



## Cursing the Leader/Blessing the Leader • Parshat Mishpatim

In “How Leaders Should Handle Public Criticism” (*HBR*, December 12, 2022), Ron Carucci argues that the more public your role is and the more decisions you make, the more likely you are to get things wrong, and the more people will critique you in ways that are not always just or fair. “The cruel reality of leadership is that when things go wrong, you take a disproportionate amount of the blame.” This can be a hard burden to carry because the rumor mill works overtime. “When you make mistakes, the scrutiny from the broader organization is intensified. Remember, the farther people are from the problem, the less context and understanding they have. They will fill in the blanks with conjecture, projection of their own trauma, and perceived motives for why you did what you did.”

Carucci advises leaders to accept this reality and, as hard as it may be, try not to get sidetracked by the noise. Play the long-game of impact. At the same time, respond with humility and transparency and, when necessary, set the record straight with facts rather than emotions. Respond to the kernels of truth in what you hear, take action, and report back your results. Don’t let snarky or malicious feedback make you thick-skinned or cold-hearted, Carucci warns. Be your best self even and especially when you feel crushed: “You have to be true to the values you want people to remember you by. If you don’t want this moment to define you, then make sure it reveals who you intend to be.” Moments of intense criticism can also be opportunities to share your deepest convictions.

I thought of Carucci’s recommendations when reading a verse in *Mishpatim*, this week’s Torah portion: “You shall not revile God, nor put a curse upon a leader (*nasi*) among your people” (Ex. 22:27). Cursing the leader is mentioned in the same breath as cursing God because these are two sources of authority: Divine and human. The natural tendency to question or rebel against those who have control over us or constrain us is constant. The Torah reminds us to keep it in check.

On a surface level, this may be prudent advice. Cursing those in positions of influence can have unpleasant personal consequences, to say the least. Cursing someone in the ancient world (and in some parts of the modern world today) was taken very seriously, which explains the many prohibitions throughout Tanakh that warn against it. Ecclesiastes recommends that we silence negative thoughts against the king because the walls have ears; any public criticism may come back to bite the one who questions authority: “Do not revile a king even among your intimates. Don’t revile a rich man even in your bedchamber; for a bird of the air may carry the utterance, and a winged creature may report the word” (Eccl.10:20). You don’t know who you can trust or where anyone’s ultimate loyalties are.

Who are the leaders the Torah tells us not to curse? R. Abraham ibn Ezra mentions judges, priests, and Levites – all positions, he contends, that represent Torah. When you curse those who uphold the Torah, he is suggesting, you are, on some level, criticizing the Torah and God who gave us the

Torah. Ibn Ezra adds that this law applies to speaking in secret or in public. In other words, the one who curses should try to shift his or her very mindset about the current leadership.

Ibn Ezra also helps us understand the context of this law. It appears immediately after the prohibition that one who lends money must return the garment that a poor person gave as collateral at night and adds a line of compassion amidst a listing of laws: “In what else shall [your neighbor] sleep? Therefore, if that person cries out to Me, I will pay heed, for I am compassionate” (Ex. 22:26). Ibn Ezra examines this juxtaposition and concludes: “The poor man, while in pain during the night, might revile the judge who ruled that the lender should take the pledge.”

Sforno takes this prohibition in a different direction: “Even though you may feel that the judge has judged you unfairly, you must not curse him. The reason is that no individual can judge his own guilt or innocence objectively.” Before we curse a leader, we have to look in the mirror to check if we judge others more harshly than we judge ourselves. We should interrogate our own subjectivity.

The medieval compilation of mitzvot, the *Sefer HaChinukh* (#71:1) adds that this law applies not only to a king but also to the head of the Sanhedrin, the ancient assembly of sages who determined Jewish law, “since the intention of the verse is about anyone who is the head authority over Israel, whether it is the government of the kingdom or whether it is the government of the Torah.” He extended the application of this law beyond those in political positions of power to include the authority of scholars.

So seriously was this law observed that the Talmud includes the strange and gruesome story of the sage Bava ben Buta to illustrate. King Herod called upon Bava ben Buta and placed a porcupine hide on his head to prick his eyes out. Herod sat before this blind scholar and cursed *himself* to see Bava ben Buta’s reaction. He goaded the sage to join him. Bava ben Buta quoted our verse in Ecclesiastes – “Do not curse the king, not even in your thoughts” – but Herod pushed him further: “He is not a king since he rules illegally.” Still Bava

ben Buta would not concede. “And even if he were merely a rich man, I would not curse him, as it is written: ‘And do not curse a rich person in your bedchamber’ (Eccl.10:20). And even were he only a leader, I would not curse him, as it is written: ‘And you shall not curse a leader among your people’ (Ex. 22:27)” (BT *Bava Batra* 4a).

Bava ben Buta suffered greatly under Herod’s rule, yet he still observed this commandment. Here it is important to make a distinction between criticizing and cursing. One is not forbidden to question a leader’s rulings, policies or character to maintain the integrity of the office. Most ancient Israelite kings had a prophet to guide and chastise them precisely to keep the king’s power in check and remind him to answer to the King of Kings. Saul had Samuel. David had Nathan. But there is a difference between the legitimate critique of power and a course, emotional and blasphemous challenge that invokes supernatural powers against the leader.

The word for leader in our verse is “*nasi*,” and it is in defining this term that we may better understand the prohibition. The infinitive “*l’nasot*” is used throughout *Tanakh* to refer to shouldering a burden, sometimes a very heavy one. Those who curse a leader add weight to an already heavy burden. Sometimes, in our anger or indignation, we fail to see all that a leader may be carrying. When adding to the load, we may inadvertently become the reason a leader walks away from the position. “What do I need this for?” Look around to see how many volunteers are *not* signing up for senior leadership roles because they don’t want the constant criticism without much recognition or praise. It is a lot to carry.

But Nahmanides, in his interpretation of our verse, adds that the root of “*nasi*” also means to lift up. The role of the leader is to lift up the follower. Perhaps the word also reminds us that leaders themselves need to be uplifted. If we lift up leaders, and they lift us up, maybe more people would sign up for these unpopular jobs. When leaders make mistakes, it is incumbent upon us to bring them to public attention, but there is a difference between constructive solutions and reckless gossip, between offering respectful feedback and cursing the leader.

In his book, *Judaism's Life-Changing Ideas*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks shares a personal story that may provide a small window into this complex issue. At the beginning of his rabbinical career, he sought the approval of a senior rabbi and waited for a word of encouragement. He was working hard and taking risks. "You need support at such moments, because taking risks and suffering the inevitable criticism is emotionally draining. The encouragement never came. The silence hurt. It ate, like acid, into my heart." It was then that he

had a shift in strategy. Instead of waiting for praise, he praised the rabbi he sought praise from. "I began to formulate it as an ethic. Don't wait to be praised: Praise others. Don't wait to be respected: Respect others. Don't stand on the sidelines, criticising others. Do something yourself to make things better."

So, consider ways you may have "cursed" a leader. What praise could you offer to lift up a leader who is lifting you?