

# Parsha Ponders

Nitzavim | September 26, 2019 | 26 Elul 5779

## *Shared responsibility*<sup>1</sup>

הנסתרת ליקוק אלקינו והגלות לנו ולבנינו עד-עולם לעשות את-כל-דברי התורה הזאת

The hidden [deeds] are for Hashem our G-d, and the revealed [deeds] are for us, our children, forever, to fulfill all the words of this Torah<sup>2</sup>

This week's *parsha* contains one of Moshe's last major speeches to the Jewish people. He starts by pointing out that the entire people were present during this speech<sup>3</sup>. The leaders, the commoners, the women, the children, the converts. No one was missing. Moshe was bringing everyone into a covenant with G-d, for all generations. Part of this covenant involved a shared responsibility for one another. If some people sin, all could be punished. We should all ensure that our fellow is on their best behavior, and not turn a blind eye.

Lest a person say that the thoughts of their fellow are not accessible, and if they had inappropriate thoughts why should we be responsible, Hashem had a response<sup>4</sup>. The hidden deeds of our fellow are for Hashem to deal with. We bear no responsibility. But outward acts of defiance and impropriety are not something we can simply ignore. We have a shared responsibility for our fellow Jew, and we are all held accountable for the actions of the few.

Our Sages note<sup>5</sup> that the words לנו ולבנינו, "ourselves and our children", as well as the letter *ע* that follows, have dots on them in every *kosher sefer Torah*. Why is this so? There's actually a dispute. One opinion<sup>6</sup> is that it teaches us that the Jews weren't punished for hidden acts until they crossed the Jordan River into the land of Israel. Another opinion<sup>7</sup> is as we said before. Why would the Jews be punished for the hidden deeds of others? Rather, the dots are teaching us that the Jews weren't punished for overt acts of defiance until they crossed the Jordan River<sup>8</sup>.

What's the significance of crossing the Jordan River? The Jews were previously<sup>9</sup> commanded to recite various blessings and curses that could befall the nation. These blessings and curses were to be pronounced on two mountains in the Land of Israel. Once they crossed the Jordan River, they went to these two mountains and fulfilled their command<sup>10</sup>. Our verse is telling us that they weren't punished for hidden deeds, or revealed deeds (depending on the opinion), until that time. The significance is once they pronounced these blessings and curses, all the Jews became fully responsible for each other<sup>11</sup>. Until then it was only theoretical. At that point it became practical. It would make sense then that that is when the nation could be punished for an individual's misdeeds.

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<sup>1</sup> Based on Be'er Yosef to Deuteronomy 29:28

<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy *loc. cit.*

<sup>3</sup> Ibid v. 9,10

<sup>4</sup> Rashi to v. 28

<sup>5</sup> Sanhedrin 43b

<sup>6</sup> Rabbi Yehudah

<sup>7</sup> Rabbi Nechemia

<sup>8</sup> Rashi *loc. cit.* brings only this opinion

<sup>9</sup> Deuteronomy 11:29-32 and 27:11-26

<sup>10</sup> Joshua 8:30-35

<sup>11</sup> Rashi to Sanhedrin *loc. cit.* s.v. עד שעברו את הירדן, from Sotah 37b

The commentaries<sup>12</sup> struggle to try to provide different explanations for how these lessons could be derived from these dotted letters. It's not immediately clear how dots over לָנוּ וּלְבָנֵינוּ would indicate not being punished until crossing the Jordan River. As well, any explanation needs to also take into account the dot over the letter י<sup>13</sup>. One simple explanation is that there are eleven dots in this verse, over eleven letters. These eleven dots correspond to the eleven aforementioned blessings and curses<sup>14</sup>. After the Jews pronounced these eleven blessings and eleven curses, they all became fully responsible for each other. Only then would they be punished, either for hidden deeds of their fellow, or for the revealed sins, depending on the opinion<sup>15 16</sup>.

Good Shabbos

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<sup>12</sup> See Rashi and Tosafos ad. loc., and Mizrachi ad. loc., who bring many possible ways to derive these lessons

<sup>13</sup> Tosafos loc. cit. conclude that according to Rabbeinu Tam's explanation (brought there), there's no proper explanation for the dot over the י according to Rabbi Nechemia

<sup>14</sup> Blessings for those who avoid, and curses for those who break: (1) Making a graven image (2) Beating a father or mother (3) Infringing on the boundary of one's fellow (4) Misdirecting someone blind (5) Perverting the judgement of a convert, orphan, or widow (6) Relations with one's father's wife (7) Relations with an animal (8) Relations with a mother-in-law (9) Beating one's fellow in secret (10) Receiving a bribe in a capital case (11) Not withholding the Torah

<sup>15</sup> This approach doesn't explain why specifically these letters got dots, as opposed to other ones in the verse

<sup>16</sup> The son of the Be'er Yosef points out that this approach is basically the same one brought by the Maharal in Gur Aryeh ad. loc. § 17, although the latter provides a different one which he considers primary. See there