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Blessings and Curses

27: 11-26

Blessings and curses DIG: Why, where, when, and how was this ceremony to be conducted? Why not stay in the valley? Who were the participants? Bystanders? Who said the “curses?” Who responded? What did the “Amen” represent? What does it mean to be cursed? Why do the curses come before the blessings? Why so many more curses? What corresponding blessings do these tribes receive later from Moses in Chapter 33?

REFLECT: What kind of oaths does your employer, coach, spouse, or parent implicitly force you to take? Anything like this ceremony? To what divine sanctions do you tend to say, “Amen”? Why? Were there any items on this list for which your “Amen” was weakly offered, if at all? Has Yeshua ended the “curses” when He hung on the tree (see Galatians 3:13)? What is the Good News in this which you can share with someone this week?

When the people answered “Amen!” their response wasn’t merely their agreement with the words spoken; it was their acceptance of the terms of the covenant.

Once **Joshua** had led **the people** into **the Promised Land**, **they** were to interrupt **their** conquest and engage in a ceremony of reaffirming the covenant (**Joshua 8:30-35**). It would take place near **Shechem**, with **Mount Ebal** to the north and **Mount Gerizim** to the south. The valley between **the two mountains** formed a natural amphitheater where **the priests** and **Levites** (see the commentary on **Ezra-Nehemiah, to see link click An - Priests, Levites and Temple Servants**) could assemble and declare **God’s Word**.

There are at least four potential reasons for the choice of **Mounts Ebal** and **Gerizim** as the site for this covenant-renewal ceremony: the valley between **the two mountains** provides a natural amphitheater (the acoustical factor); **Shechem**

was an important site throughout biblical history (**Genesis 12:6-7; Joshua 24:32**; the historical factor); **Shechem** was centrally located among the tribal allotments (the geographical factor); and **mountains** and **hills** were often appealed to as witnesses in covenantal contexts (the covenantal factor).⁵⁷⁵



These were **curses** that would be given to **the Israelites** if **they** did not obey the commandments that had just been given to **them**. And the way these **curses** were pronounced was in a very dramatic way. **ADONAI** had six tribes stand on **Mount Ebal** (1,400 feet above the valley), and six tribes stand on **Mount Gerizim** (750 feet above the valley), with **the Levites** standing between **the two mountains** in the valley (near the city of Shechem) loudly chanting the **blessings** and **curses**. And **the people** would respond, **Amen!**

Blessings: Moses commanded the people on that day saying: **When you have crossed over the Jordan, these are to stand on Mount Gerizim to bless the people: Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph, and Benjamin (27:11-12). The tribes** who echoed the **blessings** had **their** tribal allotments in the heart of **the Land** and descended from **Rachel** and **Leah**.

Curses: As **the Levites** read the **curses**, **they** weren't predicting what would happen if **the people** disobeyed **God**. **They** were calling upon **Ha'Shem** to send those **curses** on **His people** if **they** turned away from **Him**. **For the curse these are to stand on Mount Ebal: Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulun, Dan, and Naphtali (27:13).** Those echoing the **curses** had **their** tribal allotments at the fringe of **the Land**; four of these **tribes** descended from **Jacob's handmaidens, Bilhah** and **Zilpah**, while the other two were **Leah's** oldest and youngest sons, **Reuben**, who lost **his** birthright for sleeping with **Bilhah**, and **Zebulun**).⁵⁷⁶

Then the Levites, probably those who usually cared for the Ark of the Covenant, **are to answer and say with a loud voice to every man of Isra'el (27:14).** At first glance, it appears that this section is redundant when compared with the **curses** found in **Chapter 28**. However, there are some clear differences. The

present section affirms that the violation of specific covenantal stipulations will trigger covenantal **curses**. Unlike the upcoming section (**Ff - Curses for Disobedience**), **Chapter 27** does not specify what the **curses** are for any of the violations. It describes certain representative covenantal violations of **God's Torah**, and **God's children** affirm **their** recognition of those possible **curses** by shouting out, **Amen!** **Chapter 28**, by contrast, carefully describes the nature of the **curses** that **the nation** will experience for covenantal violations.

The **curses** below follow a set formula: (1) passive participle (**Cursed is the one**); (2) individual address (**the one**); (3) objective statement of the offense (**who does . . .**); (4) national recognition (**Amen**).⁵⁷⁷

The first curse: Cursed is the one who makes a carved or molten image - an abomination to ADONAI, the work of a craftsman's hands - and sets it up in secret (27:15a). The first curse condemned idolatry and violated the **first** and **second mitzvot** of **the Ten Words** (see **Bk - The Ten Words**). To carve or cast an idol and worship it was to deny that **YHVH** was the one true and living **God**, and it was this sin that finally brought the wrath of **God** on **Isra'el** (see the commentary on **Jeremiah Eu - Idolatry in the Temple**). Even if a **Jew** worshipped an idol in secret and didn't try to persuade anybody to join him or her, it was still a great sin and had to be punished (see the commentary **Jeremiah Gb - The Destruction of Solomon's Temple on Tisha B'Av in 586 BC**).⁵⁷⁸

Then all the people are to answer and say: Amen (27:15b). Meaning that they were willing to be disciplined if they disobeyed **God**. **Their "Amen"** wasn't merely **their** agreement with the words spoken; it was **their** acceptance of the terms of the covenant. These **curses** were closely related to the specific stipulations of the covenant (see **Cr - The Specific Stipulations of the Covenant**), especially **the Ten Words**.

While the scene here envisioned a single, nonrecurring event, nevertheless the single historical event contributed to the ongoing liturgy of **Isra'el's** worship. The litany of **curses** and their responsive **"Amens"** may have functioned as part of the entrance liturgy, rather like **Psalms 15** and **24**, to remind the worshippers of the moral seriousness of any approach to **ADONAI** in worship.⁵⁷⁹

The second curse: Cursed is the one who dishonors his father or mother, which violates the fifth mitzvah, and reinforces the centrality of the family within the national covenant relationship (see **Bp - Honor Your Parents**). **God** gave **the**

parents the role of teaching **their children**, so **parents** are to be honored as **ADONAI's** covenantal representatives. To **dishonor one's parents** is to disrespect the authority of **YHVH**. A precise mitzvah on this subject required **the parents** to prosecute their stubborn and **rebellious son** (see **Ds - The Tale of Two Sons: The rebellious son**). But in practice this would have been a very difficult mitzvah to carry out. If **the child** was found guilty, the punishment was **death**. Therefore, the stern requirements of the mitzvah would be at odds with the continuing **love** of **the child**. The **curse** pictured here, however, would cover this scenario in a less direct fashion. Whether or not the rebellious child was brought before the elders for judgment, the act of **dishonoring parents** automatically incurred the **curse** of **God**.⁵⁸⁰ **Then all the people are to say: Amen (27:16).**

The next three **curses** related specifically to **the poor** and **the needy** among **Isra'el**.

The third curse: Cursed is the one who moves his neighbor's boundary marker (see **Dn - Moving a Boundary Stone**), which violates the eighth mitzvah (see **Bs - Do Not Steal**). Since the economic viability of the family depended upon inheriting its own share of the land, the next **curse** is directed at those whose greed attacked the original land division and who changed **boundaries** to their own advantage.⁵⁸¹ The nature of the crime was such that it would not normally be attempted, except in the circumstances that might lead the offender to think he could get away with it without anybody knowing about it. However, if **the boundary marker** was **moved**, the disadvantaged in **Isra'el** were especially susceptible to this abuse because they lacked the means to defend themselves in court. So, once again, the curse emphasized that the action was condemned within the covenant community, whether or not the offender was brought to trial. **Then all the people are to say: Amen (27:17).**

The fourth curse: Cursed is the one who misleads a blind person on the road. This revealed **God's** special concern for people with disabilities. The word blind may be taken literally, or may have a more metaphorical sense; that is, it may indicate some kind of treatment of a blind man, which would result in personal gain. For example, if money were stolen from a blind man, he would not be able to identify the thief. In contrast, the spirit of the covenant ordered just and humane treatment for all fellow **Israelites**. Once again, the thief would be **cursed**, whether or not he was brought to trial. **Then all the people are to say: Amen (27:18).**

The fifth curse: Cursed is the one who twists justice for the outsider,

orphan and widow. Then all the people are to say: Amen (27:19). The fifth curse focuses on treating the helpless and unfortunate in **the Land** with kindness and justice. **Widows, orphans,** and resident **aliens** were often abused and exploited in **Isra'el**, and **YHVH** called on **His people** to champion **their** cause and see that **they** received justice (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Ih - The Parable of the Persistent Widow**). **The Jews** had been **aliens** in Egypt for many years and **ADONAI** cared for **them** and judged the Egyptians who abused **them**. If **Isra'el** didn't care for the poor and the needy, **Ha'Shem** would also judge **her**. Among other things, this meant bringing their special **tithe** every **third year** so that the poor and the needy would have food to eat (see **Ey - The Year of the Tithe**).⁵⁸²

The next three **curses** have to do with sexual purity. These sins were prevalent among the nations in Canaan, and **Isra'el** wasn't to imitate **her** neighbors. The nature of these acts would be done in secret or in private, and therefore, they would not always be brought to the attention of the courts of law. They all violate the seventh mitzvah in spirit (see **Br - Do Not Commit Adultery**). The nonmention of adultery does not lessen the detestable nature of that offense; but these **curses** focus on less easily detected sexual offenses.

The sixth curse: Cursed is the one who sleeps with his father's wife (presumably **his** step-mother), **because he has uncovered his father's nakedness (First Corinthians 5:1).** Fellow Israelites would think nothing of a man's keeping regular company with his step-mother, sister, mother-in-law, or animals (whereas his spending a lot of time with another man's wife would be easily noticed). And a family member aware of this deviant sexual behavior might be tempted to hide it to spare the entire family from great shame.⁵⁸³ Incest was especially condemned in **Isra'el (Deuteronomy 22:30; Leviticus 18:8-9 and 17, 20:11).** **Reuben** lost **his** right as the firstborn because **he** violated this mitzvah (see the commentary on **Genesis Le - Reuben, You are My Firstborn, Turbulent as the Waters, You Will No Longer Excel**). **Then all the people are to say: Amen (27:20).**

The seventh curse: Cursed is the one who lies with any kind of animal, which once again, was normally committed in private, or in the open countryside away from witnesses (**Leviticus 18:23**). Bestiality was practiced in some pagan religions and "sacred animals" were used in the worship of their false gods. Because **God** created humans as distinct from the animal world (see the commentary on **Genesis Ao - Let Us Make Man in Our Image, In Our**

Likeness), and having sex with an animal would seem to equate animals with humans, a **curse** is pronounced. The perversion of sex is not only the abuse of a gift of **God**, but it threatens marriage and the family, which are foundational to the success of any nation. **Then all the people are to say: Amen (27:21).**

The eighth curse: Cursed is the one who sleeps with his sister, the daughter of his father or the daughter of his mother, even if the brother and sister had only one parent in common. Incest brought the curse of God. Then all the people are to say: Amen (27:22).

The ninth curse: Cursed is the one who sleeps with his mother-in-law. Then all the people are to say: Amen (27:23). Proper conduct between family members who would be living in close proximity to each other was essential to stability within the covenantal nation.

The next two **curses** return to **the Ten Words** , and the sanctity of human life based on the sixth mitzvah (see [Bq - Do Not Murder](#)).

The tenth curse: Cursed is the one who strikes down his neighbor in secret. Then all the people are to say: Amen (27:24). Murder is the ultimate crime because its consequences cannot be reversed, but to murder one's neighbor makes the crime even worse. The only thing more wicked would be to be paid to murder somebody!

The eleventh curse: Cursed is the one who takes a bribe to strike down an innocent life. Then all the people are to say: Amen (27:25). The Torah of **Moses** condemned those who accepted bribes to break the law, for making money is not more important than maintaining justice (**Deuteronomy 16:19; Exodus 23:8**). The mitzvot taught **the people of Isra'el** to **love** their neighbor and do them good (**Deuteronomy 22:1-4; Leviticus 19:18**). But whether a neighbor, or a total stranger is the victim, murder is wrong and murderers must be punished.

The twelfth curse: Cursed is the one who does not uphold the words of this Torah by doing them. Then all the people are to say: Amen (27:26). This final curse concerns the Torah as a whole, rather than focusing on a single issue. Although one could imagine a person's avoiding the eleven offenses cited in the previous verses, no one can be perfect. Paul quoted this verse (see the commentary on [Galatians Bi - All Who Rely on the Deeds of the Law are Under a Curse](#)) to prove that there could be no salvation by obeying all the 613

mitzvot of **Moshe**, since no one could obey everything **YHVH** commanded. The purpose of this Torah was not salvation, but an impossible standard that would beg for a **Savior, for the righteous shall live by faith (Galatians 3:11)**. There can be no true conversion without conviction, and conviction comes when we see the holiness of **ADONAI** in **His** Torah, and the sinfulness of our own hearts.⁵⁸⁴ To say we've kept some of **God's** mitzvot doesn't excuse us, for to break one is to break them all: **For whoever keeps the whole Torah but stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all (James 2:10)**. If you were hanging over an abyss holding on to a chain of 613 links, how many links would have to break for you to fall?

The list of **curses** clearly focuses most on the social life of **Isra'el**. But the whole list is suspended from the fundamental question of loyalty to **YHVH** or committing spiritual adultery and going after idols. Again and again the message of the TaNaKh is that if you choose the wrong gods you will end up in social decay. Biblical monotheism, far from an abstract creed, affirms that only when **ADONAI** is properly honored will society be just and compassionate. Modern western society, reaping the fruit of two centuries of systematically excluding the living **God** from all practical public reverence, is not plagued with loss of family, stability, respect for property, social compassion, sexual integrity, and the sanctity of life. Those who will not **love ADONAI**, will soon find it annoying to **love** their neighbors.⁵⁸⁵

*Dear Heavenly **Father, You** are such a wonderful and loving **God**, and **You** are also pure and 100% holy. Everyone **loves** to hear about **Your love**. **“For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16)**. **Your holiness is also very real and it demands wrath at pride and sin. He who trusts in the Son has eternal life. He who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him (John 3:36)**.*

*It is popular to take only the parts of **Your** Word that people like, such as the first part of **Second Peter 3:9** which reads: **The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise, as some consider slowness. Rather, He is being patient toward you - not wanting anyone to perish (Second Peter 3:9a-b)**. It is like watching the first part of a play that makes a person smile and then ignoring the second part that has problems and ugly situations that develop in the rest of the story. The full idea of what you say comes in the end of the verse, **but for all to come to repentance (Second Peter 3:9c)**. **Your offer is to all - all who come to***

repentance!

Your blessings are wonderful! **Your curses** are so real and wisdom does everything to avoid being **cursed** by **God**. Someone might say, "**God** would never **curse** anyone. **God** is so loving!

God gave us his own righteousness so all is good." **He made the One who knew no sin to become a sin offering on our behalf, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God (Second Peter 5:21).** True love also demands a hatred of sin. **Let love be without hypocrisy - detesting what is evil, holding fast to the good (Romans 12:9).**

You show both mercy and grace to the **repentant** sinner (**Ephesians 1:6, 2:8**), and anger at the unrepentant sinner. **But unless you repent, you too will all perish" (Like 13:3b and 5 NIV).** Oh **Father**, how vast **Your love** is (**Ephesians 3:17-18**) to forgive **as far as the East is from the West**, the sins of those who have a holy and righteous fear of **You**. **For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His mercy for those who fear Him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so ADONAI has compassion on those who fear Him (Psalms 103:11-13).**

Though **You** offer salvation to all, our Word clearly says that only those who respond back to **You** with **love** and trust will enter **Your** heavenly Kingdom. **For if you confess with your mouth that Yeshua is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart it is believed for righteousness, and with the mouth it is confessed for salvation (Romans 10:9-10).** **You** see the heart and it is not even those who claim to work for **You**, but those whose heart **loves You**. **Not everyone who says to Me, "Lord, Lord!" will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me on that day, "Lord, Lord, didn't we prophesy in Your name, and drive out demons in Your name, and perform many miracles in Your name?" Then I will declare to them, "I never knew you. Get away from Me, you workers of lawlessness" (Matthew 7:21-23)! These shall go off to everlasting punishment, but the righteous into everlasting life (Matthew 25:46).** **You** are so wise, powerful, and **loving**. I look forward to spending eternity with **You**, giving you great **love** and worship forever. In **Yeshua's** holy name and **His** power of resurrection. Amen