

The Blessing and the Curse, and the List of "the Cursed"

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A. THE BLESSING AND THE CURSE

Our parasha describes the procedure for the proclamation of the blessing and the curse on Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Eival. First Moshe divides Bnei Yisrael into two groups, with half of the tribes connected to the blessing and the other half to the curse:

"These shall stand to bless the nation upon Mt. Gerizim, when you cross over the Jordan: Shimon and Levi and Yehuda and Yissakhar and Yosef and Binyamin. And these shall stand for the curse at Mt. Eival: Reuven, Gad and Asher and Zevulun, Dan and Naftali." (27:12-13)

The focus then shifts immediately to the Levites: "The Levites answered and said to every man of Israel with a loud voice" – and then the Torah lists the "cursed," each time concluding with the same formula: "The whole nation said, Amen."

This description raises a number of difficulties:

1. It would appear that the list of the "cursed" is itself the "curse" that is previously mentioned. But if this is the case, what is the "blessing," and why is it not mentioned explicitly?
2. What is the relationship between the role of the tribes and the role of the Levites? At first it seems that it is the tribes who are blessing and cursing, but further on the text appears to be telling us that it is the Levites who perform the declaration – at least for the curses.
3. From the verses it is not clear what the role of the tribe of Levi is: on the one hand, the tribe of Levi is included among those who declare the blessings, but on the other hand, it is they who enumerate the categories of the "cursed."

Before attempting to solve these difficulties, let us take note of another important source for an understanding of the parasha – the description of the actual process as it took place, in Sefer Yehoshua (8:33-34):

"All of Israel, with its elders and its officers and its judges, stood on this side and the other side of the Ark, before the Kohanim [and] the Levites, bearing the Ark of God's Covenant – including the stranger and the native born, half facing Mt. Gerizim and half facing Mt.

Eival, as Moshe the servant of God had commanded at first, to bless the nation of Israel. And afterwards he read all the words of the Torah, the blessing and the curse, according to all that is written in the Sefer Torah."

The commentators propose two principal ways of understanding the parasha. Most (including Rashi, Rashbam and others) base their explanation on the Mishna in Massekhet Sota (32a):

"Six tribes ascended to the top of Mt. Gerizim, and six tribes ascended to the top of Mt. Eival, and the Kohanim and the Levites with the Ark stood below, in the middle - the Kohanim surrounding the Ark and the Levites surrounding the Kohanim, and all of Israel on each side, as it is written, 'All of Israel, with its elders and its officers and its judges, stood on this side and on that side of the Ark...' (Yehoshua 8:23). They turned their faces towards Mt. Gerizim and began with the blessing: 'Blessed is the man who does not fashion a graven image or molten idol' – and both sides answered 'Amen.' Then they turned their faces towards Mt. Eival and began with the curse: 'Cursed is the man who fashions a graven image or molten idol' – and both sides answered 'Amen,' [etc.] until they reached the end of the blessings and the curses."

According to this approach, the list of "cursed" had a corresponding list of "blessed." The "full text" was read by the Levites, while the tribes themselves did nothing, except to answer "Amen" for each of the blessings and the curses. The Gemara (37a) addresses the dual role of the Levites, raising several possibilities:

"We learn in a baraita:

Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov said: We cannot say that the Levites were down at the bottom of the mountain, for it is written that they were on top. And we cannot say that they were on top of the mountain, for it is written that they were down below. How can this be? The elders of the Kohanim and the Levites were at the bottom, while the rest were on top.

Rabbi Yoshia said: All those fit to serve were down below, while the rest were at the top.

Rabbi [Yehuda Ha-nasi] said: All were standing down below. When they turned their faces towards Mt. Gerizim – they uttered a blessing, [then] they turned to Mt. Eival – and uttered a curse."

According to R. Eliezer and R. Yoshia, the tribe of Levi was divided into two groups (with opinions divided as to the criteria for the division), while Rabbi maintains that all the Levites actually stood down below.

Whichever interpretation we adopt, the approach of the commentators, according to Chazal, creates difficulties in relation to the literal text:

- a. If, indeed, "the curse" mentioned at the beginning of the parasha is identified with the list of categories of those who are "cursed," it is not clear why the "blessed" are not mentioned – especially since in the beginning we are told explicitly, "These shall stand for the blessing." How can it be that only the curses are mentioned?
- b. Chazal's approach leaves us unclear as to the division of the tribes and their roles, since everyone answers "Amen" to all the blessings and all the curses.
- c. Concerning the role of the tribe of Levi, even if we accept the opinions of R. Eliezer or R. Yoshia – which are closer to our understanding of the literal text in Sefer Yehoshua – we must still ask why our parasha makes no mention of this division.

It seems, therefore, that Ibn Ezra's interpretation may sit better with the literal text. In his view, "According to the literal text, the blessing is: 'You shall be blessed in the city...,' while the curse is the opposite – witness Sefer Yehoshua." In other words, the blessings and the curses are those mentioned in the parasha of the rebuke, further on in chapter 28. We may bring several proofs for this understanding:

1. The parasha of the blessings and the curses upon Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Eval is mentioned for the first time in chapter 11, where the description appears as follows (verses 26-29): "See, I give before you this day a blessing and a curse: the blessing, THAT [IF] YOU WILL LISTEN TO THE COMMANDMENTS OF THE LORD YOUR GOD WHICH I COMMAND YOU THIS DAY: And the curse, IF YOU WILL NOT LISTEN TO THE COMMANDMENTS OF THE LORD YOUR GOD, and you stray from the path WHICH I COMMAND YOU THIS DAY... And it shall be, when the Lord your God brings you to the land where you are coming to inherit it, and you shall give the blessing upon Mt. Gerizim and the curse upon Mt. Eival." This description is very close to the description in chapter 28: "IT SHALL BE, IF YOU WILL LISTEN TO THE VOICE OF THE LORD YOUR GOD, to observe and perform all of HIS COMMANDMENTS WHICH I COMMAND YOU THIS DAY... Then all of these blessings will come upon you... And it shall be IF YOU DO NOT LISTEN TO THE VOICE OF THE LORD YOUR GOD, to observe and perform all of HIS COMMANDMENTS and statutes WHICH I COMMAND YOU THIS DAY, then all of these curses shall come upon you and overtake you."
2. Six tribes "stand for the blessing," the other six – for the curse. Correspondingly, in the parasha of the rebuke the

word "blessed" appears six times (verses 3-6), and likewise the word "cursed" (verses 16-19).

3. Ibn Ezra himself bases his interpretation on the verses in Sefer Yehoshua. From the verses cited above – "Thereafter he read all the words of the Torah, the blessing and the curse, as all that is written in the Sefer Torah" – it indeed appears that it was Yehoshua himself who read the parasha of the blessings and the curses on that occasion.

However, even if we adopt this understanding, we are left with a difficulty: why does the Torah stop in the middle of the description of the blessings and the curses, and insert the description of the declaration by the Levites and the list of the "cursed"? What is the relationship between the two subjects?

B. "CURSED IS THE MAN WHO DOES NOT UPHOLD THE WORDS OF THIS TORAH"

It appears that, according to Ibn Ezra's approach, the ceremony on Mt. Eival and Mt. Gerizim was divided into two parts. During the first part, the Levites stood and recited the list of the "cursed" exclusively, and - as it appears from Sefer Yehoshua – during this stage the Levites stood between the two mountains. During the second part, the blessings and curses listed in chapter 28 were uttered, and here the Levites had no special function. From Sefer Yehoshua it would appear that the blessings and curses were not actually uttered by the tribes themselves, but rather by Yehoshua, as representative of the nation as a whole.

It seems that the two parts of the ceremony express two ways of serving God. The second part, in which the blessings and curses are uttered, expresses the idea that observance of the commandments leads to blessing, while abandoning them causes much suffering. This gives expression to the recognition of the connection between obeying God and the way of the world, which operates directly in accordance with the behavior of Bnei Yisrael. If only this way existed, it would appear to leave the choice between blessing and curse in mortal hands, such that if man decided to take upon himself the danger of the curses and suffering, for not observing the commandments, he would be entitled to do so. [1]

Clearly, this possibility does not actually exist, for the obligation to observe the Torah and its commandments not only arises from the fact that this is the way of blessing, but is a function of Bnei Yisrael's obligation to serve God, Who took them out of Egypt and led them in the desert. Therefore, the list of "cursed" in the first part expresses the idea that even if there were no blessing for one who upheld the Torah, one who did not do so would still be cursed. In answering "Amen," the entire nation accepted upon itself the obligation of fulfilling the commandments – even without the intention of receiving reward. It is specifically prior to the presentation of the two options before the nation that the fundamental obligation to fulfill the commandments must be emphasized – independently of the matter of reward and punishment.

This duality finds expression in the words that Moshe declares to Bnei Yisrael at the beginning of the "speech of the commandments" ([Devarim 6:20-25](#)), in response to the

anticipated question by the next generation: "If your son shall ask you tomorrow, saying, What are these testimonies and statutes and judgments, which the Lord our God has commanded you?"

The significance of this question, as we may learn from the answer, is not "what" in the informative sense, but rather "For what reason are we obligated to accept upon ourselves the testimonies, statutes and judgments?" [2] The answer to this question is a double one:

- a. "You shall tell your son: We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, and God took us out of Egypt with a strong arm. God performed great and terrible signs and wonders for Egypt and for Pharaoh, and for all his household, before our eyes. He took us out of there in order to bring us and to give us the land which He promised to our forefathers. God commanded us to perform all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God."
- b. "That it be good for us all the days, to give us life as this day. And it shall be a kindness for us, if we shall observe and perform all of this law before the Lord our God, as He commanded."

The obligation of observing the commandments arises, then, both from our service of God and from the fact that such behavior is "good for us."

It seems that the difference between the parasha of "the blessings and the curses" and the list of the "cursed" is also expressed in the question of the speakers. In the parasha of the blessings and the curses, as we have said, the tribes assume an active role, thereby expressing their recognition of the connection between the functioning of the world and the observance of God's commandments. This view, focusing on human choice, should theoretically be uttered by Bnei Yisrael, in order that they will internalize the content of what they are saying. They should note the difference between the blessing and the curse in their lives, arriving at the correct conclusion: "You shall choose life."

The list of those who are "cursed," on the other hand, is uttered only by the Levites, while the rest of the nation merely answers, "Amen." The Levites here represent God, while Am Yisrael, answering "Amen," is the other party to this agreement, in which the nation accepts the obligation upon itself even without discernible reward. This view, more reminiscent of the coercion of "He suspended the mountain over them like a cask," presents not a possibility to be considered, but rather an obligation that must be accepted.

Now we understand the difference between the presentation of the curse in the first part as opposed to that in the second part. In chapter 28, the Torah lists the blessings and the curses in great detail, with the various declarations of "cursed" relating to different aspects of human life – "Cursed will you be in the city, and cursed will you be in the field," etc. In chapter 27, by contrast, the Torah says only "Cursed be he who..." with no explanation as to how he will be cursed. The difference is clear: chapter 27 expresses the gravity of failure to fulfill the commandments, and hence it is sufficient to use the word,

"cursed." Chapter 28, on the other hand, expresses the idea that the world operates in accordance with the fulfillment or non-fulfillment of the commandments, and therefore there is a need for some elaboration as to how the fulfillment of the commandments influences all spheres of life.

C. UNIQUENESS OF THE "CURSED"

In conclusion, let us briefly consider the special common denominator among all twelve of the "cursed." Ibn Ezra already points out that what is common to the list of transgressions is the possibility of committing them in private, and concerning two specific transgressions this is mentioned explicitly: "Cursed is the man who makes a graven image or carved idol, an abomination to God, the work of a craftsman's hands, and places it IN SECRET... Cursed is one who strikes his neighbor IN SECRET." Ibn Ezra explains how it is that the other transgressions here likewise are usually performed secretly:

"The list starts from the most important thing, which is man's relationship with his Creator, and then it proceeds to discuss the relationship between him and his parents – for who is to know if he treats them with disrespect?..."

[This is followed by] 'one who moves his neighbor's boundary-mark' – for this is performed in secret. 'And one who causes a blind person to walk astray' – here too, it is impossible for the blind person to publicize who led him astray ...

'And one who distorts the judgment of a convert or an orphan' – for there is none to help them, and so this too is kept secret. And mention is made of the convert, the orphan and the widow – for if the judge perverts the judgment of others, they will appeal and make his deed public, but the convert, the orphan and the widow have no power.

'And one who lies with the wife of his father ... [or] his sister ... [or] his mother-in-law,' is not suspected if he is secluded with her, and hence this is a deed committed in secret, and likewise the other transgressions: 'with any animal' ... for [the animal] has no voice to shout out...' [3]

Indeed, we may bring proof for this principle from a different parasha in the Torah, where again we find that a representative of the tribe of Levi curses a person who has transgressed, while an Israelite answers, "Amen" – as described explicitly in the parasha of the Sota ([Bamidbar 5:21-22](#)):

"The Kohen shall make the woman swear by an oath, and the Kohen shall say to the woman: 'May God make you an oath and a curse among your people, when God makes your thigh fall away and your stomach swell. These cursing waters shall enter your bowels to

make your stomach swell and to make your thigh fall away.' And the woman shall say, 'Amen, amen.'"

Here again, there is a significant emphasis on the fact that the entire process takes place specifically because the suspected transgression took place in secret: "It is unknown from the eyes of her husband and IT WAS HIDDEN; and she was defiled but there was no witness, and she was not caught." The parasha of Sota gives expression to and recognition of faith in God, Who knows all secrets, even when deeds are hidden from mortal eyes.

Likewise in our parasha: the emphasis on the curse for deeds committed in secret highlights the central message of the parasha, namely, acceptance of the yoke of Heaven in every situation and under all conditions, even when matters are hidden from human eyes and cause no apparent damage to the person who has transgressed.

NOTES:

[1] The existence of two parts of the ceremony on Mt. Eival and Mt. Gerizim is attested to from the verses in Sefer Yehoshua, which divide the ceremony quite clearly into two parts:

A. "All of Israel, with its elders and its officers and its judges, stood on this side and the other side of the Ark, before the Kohanim [and] the Levites, bearing the Ark of God's Covenant – including the stranger and the native born, half facing Mt. Gerizim and half facing Mt. Eival, as Moshe the servant of God had commanded AT FIRST, to bless the nation of Israel."

B. "AND AFTERWARDS he read all the words of the Torah, the blessing and the curse, according to all that is written in the Sefer Torah."

It seems obvious that the second part refers to the list of blessings and curses in chapter 28, which is related – according to our approach, based on Ibn Ezra – to the division of the tribes. In light of this it seems that the first part must refer to the list of "cursed," which was said "at first." This, of course, involves some difficulty in the syntax: "As Moshe, the servant of God, had commanded AT FIRST, TO BLESS the nation of Israel," but we may resolve this wording in one of two ways:

a. Rav Hoffmann, in his commentary on Devarim, presents a lengthy explanation attempting to resolve the contradictions between the description in our parasha and the description in Yehoshua; inter alia he suggests that by cursing someone who does not uphold the commandments, the entire nation merits a blessing.

b. It is possible that the expression "to bless the people" is in fact a euphemism for cursing them. This phenomenon appears elsewhere in Tanakh: see, for example, Melakhim I 21:13 – "Navot BLESSED (cursed) God and the king"; [Iyov 1:5](#), 11. We may also explain the verses in Sefer Yehoshua in a completely different way, which would not contradict our thesis in any way – see Rav Hoffmann.

[2] In the Pesach Haggada we find this question posed by the wise son. In fact, in all four places in the Torah where the subject of anticipated questions by children is addressed, the meaning of the question, on the literal level, is always why the commandments should be observed. The Haggada, seeking to express the important idea that every child must be addressed in accordance with his individual nature, interprets the verses in such a way as to match the various characters, and it is for this purpose, obviously, that it changes the answers from the original ones presented originally in the Torah. This applies also to the question by the "wise son," where the Haggada changes the significance of the question, making it indeed into an informative question (seemingly based on the assumption that the wise son would have no need to ask about the very obligation of fulfilling the commandments); hence the answer given to him is likewise informative: "You shall tell him of the laws of the Pesach...."

[3] Rashbam suggests a similar explanation.

Translated by Kaeren Fish