

KI SAVO (DEUTERONOMY 26:1-29:8)

Blessings and Curses on the West Bank

2002 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

If you've ever been to Israel, you may have had the opportunity to see the two mountains mentioned in this week's Torah Portion. If you are "brave" (crazy?) enough to go to Shechem (Nablus) in Shomron (Samaria -- a.k.a. "the West Bank") you will see Mount Gerizim --



[caption id="" align="aligncenter" width="240"]
upyernoz via Flickr[/caption]

Image by

-- a grassy mountain with an elevation of 2849 feet. About two miles to the northeast of Mount Gerizim is Mount Ebal --



[caption id="" align="aligncenter" width="240"]
State University Archives via Flickr[/caption]

Image by Oregon

-- a barren rock that is the highest elevation (3,077 feet) in Samaria. The Torah (Deuteronomy, 11:29) designated these two mountains, one lush and one barren, for the recitation of blessings and curses.

In this week's Torah Portion, Moses gives the nation instructions to be carried out after they cross from the East Bank of the Jordan River, and arrive on the West Bank. Six tribes will stand on Mount Gerizim to hear blessings, and six tribes will stand on Mount Ebal to hear curses.

There are twelve curses that are enumerated in 26: 15-26. These curses were to be recited by the Levites while facing Mount Ebal. Among them: "*Cursed is he ... who moves his neighbor's boundary marker ... who misdirects the blind on his way ... who perverts justice for the foreigner, orphan and widow...*"

At the conclusion of each of these curses, the people were to respond, "Amen." The blessings, the exact opposite of the curses ("*Blessed is he who does NOT move his neighbor's boundary marker...*") were to be recited by the Levites while facing the other six tribes standing on Mount Gerizim.

When the Torah curses, there are ramifications to that curse. One of the curses is against "*he who shows disrespect to his father and mother.*" (Verse 16) Maimonides (Hil. Mamrim, 5:15) quotes this verse and states that "the courts may ... administer punishment, as they see fit."

Whether or not the courts actually flog someone today is irrelevant; what the Torah is telling us is that by violating one of the above-mentioned curses, one DESERVES to be flogged!

I have always been troubled by the behavior of Joseph's brothers. Due to their rivalry, the brothers considered killing him, and in the end, "compromised" by simply selling him as a slave.

While there are various reasons given for their behavior, it is difficult to understand how such righteous men could have done such a thing.

I recently came across an answer in the *Yalkut Yehudah*, by Rabbi Yehudah Ginzburg, of Denver. We find the answer in this week's Torah Reading.

Among the curses listed above is against "*he who strikes down his neighbor in secret.*" (Verse 24) Rashi tells us that this is a reference to "*Lashon Hara*"-- gossip. One can hit a person blatantly, with his fist, or he can do it "*in secret,*" with his mouth.

The Torah goes so far as to CURSE someone who speaks negatively about others behind their backs. Maimonides, cited above, states that the courts have a right to take forceful action against people who violate the Torah's curses.

Joseph had complained to his father about some of their actions. The brothers convened a *Bais Din*, a rabbinical court. In this court, they determined that Joseph, by gossiping to their father, had violated one of the curses in the Torah, and as such, deserved to be punished. (An analysis of Joseph's actions and the

justification for his "gossip," is a tangent that goes beyond the point of this week's message. Suffice it to say, for the moment, that there was another side to this dispute.)

Taking the advice given by Maimonides, this court decided to take what they deemed to be appropriate action for violating a strict curse in the Torah.

(It is important to understand that this does not mean that they viewed execution as an appropriate response to gossip. As Maimonides states, "the courts may ... administer punishment, AS THEY SEE FIT." The punishment needs to fit the crime. The brothers [incorrectly] saw Joseph's statements to their father as an attempt to undermine them as legitimate heirs to Jacob's legacy, and to prevent them from becoming the TWELVE Tribes of Israel. They interpreted his actions as a threat to the future of Israel. Relatively "minor" gossip, although also cursed by the Torah, would not have been subject to such a punishment.)

It is so easy to be flippant about the words that we say. We are not hitting anyone; we're just talking about them

This is a sin that deserves punishment. The Torah curses those who speak badly of others. Conversely, it blesses those who do the opposite.

Wouldn't we rather be blessed?

Have a great Shabbos.

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