

Ki Tavo Dvar Torah
Welcome Shabbat
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I recently heard a fascinating piece of reporting about computer hackers on the Gimlet Media podcast Reply All. Now my guess is that at this point, most of us have heard about the headline-breaking stories about people hacking into large companies and stealing large amounts of data, including people's social security numbers and passwords. But what I knew much less about before I heard this story was a different kind of hacking. In this kind of hacking, people go after one individual at a time, often to steal desirable usernames on Instagram or Snapchat. Hackers steal desirable usernames and turn around and sell them.



Now I find this not only frightening, but outrageous. Not only is it a crime, but it's a crime that most people don't even know to be worried about. We might worry about our information being stolen, but our usernames? And by the way, to add insult to injury, most of the perpetrators interviewed by the reporter in this story were teenagers. At one point in the interview, the hacker being interviewed suddenly hung up the phone. The reporter, Alex Goldman, assumed that the interview was over, and that the interviewee was refusing to speak further, but then the hacker called back a few minutes later. He explained, "My dad just walked

in, sorry about that.” These are kids, having fun at other people’s expense, but what an expense that is.

We are warned about taking advantage of other people's weaknesses in today's Torah portion. A few moments ago, we read about a dramatic ritual in which the people stand on two mountaintops



while the Levites tell them that they have a choice: They can choose obedience or disobedience, blessing or curse. Their fate is in their own hands. And this recitation, which ends with an enumeration of the possible blessings and terrible curses that await, begins by explaining exactly what behaviors will earn those curses. Now we might expect that any disobedience of God’s laws qualifies for curses. After all, it takes the Torah just over one verse, albeit repeated in similar language multiple times, to explain who qualifies for a blessing. “If you obey the commandments that God instructs you.” But in fact, from looking at this *Parashah*, it seems that not every act of disobedience triggers the curses that God threatens to send. The Torah actually gives a very detailed list of what sins qualify for curses.

The medieval commentator Ibn Ezra points out that if you look at that list, a pattern emerges. “Cursed be anyone who makes a sculptured image, and sets it up in secret.” Condemning idolatry is pretty standard for the Torah – but the Torah specifically lists an idolator who acts in secret. Why is that? If we skip ahead in our list, we’ll find that this isn’t the only time an act is specified as being secret. In verse 24, it says “Cursed be the one who strikes down their fellow in secret.” And other acts here seem unlikely to be revealed in public as well – act

number 2 is insulting your parents, and I'd imagine most parents might not want to get their child in trouble, so that behavior is likely to stay private as well. Act number three is moving a land boundary marker which, if done in secret, is a great way to steal land without anyone ever knowing it. Act number four is misdirecting a blind person, a behavior which, again, is unlikely to ever be discovered, as even the person being misdirected may wonder if they themselves are at fault, and they simply failed to follow their directions properly. And the list goes on. In fact, the final item on the list, which might be understood to include any violation of any commandment, Ibn Ezra intuitively from the context that it is in fact a prohibition against violating commandments specifically *in secret*. So it seems that here, what makes the sins on this list so egregious isn't just the act itself – it's the fact of doing something with the expectation of being able to get away with it. These acts vary widely in how much harm they cause, from an insult to stealing land to causing physical harm, but what they all share is that the perpetrator is trying to manipulate others, to use their power or knowledge to take advantage of someone's weakness. In every one of these, there is a high likelihood of getting away with the behavior, and in most of them, a vulnerable person is hurt.

Now we might ask, why is exploitation the defining feature of an act that merits the worst kind of punishment? Elsewhere, the rabbis actually identify three particular sins that are considered to be so bad that you should die rather than do them: idolatry, certain kinds of inappropriate sexual relationships, and murder. In that case, the rabbis are concerned with the outcome, what actually happened, not with how you got there. So why is it that here in *Parashat Ki Tavo*, the Torah is so concerned about the person's approach to an act rather than just the act itself?

One answer is the asymmetry of the behavior. As upsetting as it may be to be manipulated or preyed upon by someone acting surreptitiously, the perpetrator is generally able to avoid facing the full gravity of their misdeed head on. Now some people might not care about how much they hurt other people, but a lot of people do. Something that is particularly insidious about harming someone in an indirect or secretive way is that it allows the person who does it to lie to themselves about how much harm they caused. As opposed to someone acting publicly, someone acting secretly might hope to avoid not only external consequences, but also the full impact of seeing how much they have hurt another person. In fact, in the story about that computer hacker, that is exactly what happened. The teenager being interviewed actually asked the reporter, "What's the big deal? Why is she so upset? I only targeted that snapchat account anyway because I saw that the owner hadn't used it in over a month." He totally missed how confused and unsettled it would make a person feel to have their social media account stolen, because he wasn't interacting with his victims.

I think there's another answer here to our question about why the Torah is so concerned with transgressions that are done in secret, as opposed to the specific nature of the transgression. I think the Torah is not only concerned with individual behavior, but with the nature of the society that the Israelites will create once they enter the land of Israel, which they are about to do. One major feature of the curses in *Ki Tavo* is that they are delivered to the entire people, gathered together on two mountaintops. And in fact, the blessings and the curses that are enumerated impact the entire people collectively. If you are blessed, God will set you high above all the nations of the earth, God will make sure you defeat any enemies that attack

you, God will provide rain for your land in season. If you are cursed, God your enemies will conquer you, disease will run rampant, and the land will experience a drought. These are collective – not individual – rewards and punishments.



Now, this begs the question – What happens if only one person violates one of these commandments? Would an entire people be conquered because one person managed to surreptitiously move a land marker to steal land from a neighbor? Would a whole country experience drought because one person misdirected a blind person? It seems from the context that the entire people here are assumed to be somehow culpable. And in fact, the commentator Sforno is careful to say that people are only being punished here for sins for which they themselves are responsible. In order to believe that, then either you believe that this punishment only occurs when everyone is committing these sins, or that something else is going on here.

I think the implication here is that these dramatic blanket punishments are not solely about the behavior of individuals. Rather, they are in response to a society in which this type of transgression is normal. A society in which the powerful routinely exploit the powerless with impunity is exactly the type of society that the Torah condemns in our *parashah*. This warning is given to the whole people because the concern here is about what type of society they are

going to build. Will they build a society with the proper mechanisms in place to prevent exploitation? Will people who try to manipulate others be stopped and punished?

In our world today, it's become clear that when individuals take advantage of other people's weaknesses, they are often acting within a system that allows them to get away with it, or even encourages that behavior. Furthermore, if they don't have to interact with their victims, like the computer hackers in the story I opened with, or like so many of the people listed in our *parashah*, who act in secret, it's easy for them to minimize to themselves the harm that they are causing.

Now when it comes to the type of computer hack described above, I actually think that eventually, in the long term, we're going to find a way out of this. Either we will all stop using the internet for private information, which seems highly unlikely, or companies will find a way to make it harder to steal our accounts and information.

This process of protecting others is something that happens not just at a societal level, but also at a communal level. I feel so blessed to be joining the Temple Emunah community, which, it is very clear, is a community of caring individuals, committed to encouraging caring behavior. Our inclusion committee has launched a



number of initiatives to make sure that our synagogue is a safe place that meets all sorts of needs, from allergies to physical disabilities to mental health challenges. The Refugee assistance committee looks outward, providing ways for our community members to make sure that our

immigrant and refugee neighbors are supported and protected. And I could go on and on. I have seen one example after another of attempts to make our community one in which nobody slips through the cracks, and in which everyone feels equally seen and valued. I am so grateful to have been so warmly welcomed into this caring community, and I hope to do my part in supporting and helping to grow all of the many ways that we together make our community a place that we can all feel proud of.