YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Student summaries of sichot of the Roshei Yeshiva**

**Parashat Ki Tavo**

**Sicha of HarAV Yaakov Medan**

**On Sins Committed in Secret and on Concluding the Year with Repentance**

Summarized by Shmuel Fuchs

Translated by David Strauss

**The “Cursed Be”s**

***The connection to sota***

Our *parasha* includes a description of the assembly at which the blessings and the curses were delivered, where the priests counted twelve categories of people who are "cursed,"[[1]](#footnote-1) corresponding to the twelve tribes of Israel.

The assembly at which the blessings and curses were delivered is reminiscent of the section in *Parashat Naso* about a *sota*, a married woman whose husband suspects her of adultery. Two main similarities may be pointed out: First, both passages emphasize the “curse,” using the root *alef-resh-resh*. The *sota* section states:

Then the priest shall cause the woman to swear with the oath of cursing, and the priest shall say to the woman: The Lord make you a curse and an oath among your people, when the Lord makes your thigh fall away, and your belly to swell; and this water that causes the curse (*mayim ha-me’arerim*)shall go into your bowels, and make your belly to swell, and your thigh to fall away; and the woman shall say: Amen, Amen. (*Bamidbar* 5:21-22)

We see a similar pattern in the section of the curses in our *parasha*, where, as mentioned, the term "cursed be" is repeated twelve times:

Cursed (*arur*) be he that… and all the people shall say: Amen. (*Devarim* 27:15-26)

***“In secret”***

In addition to the very idea, common to both sections, that a person who commits to a covenant accepts upon himself the punishment of a curse in the event that he breaks his commitment, the content of the commitment is also similar. In both cases, emphasis is placed on things done in secret. This is how the section dealing with a *sota* begins:

Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: If any man's wife go aside, and act unfaithfully against him, and a man lie with her carnally, and it be hid from the eyes of her husband, she being defiled secretly, and there be no witness against her, neither she be caught in the act. (*Bamidbar* 5:12-13)

Similarly in our *parasha*, although the words "in secret" appear only twice (in verses 15 and 24), in fact, all of the transgressions found in the passage are those done in secret – since they involve actions that are easy to hide or overlook. The following question then arises: What is it about acts done in secret that requires a covenant to be made about them upon entering the land?

To answer this question, let us consider the reality that prevailed during the time of Israel's sojourning in the wilderness. It stands to reason that during their stay in the wilderness, everyone knew each other. When six hundred thousand families live in a camp that is twelve mils by twelve mils, nothing can be hidden from anyone. Whatever a person does is not just his private business, but also that of his neighbors – whether he wants it that way or not.

The reality in the land of Israel, however, would be completely different. When the Israelites finish conquering the land and everyone lives on his own property, each person will build his own house in the center of his property, surround it with a hedge and beautiful trees, and declare: This is my house, and what happens here is my own private business. In such a situation, not only is it easier on the practical level to sin in secret, but there is room for a principled argument that it is not the community's job to interfere in the private life of this or that person.

It is precisely against this reality and against this claim that the assembly described in *Parashat Ki Tavo* is directed. At this assembly, every individual had to take an oath and was cautioned about the affairs of the other. The actions of every individual affect the entire nation, and the rights of the individual are subject to his obligations toward the community as a whole.

**Between Blessings and Curses**

Every year *Parashat Ki Tavo* is read two *Shabbatot* before Rosh Ha-shana. Why so?

Rabbi Shimon ben Eliezer says: Ezra established for Israel that they would read the curses in *Vayikra* before Shavuot and those in *Devarim* before Rosh Ha-shana. What is the reason? Abaye said, and some say it was Resh Lakish: So that the year may end along with its curses. (*Megilla* 31b)

But in addition to "ending the year along with its curses," it seems that we must add another point to what the Gemara says. In addition to enacting that the curses be read two Shabbatot before Rosh Ha-shana, Ezra also enacted that *Parashat Nitzavim* be read on the Shabbat before Rosh Ha-shana – so that the year may end with repentance. This requires explanation.

The assembly involving the blessings and curses is mentioned twice in the book of *Devarim*, in *Parashat Re'eh* and in our *parasha, Parashat Ki Tavo.* But the assembly is described in completely different ways in the two *parashot.* In *Parashat Re'eh* we read:

Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you shall hearken to the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you this day; and the curse, if you shall not hearken to the commandments of the Lord your God, but turn aside out of the way which I command you this day, to go after other gods, which you have not known. (*Devarim* 11:26-28)

Here, the choice presented is between a blessing and a curse, and it is emphasized that the choice is in the hands of the person. However, later on in the same book, in *Parashat Ki Tavo*, the account is very different:

And the Lord said to Moshe: Behold, you are about to sleep with your fathers; and this people will rise up, and go astray after the foreign gods of the land, where they go to be among them, and will forsake Me, and break My covenant which I have made with them. Then My anger shall be kindled against them in that day, and I will forsake them, and I will hide My face from them, and they shall be devoured, and many evils and troubles shall come upon them; so that they will say in that day: Are not these evils come upon us because our God is not among us? (*Devarim* 31:16-17)

In contrast to *Parashat Re'eh*, which emphasizes the ability to choose, here the failure is presented as inevitable – in the end, the people of Israel will choose the wrong path and will sin. Nevertheless, it is emphasized here that even though the sin is unavoidable, that does not necessarily mean there will be a punishment. God gave us the gift of repentance; if we succeed in repenting for our sins, we can be saved from the harm of the curses.

It is necessary to emphasize the possibility of repentance before Rosh Ha-shana, especially after reading the rebuke the week before. Indeed, we have sinned against God, and there is no doubt that we will do so many more times. But there is such a thing as repentance, which allows us to correct and improve our ways, and thus emerge vindicated on the day of judgment.

(This *sicha* was delivered by Harav Medan on Shabbat *Parashat Ki Tavo* 5780.)

1. If we include "Cursed be he that confirms not the words of this law to do them" (*Devarim* 27:26) in the count, against Rashi. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)