

TORAH SPARKS

A RITE OF PASSAGE

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Language of the Parashah

Among the sundry legal topics covered in this week's *parashah*, considerable attention is devoted to the matter of how to determine who is a legitimate prophet (*navi*) as opposed to a mere charlatan ([Deut. 18:9-22](#)). To set the boundaries of what a true *navi* cannot be, the Torah provides a comprehensive inventory of nine types of false prophets:

לֹא יִמָּצֵא בְךָ מַעֲבִיר בְּנוֹ-וּבִתּוֹ בָּאֵשׁ קֶסֶם קֶסָמִים מַעוֹנָן וּמְנַחֵשׁ וּמְכַשֵּׁף: וְחָבֵר חָבֵר וּשְׂאֵל אוֹב וַיִּדְעָנִי וְדָרַשׁ
אֶל-הַמֵּתִים:

Let no one be found among you **who consigns a son or daughter to the fire**, or who is an augur, a soothsayer, a diviner, a sorcerer, one who casts spells, or one who consults ghosts or familiar spirits, or one who inquires of the dead. (Deut 18:10-11)

Eight of these terms refer to various types of fortune-tellers and probably overlap significantly. The first term, however, is quite different: *ma'avir beno u-vito ba-esh* (NJPS: "he who consigns a son or daughter to the fire"). In contrast to all the other terms, this does not seem to be a type of magician or soothsayer. Apparently, it is someone who practices child sacrifice by means of immolation. Why is this included here? This is not the first time that we have encountered a prohibition against this dreadful practice in the Book of Deuteronomy. Just last week, in *Re'eh*, we read:

לֹא-תַעֲשֶׂה כֵן לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ כִּי לִלְתוּעֹבֶת יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר שָׂנֵא עֲשׂוֹ לֵאלֹהֵיהֶם כִּי גַם אֶת-בְּנֵיהֶם וְאֶת-בְּנֹתֵיהֶם יִשְׂרְפוּ
בָּאֵשׁ לֵאלֹהֵיהֶם:

You shall not act thus toward the Lord your God, for they perform for their gods every abhorrent act that the Lord detests; they even **offer up** their sons and daughters **in fire** to their gods. (Deut. 12:31)

But are these two verses really referring to the same thing? It would be hard to deny that the verse from Deut. 12 is describing ritual child sacrifice. That verse uses the explicit phrase *yisrefu va-esh* ("they burn with fire"). But the verse from our *parashah* uses the more ambiguous phrase *ma'avir ba-esh*. What exactly does this mean? The NJPS translation ("consigns to the fire") is frankly useless. Are these parents under the impression that their children are being handed over for safekeeping (consignment) in a fire? In order to get to the heart of the matter, we need to take a closer look at the meaning of *ma'avir*.

The verb *ma'avir* is the causative (*hiphil*) form of the root ע.ב.ר ("to cross over"). This means "to cause to pass over, to transfer." This form of the verb appears very frequently (approx. 300 times) throughout the Tanakh. It is used to describe a wide variety of movements: the people "crossing" the Jordan River ([Joshua 7:7](#)), a wind "blowing" over the earth ([Gen. 8:1](#)) and a proclamation "spreading" throughout the camp ([Exod. 36:6](#)). You are probably also familiar with this verb from the climax of the *U'Netaneh Tokef* prayer which we say on the High Holidays:

וּתְשׁוּבָה וּתְפִלָּה וְצִדְקָה מַעֲבִירִין אֶת רַע הַגְזֵרָה.

But repentance, prayer and righteousness **avert** the severity of the decree.

In each case, *ma'avir* refers to a broad movement from one side to another brought about by an agent (i.e., Joshua, God, Moses). So if we return to the phrase from our *parashah*, a literal translation would be "he who causes his son or daughter to pass through the fire." This raises the question: from where to where are these children being passed?

One important clue is found in the law of *pidyon ha-ben* ("the redemption of the firstborn") in Exodus:

וְהַעֲבַרְתָּ כָּל-פֶּטֶר-רֶחֶם לַיהוָה וְכָל-פֶּטֶר שִׁגְרָה בְּהֵמָה אֲשֶׁר יִהְיֶה לָּךְ הַזְכָּרִים לַיהוָה:

You shall **set apart** for the Lord every first issue of the womb: every male firstling that your cattle drop shall be the Lord's. (Exod. 13:12)

Although NJPS says "set apart," the word in Hebrew is *ve-ha'avarta*, also the causative form of ע.ב.ר. This verse is describing a ceremony in which a firstborn animal is transferred over from the farmer to God. Thus the word *ma'avir* has the technical meaning of "to consecrate." It would seem that this is also the specific sense of *ma'avir* which is being used in

the verse from our *parashah*. If so, this would raise two problems: (a) these children are being dedicated to foreign gods, not YHWH and (b) this involves passage through fire, which makes a mockery of authentic covenantal rituals.

Another important clue is found in Leviticus:

וּמִזְרַעְךָ לֹא-תִתֵּן לְהַעֲבִיר לְמֶלֶךְ וְלֹא תִחַלֵּל אֶת-שֵׁם אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲנִי יְהוָה:

Do not allow any of your offspring to be offered up to Molech, and do not profane the name of your God: I am the Lord. (Lev. 18:21, cf. Lev. 20:2-3)

Several biblical texts (2 Kgs. 23:10, Jer. 7:31) mention that the worship of the Canaanite god Molech became popular during the reign of Manasseh of Judah (7th century BCE). This cult was focused around an infamous shrine in Jerusalem called Tophet, located in the [Ben Hinnom Valley](#) (a.k.a. Gehenna), southwest of today's Old City. The prophet Jeremiah was the most famous critic of this cult:

וַיִּבְנוּ אֶת-בָּמֹת הַבַּעַל אֲשֶׁר בָּגִי'א בֶן-הַנֶּזֶם לְהַעֲבִיר אֶת-בְּנֵיהֶם וְאֶת-בָּנוֹתֵיהֶם לְמֶלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר לֹא-צִוִּיתִים וְלֹא עֲלֵתָה
עַל-לִבִּי לַעֲשׂוֹת הַתּוֹעֵבָה הַזֹּאת לְמַעַן הַחֲטִי' אֶת-יְהוָה:

And they built the shrines of Baal that are in the Valley of Ben-hinnom, where they **offered up** their sons and daughters to Molech—when I had never commanded, or even thought [of commanding], that they should do such an abominable thing, and so bring guilt on Judah. (Jer. 32:35)

All these verses, like the verse from our *parashah*, use the verb *ma'avir* in connection with a covenantal ritual involving children. Although it is certainly possible that some Israelites did ritually kill their children (see [Ezek. 16:21](#)), it is likely that many others engaged in a symbolic ritual which involved "passing" of their child through a sort of gauntlet of fire. This is the position of two rabbis in the Babylonian Talmud, asked what the "passing through the fire" refers to:

אָמַר אַבְי': שֶׁרָגַא דְּלִבְי' בַּמַּצְעִי נוֹרָא מֵהָא' גִּיסָא וְנוֹרָא מֵהָא' גִּיסָא. רַבָּא אָמַר: כְּמַשְׁוֹרְתָא דְּפוֹרָא:

Abaye says: The child is taken by foot along a latticework of bricks in the middle, between the fire on this side and the fire on that side. Rava says: The typical manner of passing is like the leaps of children on Purim. (b. *San.* 64b)

Apparently, in 5th century Babylonia it was customary to light a bonfire on Purim inside a pit, and children would amuse themselves by leaping over it. This is a far cry from the terrifying rite of immolation we began with. So what is the problem? The Torah objects to what this ritual symbolizes and how it perverts legitimate covenantal rituals, such as the famous "covenant between the pieces" that Abraham participates in soon after his arrival in Canaan. Recall that Abraham, having slaughtered and divided a series of animals, falls into a deep sleep, and then:

וַיְהִי הַשָּׁמֶשׁ בָּאָה וְעֹלָטָה הָיָה וְהִנֵּה תִנּוֹר עֹשֵׂן וְלִפִּיד אֵשׁ אֲשֶׁר עָבַר בֵּין הַגְזָרִים הָאֵלֶּה:

When the sun set and it was very dark, there appeared a smoking oven, and a **flaming** torch that **passed** between those pieces. (Gen. 15:17)

This verse describes a strange, but common ancient Near Eastern ceremony which was meant to serve as a warning to the parties entering into a treaty: "may my fate be like these animals if I break the oath we have just sworn." Interestingly, like the verse from our *parashah*, this verse contains the root ע.ב.ר ("to pass") as well as the word אֵשׁ *esh* ("fire"). But unlike the verse from our *parashah*, the verb is not in the causative (*hiphil*) form. Rather it is in the simple active (*kāl*) form. Abraham does not cause the fire to pass between the pieces like a pagan magician. He falls asleep and God (manifest in the form of a torch) is the sole agent of the passage.

Perhaps the practice that is being outlawed in the verse from our *parashah* is an aberrant, idolatrous version of Abraham's covenant ritual. Rather than allowing God to seal the covenant, these false prophets carry their infant children through the fire in an effort to manipulate the gods. This is the reason that in our *parashah* it makes sense for "the one who consigns a son or daughter to the fire" appears alongside eight other false prophets. This person is likely not a baby killer. Rather than sacrificing children, he is using them as part of an elaborate magical ceremony intended to ratify a covenant between Israel and Baal. As the Torah prepares the nation for life after Moses, it is careful to distinguish between legitimate prophecy and mere hocus pocus.