

Parshat Ki Tavo

Public Speeches, Private Deeds.

Chavruta

1. Study the list of "curses" in Devarim 27:15-26

Two questions stand out:

- What is the nature of this list: Why are these mitzvot in particular singled out, and what makes them a group?
- What is the relationship between this list of twelve curses and the Tochacha of chapter 28? Is this the klalot spoken of in Devarim 27:12 and 11:27-30?

See:

- Rashi 27:12 for the choreography of the occasion
- Ibn Ezra's opening comments (v.15) for the relationship between Tochacha and the curses

2. See the fascinating discussion between Rashi, Ramban Ibn Ezra and Ramban regarding the curse that talks of "All the Torah" – verse 26.

Shiur:

At a glance, our parsha contains four topics:

1. The bringing of the Bikkurim to the Temple
2. The Viduy Maasrot – The Tithe Confession
3. The ceremony at Har Eval: The stones, the altar, blessings and curses.
- 3b. The Tochacha

When I began to study this Parsha I was struck by the emphasis devoted to ceremonial public statements. It would seem that the phenomena of public pronouncements form the core of the Parsha. Let us explain...

Our Parsha opens with the process of bringing Bikkurim – first fruits - to the Beit Hamikdash. At the heart of the ceremony is the pronouncement (familiar from the Haggada) of "Arami Oved Avi."

A second Mitzva is the parsha of "Viduy Maasrot" – the Tithe Confession. Here, yet again, the Torah mandates the farmer to pronounce a verbal confession. He stands at the Temple proclaiming his successful fulfilment of all his religious responsibilities and obligations.

"I have removed all the holy food (*truma, ma'aser etc.*) from my property and I have given it to the Levi, the stranger, the orphan and widow just as you have commanded me; I have not transgressed nor neglected any one of Your commandments, I have forgotten nothing ... I have obeyed the Lord my God, I have done everything He required of me." (26:13-14)

- Quite a statement! To stand before God in the Temple and say, "My slate is clean, I have done my duty!". We are accustomed to Viduy – Confession. On Yom Kippur each year, we stand before God and we profess our guilt! How vastly different is this confession?! This Jew stands before God and professes not his guilt but his innocence, not his religious lapses, but rather his exacting and comprehensive fulfilment of the Halakha.

And now, to a third scene: Chapter 27 transcribes a national commitment ceremony, an event of covenantal significance. The entire nation take part; half the nation standing at Har Eval, and the other half on Mt. Gerizim; and the people pronounce a series of curses and blessings. This is a national act of articulation. mapping out a simple equation in which adherence to the covenant engenders national prosperity and abundance, whereas violation of the law will induce failure, ruin and exile.

PRIVATE SINS

Within this ceremony at the mountains of Eval and Gerizim, a list of twelve statements - each a "curse" – are presented. The people will announce these curses at the start of the ceremony at *Har Eval*. Many commentators have been puzzled by the choice of topics in the list of twelve. They range from idolatry to incest, bribery to assault, parental affront to misleading the blind. What is it that unites this list? Might it be that these twelve sins are of particularly serious nature if they are to be singled out above all other crimes? What is it that brings this varied collection of misdemeanours into a single list?

Looking at the list, (look up the list in your Chumash,) one particular word jumps out of the page repeatedly. It is the word, "*ba-seter*" meaning "in private" or "in secret". Twice this phrase comes up:

"Cursed be anyone who makes a sculptured or molten image, abhorred by God ... and sets it up in secret.... Cursed be he who strikes down a fellow man in secret..." (v.15,24)

This notion of "*Ba-seter* - in secret" is rather strange. After all, it is a capital offence to engage in idolatry, wherever it is! Why mention that it takes place "in secret"? Likewise, one is forbidden to hit another Jew. Who cares whether it takes place in broad daylight or behind closed doors? Now, regarding setting up an idol in a private place and the law of violence that causes personal injury the aspect of a "secret" location is explicit. However, if you read the entire list of the twelve curses, every line refers an act that is performed in private, an act which is unlikely to be publicised or to come to the attention of the ones associates and friends. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch notes this detail and comments in the following way:

"... it is sins which as a rule escape the attention of the human courts, which are here placed under the Rule of God dispensation of 'blessing' and 'curse'...."

...All blessing is denied to him who outwardly plays the pious man devoted to God, but in secret denies the exclusive existence of One God and His Rule; who outwardly is respectful to his parents but inwardly considers himself vastly superior to them (v.16), who in the eyes of men preserves the reputation of an honest man but where unobserved does not hesitate to injure the rights of his neighbour to his own advantage (v.17), who is full of enthusiasm for the welfare of his neighbours in the presence of clever and intelligent people, but pushes short-sighted and blind people into misfortune (v.18); who grovels before the powerful, but denied the weak and helpless their rights (19); pretends to be a respectful member of society, to wallow in sexual licentiousness in his intimate privacy (20)...."

So the prelude to the *Tochacha* (Ch.28) is the message, loud and clear, that our private lives are also under scrutiny. If Jewish society is a hypocritical society where people act *frum* outside and have different standards at home, it is a failed society. We are a Jew in every area of our lives, and not just in the public domain. As much as society can be at fault for public sins; private morality - what goes on within our minds, our emotions, our homes, boardrooms and bedrooms - is also subject to God's attention. As we say in the Yom Kippur *davening*:

"You probe all the innermost chambers and test the thoughts and emotions. Nothing is hidden from You and nothing is concealed from Your sight."

PUBLIC STATEMENTS

As we now see it, we might understand that the entire parsha revolves upon the axis of private and public, of concealment and exposure. The best example of a person opening his personal accounts to Divine scrutiny is "*viduy ma'asrot*" - The confession of the tithes. After a farmer (in those times, this was the occupation of 90% of the nation) had completed a three-year farming cycle, he was to come to the *Beit Mikdash* on Sukkot. There he would make a ceremonial proclamation. He was to express his absolute confidence that he had been meticulous in his fulfilment of all the Halakhic requirements associated with agricultural produce.

By the way, this too happens *Ba-seter!* No one knows if he performs his religious duties in his barn or winery. No body can check up on him.

A Jew, a regular farmer, can indeed reach the point where he can stand before God – in the place that represents God's presence - and attest his complete and total adherence to the law. Here, we see a classic example of how a person demonstrates absolute integrity and wholesomeness in his dealings with God. He stands, confident before the law of God, and before God himself.

ARTICULATION

The notion of articulation of ideas, of making an outward pronouncement has a unique power. Rav Hirsch again:

The first step of Teshuva, the most essential and at the same time, the most difficult is Viduy, the Confession, or much rather, "*hitvadeh*" the admission to oneself that one has sinned. It is not God who needs an avowal or confession from us, for he knows us through and through; in fact much better than we know ourselves. But we are very much in need of honest and unreserved confession; it is to ourselves that we must admit that we have done wrong, for without such a confession to ourselves we can never become better. It is a difficult admission indeed for a man to make. There is within each and every one of us a small defender who is ready at all times to deny outright that we have done wrong at all or at least to make excuses, to mitigate and to cloak our transgressions. In this manner our defender veils from our eyes the true picture of ourselves as we really are ... Therefore, the first most effective and indispensable part of the confession that we have to make to ourselves is "*Aval anachnu chatanu* – Truly we have sinned."

As Rav Hirsch points out, confession is reflexive; it works on the person who makes the pronouncement. The person bringing Bikkurim becomes aware of his connection with his history, his land and forbears, his nation. The farmer of Viduy Ma'asrot will go home with a big smile, with a feeling of spiritual satisfaction and achievement.

INSIDE, OUTSIDE.

There is a very delicate interplay between our inside, our *ba-seter*, and our outside. On the one hand, we all hide things, we all have private hidden lives. On the other hand, we seek integrity and desire to live clear and honest lives. How do we begin to understand what is inside, to come to terms with it, to begin to improve? How do we penetrate our inner world? The spoken statement is one way, it manages to reach deep in a unique way.

In this period leading up to the Yamim Noaraim, we too are on the threshold of our Viduy, our confession. Will the confession that we make reflect our true inner world? Will we be able to stand before God, proud of our spiritual achievements or will we bend down, ashamed? How much are we willing to purge the sins that we retain, *Ba-seter?* And how much can we succeed to achieve a life devoid of hypocrisy and enlightened by integrity, honesty and truth?

In the coming days, we shall begin to recite selichot and Viduy, to work on ourselves to be true people, thorough and honest, where our performance of God's will penetrates our hearts and our actions. Then may we say to God, like the farmer in our parsha:

"Look down from your holy abode, from the heavens and bless your people, Israel, and the land that you gave to us, as you promised our forefathers, a land flowing with milk and honey."
(26:15)

Shabbat Shalom!