

My husband, upon finishing Robert Alter's seminal translation of the Tanakh, said to me "the Torah boils down to two salient points: how do I please God? Does this look infected?".

In this parsha of Ki Tavo, the Israelites receive a specific and satisfying answer of how to please God upon entering Israel. Moses tells us that we are to build an altar, leave a basket of fruit, recall the Passover, remember the covenant, and rejoice over the good that is God. Easy enough, right?

We are also given a list of specific and individual transgressions that displease God and that will result in a curse upon the transgressor. Don't make idols in secret, don't mislead blind people, don't have carnal relations with inappropriate people or beings, don't take bribes.

Moses goes on to tell us that if we keep the commandments and heed the word of God, we will have blessings beyond imagining. God will keep the covenant and we will be established as God's holy people with a powerful place in the world.

But if we do not obey God and we neglect to safeguard the commandments, we are to be cursed with dire consequences; we'll be infected with oozing boils, our crops will fail, our animals slaughtered, our children taken. Should we fail, we will be lonely individuals bereft of our tribe, subjugated and scattered to the winds, and ultimately forced back to Mitzrayim, Egypt, a narrow place.

But we have a confusing paradigm. We have specific instructions for the community to perform an offering of thanks. We are then given a list of specific transgressions that will bring an undetermined curse upon the individual transgressor. On the other hand, this parsha enumerates specific curses that shall befall us as a people if we fail to obey the laws properly. But this parsha does not mention which laws are most crucial, nor how many people must obey God for God to maintain our covenant.

Why do we have this disconnect? Why do we have such specificity for individual transgressions, but not their associated punishments? And why is it the opposite for the community: a clear delineation of the curses that will befall us all, but no specific guidance on the most important laws we as individuals must follow?

It's the nature of the covenant itself. God holds a covenant with us as a collective, but this is not the only covenant that exists.

If the actions of the few dictate the fate of the many, then we must necessarily have a covenant with one another.

Some time ago, I heard a drash here in this sanctuary about the impact of our actions on each other. Our darshan had found a wallet and returned it to its owner. The grateful owner tried to give him a small reward, and our darshan declined, saying that he'd prefer that the wallet owner pay it forward. A mitzvah begets a mitzvah, he said. What a beautiful way to build trust between individuals – I trust that you, a good and righteous citizen, will go be good and righteous in our community.

If a good deed begets a good deed, is the opposite true? Does a transgression beget another transgression? Imagine that you know someone in your community who misled a blind person or swindled a widow. Would you trust them? Would you consider them a kind and honorable community member, worthy of high regard, equal to you in the eyes of God? Probably not. Perhaps that's the vague and unspecified curse of the named transgressions – an erosion of communal trust and the fraying of social order.

A society without mutual trust cannot keep a covenant between its own members – so it certainly can't keep one with God.

But our covenant with each other is not built on returning wallets and the absence of these transgressions. The text instructs us to safeguard all of God's commandments – do we extrapolate and say that every single Jew is required to follow the laws equally and exactly, lest we break the covenant and bring curses upon ourselves? Is this a directive for us to become mitzvah police? This type of scrutiny equally sows mistrust in a community.

Or do we take a step back, to say that our communal covenant is based upon Rabbi Hillel's famous words - "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole Torah; the rest is the explanation of this" Is a faithful observance of the laws secondary to building our communal trust and maintaining our covenant with each other? Ignoring the laws of Torah erodes our communal identity and negates the entire point of our covenant with God.

I don't know that we'll ever have one uniform, satisfying answer of how to keep the covenant. Is that not the essence of Talmudic literature and disagreement between the different movements of Judaism?

I think it's somewhere in the middle. In our homes, we avoid idolatry, we avoid chametz during Pesach, we hear the shofar for Rosh Hashanah. And we keep the covenant with God by strengthening the covenant with each other. We pray and mourn together in a minyan. On Yom Kippur, we will beat our chests, collectively reciting a list of sins we all assume that we do. We support the synagogue, donating our time and our resources. And we remember our origin stories to root our community in a sense of time and space.

So. How do I please god? Observe the laws and find your sense of holiness. Show up for each other. Sponsor a kiddush, so your community eats together on Shabbos.

Does this look infected? There's a minyan of doctors in this room who can answer that question.