

Why More Curses Than Blessings?

The Book of Leviticus holds many detailed instructions devoted to the formation of a people as they learn how to live according to the ways of God. Then, in chapter 26, towards the end of Leviticus, we come to what might be described as a motivational ‘pep talk’ in the form of a series of blessings (vv.3-13) and curses (vv.14-45). Read them and share your observations and insights with a friend.

What is one of the first things you noticed in reading the blessings and curses in Leviticus 26? Perhaps, like the Jewish sages of old, you noted that there appear to be many more curses than blessings! Does this surprise you, bother you? Surely the God we know and love and who holds our deepest interests at heart is a God characterised by blessing rather than cursing? Why the apparent imbalance here? The sages asked this question. Ponder it yourself before reading on.

Despite the number of verses dealing with curses, Jewish tradition repeatedly discerns (here and throughout the Torah) a principle that says: divine goodness outweighs divine retribution. Let’s explore three interpretations in support of this principle:

The first comes from Ibn Ezra [12th c.] and has been elaborated over time: If we look closely at the text we see that the blessings are to take place immediately and in their fullness. However, the curses are carried out in gradually increasing stages of severity. Transgressors are not struck down all at once, but first with minor blows, then—should they still fail to repent—by more severe blows. Only if they still refuse to reform does the major curse materialize.

Does this view agree with your close reading of the text?

Our next interpretation is somewhat similar. Just before the blessings it says:

“If you follow my laws and faithfully observe my commandments...” (26:3)

By contrast, before the curses we read:

“But if you do not obey me and do not observe all these commandments, if you reject my laws and spurn my rules, so that you do not observe all my commandments and you break my covenant...” (26:14-15).

What do you notice? Only after a person ‘rejects’ and ‘spurns’ the laws do the curses follow. Whereas blessings flow from a simple keeping of the law, curses require a sustained effort of rejection! [1]

Our third interpretation involves a playful reflection on the Hebrew alphabet. Rabbi Shemuel said: the student will find more blessings than curses. How so? The blessings begin with the first letter of the alphabet (*alef*) and end with the last letter of the alphabet (*tav*), signifying that *alef-tav* [‘A to Z’] blessings will reach you. The curses, on the other hand, begin with the sixth letter and end with the fifth letter, and there is nothing between them. [Midrash Tanhuma, Re’e 4]

Reflection

The painful difficulties of life can threaten to eclipse our awareness of God’s blessings. How do you live with a fundamental sense of life as gift and blessing?

The interpretation above understands ‘curse’ as a carefully-applied corrective by God who desires to give people every chance to mend their ways. It does not suggest a blanket intent to destroy. Do you agree?

How might this ancient text speak to the (often complex) relational and societal dynamics of present-day life?

[1] As noted, for example, by Seforno (1470-1550), Italian Jewish Torah commentator.

Bibliography: Leibowitz, *New Studies in Vayikra*, Vol 2 (New York, 1996), 569-571. Scripture: JPS.

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