



## THE PARSHA EXPERIMENT

### PARSHAT KI TAVO: HOW TO MAKE SENSE OF THE TERRIBLE CURSES

This guide corresponds to the video: [How To Make Sense Of The Terrible Curses](#)

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#### SABBATH TABLE OUTLINE

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- I. This is one of the most difficult parshiot to read in the entire Torah.
  - a. After Moses lists all the blessings that Israel will receive for following God's laws, we hear curse after curse, and they are downright horrible.
    - i. God will cause pestilence to cling to you until you are wiped off the face of the land that you are now about to inherit (Deuteronomy 28:21)
    - ii. The heavens will be dry as dust and the ground will be as fertile as iron.
    - iii. The poetry of the curses is so vivid, but it doesn't stop there.
  - b. The curses aren't just as simple as: "yeah, things will be bad, lots of people will die and you will suffer." No, they're specific and even somewhat sadistic.
    - i. You will become engaged to a woman, and another man will lie with her (Deuteronomy 28:30)
    - ii. You will build a home, but you won't dwell in it (Deuteronomy 28:30)
    - iii. You will plant a vineyard, but you won't enjoy its fruit.
  - c. These curses are so painful. It's not that: "Oh, you won't find love, or you'll be homeless and hungry"
    - i. No, you'll work hard.
    - ii. You'll court a woman, fall in love, be ready to get married, and she'll be taken away from you.
    - iii. You'll build a home with your bare hands, delight in its planning, pour blood sweat and tears into your vineyard, but you won't live there, you won't enjoy its fruit.
    - iv. And we get example after example of this unique kind of torture - you will raise your oxen, and it will be slaughtered before your eyes, but you won't eat from it.
    - v. You will raise children, but they will be sent to another nation.
    - vi. You will be anxious and oppressed all of your days, and it will drive you into madness.
  - d. And if this were not bad enough, we are left with the most horrific imagery of all.
    - i. Something so horrific, we debated avoiding this subject entirely, and something so terrible we're choosing not to animate it.
    - ii. You will eat the fruit of your womb, the flesh of your sons and daughters that God has given you (Deuteronomy 28:53)
    - iii. It is a curse so appalling, it is difficult to believe that it is a verse in the Torah.

- iv. And if that weren't enough, the Torah goes into more detail as to how the children will be eaten.
  - v. The most tender and delicate man among you, when he eats his children, he won't share the leftovers with his brother, his wife, and whatever other children he has left.
  - e. What is going on here?
    - i. I'm not asking why the Torah brings up reward and punishment, I'm okay with that.
    - ii. But why these sadistic curses and why something so dark, so horrific?
    - iii. Yes, maybe we will fail, but is this really how God will punish us?
    - iv. Doesn't it seem like a little bit...much?
  - f. This video is Part 1 of a 2-part series focusing on the strange blessings and curses at the end of the Torah.
- II. The Torah seems to tell us, in one verse, what terrible misdeed warrants these horrific curses.
- a. Because you did not serve God in happiness, and with goodness of heart, out of all of your abundance (Deuteronomy 28:27).
    - i. Really? You get curses because you aren't happy?
    - ii. Are you telling me that if you have this guy, he follows every command in the book, honors his parents, destroys foreign idols, but because he was a little bit grumpy, he is doomed to eat his children?!?! How can this possibly be?
  - b. In order to understand what is going on here, we need a bit more context.
    - i. This parsha largely consists of the curses and blessings that Moses is promising Israel will receive as punishment or reward for keeping a long list of laws that we have been reading for a few parshiot now.
    - ii. But right before Moses lists those blessings and curses, we hear of one final law, which seems to be deeply significant in understanding these blessings and curses. And that is the law of Bikkurim.
  - c. When Israel is finally in the land, when a farmer is able to grow his first crop, he should gather those fruits in a basket and bring them to the Temple.
    - i. And he shall place the basket of fruits before the priest, and make a declaration: "I have come to the land that was promised to my forefathers. My ancestor, Abraham, was but a wandering Aramean, we went down to Egypt few in numbers but we multiplied there and became great. Then, we were enslaved there and we suffered terribly, but God saved us and brought us here to the land flowing with milk and honey."
    - ii. It's a beautiful declaration, that's for sure. Although, it's strange that the farmer needs to recount our entire nation's history.
    - iii. There is no such speech made when someone fulfills the command to build a maakeh, a fence on the roof of their house. "As I install the fence of this roof, I hereby declare that this house is built on land promised to my ancestors..."
    - iv. But anyway, the Torah continues: in your giving of bikkurim, "You should be happy, rejoice in all of the good that God is giving you and your household" (Deuteronomy 26:11)
    - v. Hmm...happiness in all of the good. Doesn't that seem just like what we were talking about before, with the curses?

1. Israel will be punished with those terrible curses because they did not worship God in Happiness, in goodness of heart and with an abundance of everything.
2. Why does this parsha begin and end with these ideas? What do they mean? And how do they shed light on why we get these terrible curses?

III. I think we're given a clue at the very end of this blessings and curses narrative.

- a. Moshe's speech, enticing the people to remain loyal to God with blessings, exhorting them against straying from God with curses, that all ends in the next parsha, Parshat Nitzavim.
- b. He's trying to get the people to pursue blessing and avoid curses, and he sums it all up simply and poetically: "See that I have placed before you today, life and good and death and evil. These blessings, they afford you life, they are good. Stray from God and you are cursed, it is evil, it is death." (Deuteronomy 30:15)
- c. Now...does any of this seem familiar to you?
  - i. These ideas? These words, paired together the way they are in this verse? Tov and Ra, Chayim and Mavet?
  - ii. Doesn't this remind us of the Eitz Hadaas Tov va Ra, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Garden of Eden?
  - iii. And wasn't there another famous tree in the garden?
  - iv. The Eitz haChayim - the Tree of Life.
  - v. And what would happen if you violated God's command and ate from the tree of knowledge?
    1. On the day that you eat from it, you will be subject to death (Genesis 2:17).
    2. Good, evil, life, death - Could it be that somehow, these blessings and these curses are taking us back to the garden?
  - vi. Here we are at the very end of the Torah, at the end of the five books of Moses, and yet, strangely, we are back at the beginning, back to that fateful moment, the very Genesis of humanity of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden?
  - vii. What would that mean, and how might it help us understand the blessings and the curses here at the end of the Torah?
- d. And it's not just the allusion to the trees in the Garden that send us back to Bereishit.
  - i. The word "tov," "good," which is all over our parsha, that word also shows up all over the beginning of the Torah.
  - ii. Not just in the tree of knowledge of good and evil, but even earlier, in the very beginning - in the creation of the world.
  - iii. Let's look all the way back at Creation, and see if it might shed any light on our parsha, here at the end.

IV. In our first video ever at the Parsha Experiment, we talked about how over and over, in Creation, we hear: Vayar Elokim Ki Tov - God sees what He has made, and declares that it is good.

- a. On the first day, there is tohu vavohu, it's chaos, v'chosech al pinei tehom, there is darkness on the face of the deep.

- i. Man cannot survive in the world of chaos and darkness, so God creates light. Vayar Elokim Ki Tov.
    - ii. This will be good for man.
    - iii. But the world is covered by water, there is no place for man to survive, so God separates upper and lower waters, and, on the third day, brings forth land for man to rest his feet. Vayar Elokim ki tov.
    - iv. This, too, will be good for man.
    - v. Each day of creation is another layer of foundation laid before the purpose of it all, man, can be brought into the picture. On the 6th day, when man is finally created, Vayar Elokim...vihinei tov...miod. God saw and behold it was very good.
  - b. God, the Creator, is the knower of Good and Evil.
    - i. That's what it means to be the Creator, You designed the system, You know what's good for your creations, for mankind, and You know what's not good.
    - ii. In Chapter 2, God declares that it is not good for man to be alone - Loh tov heyot ha'Adam levado. And He creates woman.
  - c. The suggestion we made way back in Bereishit is that God, our loving parent, our Creator, created this world in order to gives us the good. To enjoy.
    - i. Look at what God tells humanity after Creating the world: "Eat from every tree of the garden, enjoy this world, every species of fruit, every tree" (Genesis 2:16)
    - ii. And did you notice that word? Kol?
      - 1. Eat from all the trees, eat from every tree.
      - 2. This world is a world of abundance, it is a world of Kol, it is a world of Tov.
  - d. It is also a world of blessings:
    - i. God blesses mankind, "Behold I have given you all the vegetation that is on all of the land, and all the trees that produce fruit" (Gensis 1:29)
    - ii. Kol, kol, kol, there is abundance, there is blessing, there is goodness everywhere you look.
- V. Mankind had kol; they had everything.
- a. But, says the little skeptic inside every one of us, did they really have everything?
  - b. God tells mankind to enjoy all the trees of the Garden, except for one: eat from all the trees of the Garden, just not from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.
  - c. We asked, in that very first video, why does God put that tree in the garden?
    - i. Why jeopardize perpetual paradise by putting a big ol' self-destruct button and making it so shiny and enticing for humanity to push?
    - ii. And besides, it's a tree of knowledge of good and evil, of right and wrong, what can be more religious than to know right and wrong?
    - iii. God is pretty religious, no? He's God! Doesn't He want us to know right and wrong?
  - d. Across The Parsha Experiment, and throughout Aleph Beta, we have revisited these questions many times.
    - i. We suggested that God wants to give to us, to have us enjoy paradise, but to enjoy it together with Him.
    - ii. Here are all the trees to enjoy, but recognize that I am the one who gave them to you.
    - iii. Why does a parent delight in buying a toy for their child?

1. Sure, they want their kid to enjoy the gift, but they'd feel pretty rotten if their kid wordlessly took their new toy into their room and shut the door behind them, emerging only for meals.
  2. A parent wants their child not only to enjoy the gift, but to understand that the gift came from them. To appreciate them.
  3. The gift is meant, not only to satisfy a need, but to deepen a relationship.
  4. And how will humanity enjoy this world, their gift, in a way that deepens their relationship with their Creator?
  5. By honoring the prohibition not to eat from G-d's one tree, we convey our understanding and our appreciation that God is the Creator.
  6. He is our Parent, and we are in the garden because He brought us here.
- e. So why did humanity fail?
- i. They had kol, they had everything.
  - ii. How could they eat from the tree when they had so much to enjoy, and when such devastating consequences awaited them?
  - iii. Let's dig deeper into this story in the next video and try and uncover why Deuteronomy sends us back here to Genesis.
  - iv. I think the secret of the sin in the garden will help us make sense of these terrible curses, and moreover, it will help us understand the larger purpose of the entire Torah.