

Customs and Laws from the Parsha: Balak

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So now, please come and curse this people for me, for they are too powerful for me... (Bamidbar 22:6)

There are many different prohibitions in the Torah against cursing another person. The primary source is found in Leviticus and specifies the law against cursing a deaf person (Leviticus 19:14). Another verse states 'You shall not curse a judge; neither shall you curse a prince among your people' (Exodus 22:27). In both cases, the prohibition seems to be limited to cursing specific individuals, in this case the leaders of the Jewish people.

The Midrash and Talmud explain that in the latter verse, the phrase 'among your people' is superfluous to the simple meaning and therefore includes a general prohibition against cursing others (Sifra 2:13 and Sanhedrin 66b).

Why then did the Torah specify two very particular prohibitions; one against cursing someone who is deaf and another against cursing Jewish leaders, when a general prohibition would have sufficed.

The Sefer HaChinuch (attributed to Rabbi Aharon ben Yosef HaLevi, d. 1290) explains that the verse which prohibits cursing the deaf teaches us that it is forbidden to curse anyone even if they are not in earshot and are therefore effectively 'deaf' to the invective (Sefer HaChinuch 231). One might have thought that since the intended victim is not directly affected, the gravity of the misdeed is weakened, yet this is not the case.

The Talmud offers a different approach. The Torah deliberately brings examples from the two ends of the societal spectrum: the powerful and the vulnerable. The message is that maledictions damage equally regardless of the status or stature of their target (Sanhedrin 66b).

Moreover, while receiving a curse is clearly harmful and upsetting, since the prohibition equally applies when the victim is unaffected, there appears to be another dimension to this act.

Maimonides (d. 1204) highlights that the damage of cursing someone not only affects the victim but is detrimental to the character of the one delivering the curse (negative commandment 317). As we see from Bilaam, someone who curses others denigrates himself to an even greater degree than the one he intends to harm.

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