

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP



PERMISSION TO MOCK? A GREAT AND GRETA QUESTION

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

Maimonides and Nachmanides famously offer different explanations for Biblical Hebrew being known as *lashon hakodesh*, the Holy Tongue. Maimonides contends that the reason is that Hebrew contains no words whose primary meaning refers to the organs and elements of sexuality or scatology; it contains only euphemisms. Nachmanides argues that this reasoning is false and unnecessary. The true reason is that Hebrew is the language of G-d, meaning; the language in which He speaks, the language in which He is named, and the language with which He created.

Nachmanides' reasoning appears in his commentary to Exodus 30:13 as a digression from his explanation of the phrase *shekel hakodesh*. His implicit analogy is that just as the proper translation there is "weight-measure of the holy" rather than "holy weight-measure", so too *lashon hakodesh* refers to use, "language of the holy", rather than to the nature of the language.

Nachmanides' explicit arguments are that a. his explanation is true and sufficient, and b. Biblical Hebrew in fact does contain words whose primary meanings are sexual and scatological. These words are generally replaced by euphemisms when Tanakh is read aloud. A beraita on Megillah 25b lists these replacements.

I have three additional difficulties with Maimonides' position. The first is: How can we know for certain what the original meaning of dual-use words was? The second is: How can we know that Tanakh isn't just written for polite society, so that the words we have are already replacements? The third is: English as I understand it distinguishes between the euphemistic, the clinical, and the obscene. The obscene can be either a primary or a second term, while the clinical is always primary. It's not clear to me why holiness requires not having clinical terms. Maimonides argues that their absence teaches us that these things are not to be spoken of, but I wonder if it isn't the presence of euphemism, rather than the absence of clinical terms, that teaches this. Or whether Maimonides wouldn't have done better to argue for the absence of obscene terms (acknowledging that in other languages polite and obscene terms can switch roles over time).

The list of replacements on Megillah 25b is qualified by Rabbi Yehoshua ben Karchah. He states that a scatological term in II Kings 10:27 must be read as-is, because it is used to denigrate idolatry. This statement is then generalized by Rav Nachman: "All *leitzanuta* is forbidden except for *leitzanuta* about *avodah zarah*." Rav Nachman provides an example of permitted *leitzanut* – a scatological pun on the description of an idol in Yeshayah 46:2. Rabbi Yannai offers a similar pun on Hoshea 10:5. Rav Huna bar Manoach in the name of Rav Acha son of Rav Ikka spells out a scatological dismissal one is permitted to say to an idolater about their idol, and Rav Ashi spells out a sexual epithet one may use when addressing someone with a reputation as a habitual sexual sinner.

The problem I've always had with these texts about exceptions and euphemisms is that they work only if one knows the full obscenities. My instincts are Maimonidean – I object strenuously to being made to think words even if I don't speak them. I find it very hard to imagine a person who is ordinarily very careful about *nivul peh* being able to effectively curse out an idolater, and I suspect that an unfluent cursing out is more likely to yield ridicule for the curser than the cursed. I'd like to argue that these Amoraim are talking about ways to harness the *yetzer hora* for good rather than genuinely advocating this behavior. But I admit that at the moment I don't have any textual evidence for this.

In fact, the previous paragraph was presented through the prudish lens of my instincts. It assumed that Rav Huna bar Manoach and Rav Ashi were permitting exceptions to a ban against obscenity. This seems contextually compelling on Megillah 25b. However, Rav Nachman's statement is brought on Sanhedrin 63b in the context of a discussion that otherwise has nothing to do with obscenity, and the term *leitzanuta* in Rabbinic literature certainly has a meaning broad enough to encompass non-obscene contexts and behaviors. One can therefore read the exceptions as implying a general prohibition against mockery, obscene or otherwise.

This reading is behind both sides of a halakhic dispute on Facebook last week between Rabbi Gil Student and Rabbi

Daniel Feldman regarding mockery of Greta Thunberg's political activism.

Rabbi Student wrote: "I don't know if you've seen people scolding about this in your timeline like I have but they are right. The Talmud (Megillah 25b) says that we are not allowed to mock anyone or anything except for idolatry. So until she bows down to an idol, stick to the facts and stay away from mockery. The Bible has some unkind words for mockers."

Rabbi Feldman responded:

"In our day, the biggest idolatry is a religious movement that believes it is glorifying God by slaughtering innocent people (especially per the logic of the Meiri, but even without that). Second, as Rav Hutner explains, the reason that mockery is only appropriate for idolatry is because mockery is a denial of importance, and the ultimate importance is worship, and the ultimate misuse of worship is idolatry. In this case, the disgraceful distortion of priorities displayed by those who would claim to be "kidnapped" in these circumstances, while hostages are being held in the cruelest of circumstances for more than 600 days, and who are not even willing to watch a fraction of what happened on the day that those victims were actually kidnapped, is why mockery was invented. It is very hard to imagine something more deserving of mockery than this."

The debate later moved to the Jewish Press, where Rabbi Student and Rabbi Feldman each significantly qualified their position toward the other's, while modeling deep mutual respect. Rabbi Student acknowledged that there are clear precedents for extending the permission beyond actual idolatry (as is clear from Rav Ashi's permission to mock those with a reputation as habitual sexual sinners, but later rulings are significantly broader), and Rabbi Feldman agreed that even the permission to mock idolatry should often not be utilized.

Neither Rabbi Student nor Rabbi Feldman distinguished between obscene and "polite" mockery, and for that matter, I see no indication that Rabbi Feldman intends to permit obscene mockery. However, it seems to me that any such halakhic distinction would have to be rooted in pragmatic rather than abstract considerations, e.g. a claim that obscene mockery would lead to more sympathy for Ms. Thunberg and her positions rather than less.

I would like to introduce two additional distinctions.

1. As Rabbi Student cites from *Orchot Tzaddikim*, end of *Shaar HaShukah*, the person being mocked is often not the intended audience. The purpose of mocking can be to diminish

the mockee in the eyes of others, and/or to deter others from engaging in the same behavior lest they be mocked.

It seems likely to me that the Talmud's permissions assume that the mocker and the intended audience – whether that is the object of mockery or others – fundamentally share values but need the reassurance and reinforcement of having someone express those values forcefully and even transgressively. The authors of those permissions were aware that mockery might stiffen the spines of genuine opponents.

With that in mind, we need to ask who the intended AND ACTUAL audiences are for mockery of Ms. Thunberg. I suggest that most forms of mockery work only to reinforce the base. We therefore need to be careful of two prevalent illusions: that mocking social media posts only reach our base, and that we know people from other cultures well enough to know what humiliates them to the point of demoralization. For example: Whenever one hears suggestions of humiliating enemies by spraying pig blood at them, one should consider them in light of all the inaccurate American tv episodes about whether Orthodox Jews will accept pig organs as transplants. And one should assume that all such suggestions are shown to enemy soldiers and civilians in order to motivate them.

2. One common mode of mockery involves making fun of a characteristic that the mockee shares with many other people, such as physical characteristics or affect. This kind of mockery can harm everyone else having that characteristic – it functions as a shotgun not as a rifle (with apologies to anyone capable of using a shotgun as a precision weapon.) Moreover, many people in our society consider that sort of mockery a moral horror, and so one risks antagonizing people who would otherwise agree with you.

I can imagine a world in which halakhic permission to mock is universally understood to exclude that sort of mockery. But I don't live in that world. So I think it's necessary to say explicitly that even in cases where mockery is permitted, it should relate exclusively to people's positions and actions rather than to any of their incidental characteristics.

Shabbat shalom!