G-d.

7. One who pronounces the Explicit Name according to its spelling, as written Y-H-V-H, will be "uprooted from the world."³⁷

When a person reads scriptures containing G-d's Names, it is

³² Rambam, *Laws of Oaths* 12:11.

³³ Genesis 39:2-3.

³⁴ Rashi on Genesis 39:3.

³⁵ Genesis 41:16.

³⁶ Genesis 21:33.

³⁷ Tractate *Sanhedrin* 90a.

permitted to read them as spelled in any language, except for the name Y-H-V-H, which is forbidden to pronounce; rather, one should read it “*Ad-onai*.” (Some are even more stringent, and do not to read G-d’s holy Names as spelled even when reading scriptures, but rather substitute “*HaShem*,” which literally means “The Name.” It appears that this applies only to G-d’s Names written in the original Hebrew. But G-d’s names in other languages are considered like attributive names and may be mentioned while learning.)

8. One who curses any person with G-d’s Name in any language, whether he curses himself or others, or even a dead or evil person, has transgressed a prohibition, since he uses G-d’s Name in vain.

9. One who mentions G-d’s Name (in any language) and spits (in disgust), whether he does so before or after he mentions the Name, has jeopardized his part in the World to Come.

10. It is forbidden to mention any of the specified holy Names of G-d in Hebrew (which may not be erased; see below), and even names for G-d in other languages, in a place where there is filth or in an undignified situation (for example, in a restroom or bathhouse, or where people are unclothed), since this is degrading to G-d’s Name.

The word *shalom* in Hebrew is also a Name of G-d (based on Judges 6:24), and it is therefore forbidden to say “*shalom*” (“peace”) as a greeting while one is in such a place. This applies specifically to saying it in Hebrew, but it is permitted to say the translation of the word *shalom* in other languages, since that is not considered G-d’s Name. One may, however, call a person by his given name *Shalom* in a bathhouse.³⁸

Attributive names such as “The Compassionate,” “The Merciful,” “The Faithful” and the like, may even be mentioned in Hebrew in a bathhouse, even if one intends that it refers to G-d, since people are sometimes also described with these terms.

11. It is forbidden to destroy holy Names and writings, as this is a disgrace to G-d’s honor and profanes His Name. The Hebrew Names

³⁸ This leniency is granted because the intent is to say the person’s name (*Shalom*), and not to utter a name of G-d.

which may not be destroyed are: Y-H-V-H, *Ado-nai*, *Ai-l*, *E-lohim*, *E-lohah*, *Sha-dai*, *Tziva-ot*, *Ehe-yeh*, and *Y-ah*, and any of the possessive versions of *E-lohim*, such as *Elo-hehah*, or *E-lohaihem*, or *E-lohainu* and the like; even to erase one letter from one of these Names is forbidden.

However, if one only wrote part of a Name, such as “Shad” from *Sha-dai*, or “Eh” from *Eh-yeh*, or “Ado” from *Ado-nai*, since he does not complete the Names, he may erase them if there is a need to do so. However, it is forbidden to disgrace them.

12. It is likewise forbidden to write holy Names for no reason, as they may come to be disgraced, especially since their very writing for no reason is a disgrace to G-d.

It is even forbidden to erase (for no justified need) or disgrace one of the seven holy Names mentioned above when they are translated in other languages. If there is a justified need, it is permitted to erase the translated names.

13. One may not disgrace a holy Name of G-d written in any language, for example, by putting it in the garbage or in an unclean place such a restroom (meaning a place that is designated and used for excrement or for baths or showers), and the same applies to all written verses from the holy Hebrew Bible. If there is a need to dispose of them, one should bury them in a container, or conceal them in earthenware vessels, which is like burial.³⁹

14. Likewise, it is forbidden to verbally mention G-d’s Name, even in prayer, in an undignified place. This would disgrace the person’s prayer and the Name he utters.

³⁹ *Editor's Note:* If what is normally a holy Name of G-d in Hebrew or some other language is found printed in an idolatrous text, or a text that promotes idolatry, such that the name (e.g. "G-d") is used to refer specifically to (or as a combination with) an idol, then the name has no holiness and may be erased, destroyed, disgraced, or disposed of by any means along with the idolatrous text or any part thereof. And indeed, idolatrous texts should be destroyed or disposed of.