SEVEN MITSVOT OF BENE NOAH (#2) What Constitutes Blasphemy?

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Last time we explained that there are Seven commandments that correspond to the children of Noah. These Seven Laws represent the code of law that, according to Judaism, applies to non-Jewish society.

We are learning the origin and extension of each of these commandments, following the book of Rabbi Benamozegh “Israel and Humanity” (the book was originally written in French, it was also translated into Hebrew, English and Spanish). The first of these seven commandments is the prohibition of practicing idolatry.

The second, which we will explore today, is known as “Blasphemy” (Rabbi Benamozegh in his book called it “sacrilege”) which means, the prohibition of “desecrating” the divine Name through a curse. In Hebrew, as in some other circumstances, a euphemism is used to describe this case (birkat haShem). This prohibition is curiously called “blessing the divine name,” but meaning exactly the opposite. It is worth noting that the fact that Jews cannot explicitly mention this act, and even to describe we have to resort to a euphemism, indicates the level of gravity (and inconceivability) that this offense means in our tradition and idiosyncrasy.

Where does the Jewish tradition learn that the prohibition of blasphemy applies also in a case of a non-Jewish person?

The Tora mentions what happened with the son of an Egyptian man and an Israelite woman. In Vayqrá (Leviticus) chapter 24 we read:

24:10 At that time the son of an Israelite woman, the son of an Egyptian, raged in the camp with a man of Israel …

24:11 And the son of the Israelite woman blasphemed the Divine Name, and cursed …

24:12 And they put him in prison, until it was made clear to them by HaShem [what they should do to him]
24:13: And HaShem said to Moses …:
24:15 … .any man who curses his God will be punished for his iniquity.
The Biblical text says there (24:15): ish, ish, which the Jewish tradition interprets as “any man” that is to say, independently of him being of Jewish or Gentile origin.
And the text also says: “… to his God” and does not say “to God”.
And I will try to explain this second element that is learned from this pasuq with my own words. The prohibition of cursing the divine name is more extensive –and stricter– for a Gentile than for a Jew. In Jewish law the prohibition is severely condemned only when one offends the divine name and in Hebrew, but not when one offends a “secondary names” (kinuyim) of God, which includes non Hebrew names. For a Gentile, however, the same prohibition applies, with the same severity, if he blasphemes the name of God in Hebrew or in another language (“his” God = God, in his language).
Rabbi Benamozegh explains that originally, all monotheistic biblical religions believed in the same God. Over time, and to differentiate themselves from Judaism, they began to use other “names”, and the use of those names triggered a greater differentiation, incorporating beliefs in other gods, or other divine manifestations, moving away from pure and original monotheism. This would be the case, according to Rabbi Benamozegh, of the ecclesiastical doctrine of the Trinity. Where the belief in three gods, which began by three names, affected the principle of monotheism.
The case of Islam is different. Since, as Maimonides explicitly says, the Muslim doctrine of monotheism (unicity of God) has not moved away from biblical monotheism, even though the name of HaShem has been replaced by the name “Allah”. In this way, Rabbi Benamozegh would not say that “Allah is the god of the Muslims”, but that “Allah is the form that Muslims call God”.
The prohibition of blasphemy, which applies to “any” Divine name (HaShem, Allah, God) reflects that original state of the monotheistic religions, where the theological difference consisted in “different names” of God, and not in His oneness

or in the way that He is worshipped.

In short, Rabbi Benamozegh says that the inclusion of other divine names within the prohibition of sacrilege, reminds us that, beyond languages and cultures, there is only one God for all humanity.

I would add, based on this same concept, that this is also the message of the prophet Zekharia 14: 9. The highest universal aspiration of the Jewish people is that in the times of Meshiah, HaShem will be recognized as the only God, and His name will be also used as the only name of God ביום ההוא יהיה ה‘ אחד ושמו אחד. This would reverse what began with a name change and ended, in some cases, with a deviation from monotheism.