

Herem

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Towards the end of this week's double portion of the Torah there is a reference to the word Herem. Most people think of Herem as the Jewish equivalent of excommunication, banning someone from the community. The most famous and highly controversial example was Spinoza (1632-1677), the brilliant and ethical Dutch philosopher descended from Spanish Jews. He rejected Judaism and challenged the authority of the Torah. But the pressure to expel him really came from religious extremists within the Protestant Church in Holland who objected to his ideas because they also undermined Christian orthodoxy.

The *Herem*, the ban, was a tool of authority in many Jewish communities which were subject to Christian and Muslim authority and could find no other way of enforcing discipline or control over their members. In some communities, it was used a lot, in others rarely if ever. Excommunication is a Christian term that meant excluding a person from receiving any Church rites or ceremonies including burial. In Judaism, the *Herem* only meant excluding someone, often a rebel against authority or the law, from the community until he or she repented. But no religious ceremonies were denied to them. So, to translate *Herem* as excommunication, is not strictly correct.

The word itself, like several other words, has opposite meanings in the Torah. Here it means something dedicated to the Sanctuary or Temple which cannot be used outside the Temple. In this sense, it means forbidden because it is something holy. Elsewhere it means forbidden for being something negative, bad. The word simply means "set aside." And you can set something apart in a good sense and it can also mean set apart in a bad sense. It is like everything in life. We can use it well or abuse it. That is an important lesson. It really is up to us!