

## *Exposing Hypocrisy For Parashat Ki Tavo*

אָרוּר הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה פֶסֶל וּמַסֵּכָה תּוֹעֵבָת יְיָ מַעֲשֵׂה יְדֵי תְרָשׁ וְשָׂם בְּסֵתֶר ... מִקִּלְהָ אָבִיו וְאִמּוֹ ... מְסִיג גְּבוּל רֵעֵהוּ ... מוֹשֵׁגָה עוֹר בְּדֶרֶךְ ... מַטֵּה מִשְׁפָּט גֵר־יְתוּם וְאֶלְמָנָה ... שֹׁכֵב ... מִכָּה רֵעֵהוּ בְּסֵתֶר ... לִקְחַם שִׂחָד לְהַכּוֹת גֹּמֵשׁ דָּם נָקִי ... אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יִקְיָם אֶת־דְּבָרֵי הַתּוֹרָה־הַזֹּאת לַעֲשׂוֹת אוֹתָם וְאָמַר כָּל־הַעַם אָמֵן:

*Accursed is him who will make a graven or molten image, God's abomination, and keep in hiding... who will disrespect his father and mother... who will trespass his friend's boundary... who will mislead a blind person on his way... who will distort judgment for the sojourner, the orphan, and the widow... who sleeps with... who beats/kills another person in hiding... who accepts bribe in return for executing an innocent person... who will not establish the words of the Torah to observe them, and the whole nation shall say Amen!*

This dreadful list is part of a momentous event the Israelites were commanded to stage upon entering the land of Canaan. The nation is to be divided into two groups of six tribes each, one standing on the slopes of Mount Eval, and the other on Mount Gerizim. The Levites will then face the nation and will read a list of twelve admonitions, clearly corresponding to the number of tribes. Each admonition, to which the whole nation must respond with Amen, starts with the word ארוּר – A curse shall rest upon him who...

We would expect the list of actions which sanction such punishment to be somewhat similar to the Ten Commandments, but they are not. We would expect them to be all transgressions which carry the death penalty, or of monetary character, but the list is a mixed bag of severe crimes such as idolatry, murder, promiscuity, and distortion of justice, alongside what we would consider minor transgressions such as disrespect to one's parents, trespassing, and deception. The obvious question is whether there is a common thread connecting all these transgressions,

and if so, what is it? We would also like to know what is the purpose of this awe-inspiring event and which specific fear was the list meant to strike in the hearts of the listeners. I believe that the answer can be found in the word **בסתר** -in hiding, which appears in the opening and closing verses of the list.

This word also explains the purpose of that historic assembly. Human societies rely on either trust or fear. A totalitarian regime can stay in control only by measure of the fear it can instill in the hearts of its subjects, and as history shown, one cannot completely subdue the human spirit. The rebellion of independent thinkers or believers against a regime is not always with positive results, as we have learned from the experience of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, and from the failed attempt of secular Egyptian leaders to oppress Muslim clerics, but there were many others with positive results, such as the nonviolent protests of Gandhi and the Civil Rights movement.

Contrary to a fear-based society, where everyone is a potential enemy or spy, a trust-based society functions with an air of reciprocity and support. But there are no perfect societies, and there will always be those who take advantage of the system, the free-loaders and the deceivers, like those shameless scoundrels who falsely reported their spouse's death after 9/11. The Torah offers a balance between fear and trust. Trust is achieved through the extensive social system of the Torah and its insistence on mutual help and loving kindness, while fear is substituted by reverence of the omniscient God, and fortified by curses and not by clear punitive measures.

Standing on the two mountains, the two groups face each other as well as the Levites in the center. On one hand, they are all in the same space, yet on the other, there is a potential sharp divide between them. The event serves as symbolic reminder that, lacking reciprocity and trust, the nation will find itself fragmented. The Levites declare, one by one, a list of transgressions united by their covert nature, admonishing people against deceiving others by pretending to be who they are not. Verse 14 is not about idolatry, but rather about hypocrisy; cursed is one who pretends to believe in God and practice Judaism, while in hiding practices paganism. The next verse does not use the term **כבוד** – respect (**לא יכבד**), but rather **מקלה** – he who makes light. This is the person who pretends to respect his parents, but in his heart makes light of them. He might convey that air of disrespect to his children, thus breaking a chain of tradition and causing greater damage than if he would openly express his opinion and have an informed debate.

Trespassing? It refers to one who slowly moves his fence, inch by inch, into his neighbor's territory. His actions cannot be tracked, and he upsets the trust among neighbors. Misleading a blind person is both a prohibition and a metaphor to giving advice to a non-expert. The expert often feigns innocence and claims he was genuinely trying to help. Distorting justice for the weaker layers of society is also done covertly, sometimes even in the name of justice, while those affected have no one to speak for them. The sexual transgressions mentioned here are not the full list of Leviticus, because this list singles out people who lead a double life, not occasional sinners.

Verse 24 - אָרוֹר מִכֵּה רֵעֵהוּ בִסְתֵר - speaks of one who secretly initiates a move which will cause damage to another person, including badmouthing that person. No one can trace the action back to him, while he pretends to care and mourn for his suffering "friend". It is followed by the admonition against bribe. It is surprising that the Torah mentions only one who takes bribe in exchange for falsely sentencing someone to death, and in light of what was said here, we have to understand it differently: taking bribe is done in secrecy, but it eventually will lead to disastrous, visible results. Not every bribe will lead to death, but the cumulative corruption of the judicial system, prompted by internal hidden hypocrisy, would inevitably cause death and destruction.

The list concludes with a call on people to establish - לְהַקִּים - the words of the Torah. This means that we have to internalize the values of the Torah and make them an integral element of our life, avoiding hypocrisy and corruption at all costs, and championing honesty and transparency.

Shabbat Shalom