

THE SECOND COMMANDMENT

Laws Against Sacrilege

So honest and frank when addressing most other enormities, Israel's Sages refer to this Second Universal law only in guarded terms. They describe the core crime here as "blessing the Name" — the holy Name of God.¹

The true crime, of course, doesn't involve blessing but cursing, profaning His holy Name.²

Name means identity. "As is his name, so is he."³ Among human beings, the world's only creatures who use language to think, a name represents the essence of its bearer.

You shall not profane My holy Name. — *Leviticus 22:32*

Profaning the Lord's Name — bringing anything directly associated with God into contempt or disrepute, by word or deed — is blasphemy.

But this gets into English semantics, muddling Hebrew Revolutionary concepts. *Profane* comes from two Latin words, *pro* and *fanum*, meaning "outside the temple." That is, secular, desanctified, unholy. *Blasphemy* comes from Greek and means "evil-speaking," or impious, godless, god-defying speaking.

We could wish for tools more precise than all that Greek and Latin offer to handle the deep and important laws within.

Here would be the place to deal with the most abhorrent of crimes, blasphemy, but the author recoils in horror from doing so.
— *R. Samson Raphael Hirsch*⁴

Blasphemy and idolatry both belong to the same family of crimes. The two Commandments against them are closely linked, each referring to the other. So it's difficult to speak of either Commandment alone, without connection to the other.

Only man — humanity — treasures sacred symbols, ideas, or language; only human beings feel any inclination to protect them. One can define man as a creature who defends the symbols that are sacred to him.

We are also a species, the only species, that both wants and needs to put a fence around the sacred, to protect it from injury — to save it from defilement.

Clearly, no finite being could ever harm the Master of the Universe. He is infinite and eternal; He is the never-changing all-powerful Creator, the Foundation of the entire cosmos, of this and every universe.⁵ That any man or men could harm Him, God!, in any way . . . the very suggestion is ridiculous.⁶ The truth, which is widely recognized, is that “human nature cannot bear blasphemy.”⁷ This is a crime that poisons civilizations; a sin — an error and a failing — that attacks man's mind, sickens his soul, and often even goads him into war.⁸

Basically, any human action leading others to denigrate or undervalue the things and beings they should esteem is blasphemous, or sacrilegious.⁹

Blasphemy defames what is holy. It attacks man's important treasure, his individual relationship to the Ultimate — to God. It attacks the proper idea of God.¹⁰

This, “the most abhorrent of crimes,” also presents us with a special challenge.

One turns to the great authorities only to find them reluctant to speak on the subject, or willing to discuss it only in very ginger, general terms. Most treatments focus only on narrow aspects of the crime. Of course “blessing the Name” relates especially to speech — to utterance — and the human aptitude for language. At