

Moshe lays out the blessings and curses that Yehoshua should say later on when the Israelites cross the Jordan River and enter the Land. One of them is:

אָרוּר הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה פֶסֶל וּמִסְכָּה תּוֹעֵבֶת הִיא מַעֲשֵׂה יְדֵי חָרָשׁ
וְשָׂם בְּסֵתֶר וְעָנּוּ כָּל־הָעָם וְאָמְרוּ אָמֵן: {ס}

“Cursed be the man that makes a statue or molten image, it is an abomination of HaShem, made of a craftsman’s handiwork, and it is erected in secret. The entire People responded ‘Amen!’” (Deuteronomy 27:15).

It appears by this verse that the curse is only on someone who is makes a craftsman’s quality image and places it in secret. Does it have to be in secret? Is it not a sin to make an idol for the public?

The Gemara Avodah Zarah 52a asks “Why not say that this matter applies only with regard to rendering the man who made the idol liable for the sin, but the object of idol worship does not become prohibited until it is worshipped? The Gemara answers: The verse states: “Cursed be the man who shall make a graven or molten image, an abomination to the Lord, the work of the hands of the craftsman, and shall set it up in a hidden place” (Deuteronomy 27:15), which indicates that from the time of its making the person who made the idol is liable to be cursed.”

The verse is teaching us that even if never worshiped, just the making it causes the maker to be cursed. A contrasting opinion brought down in the same Gemara Avodah Zarah 52a “Rav Yehuda said that the verse states: “Cursed be the man who shall make a graven or molten image...and shall set it up in a hidden place” (Deuteronomy 27:15). This indicates that the idol is

not rendered forbidden until the idolater performs in service of the idol those matters, i.e., rites, that are performed in a hidden place.” Thus, only if actually used is the maker cursed.

We can discern that this is not necessarily a contrasting view. Rav Yehuda is talking about the status of the idol itself, that it is not considered an unlawful idol until worshipped. The previous Gemara is saying the man is still cursed even before the idol itself becomes prohibited through an act of worship. Why is simply making an idol worthy of a curse?

The Gemara in Avodah Zarah 52a says “Rabbi Yitzhak says ‘From where is it derived that a Jew’s object of idol worship requires interment?’ This is derived from a verse, as it is stated “And shall set it up in a hidden place” (Deuteronomy 27:15), which Rabbi Yitzhak interprets as requiring one to inter the idol in a hidden place.”

The Gemara in Sota 37b has a different view of this verse. It also explains why the rest of the curses have to do with illicit relationships. “This is proved from the verse: “Cursed is the man who makes a graven or molten image” (Deuteronomy 27:15). Is a curse a sufficient consequence for the actions of an idol worshiper? He has rebelled against the fundamental tenet of the Torah. Rather, this is referring to one who engaged in relations with a forbidden relative and bore her a *mamzer* son. And the son, who is not allowed to marry a Jew of unflawed lineage, went to live among the other nations of the world and engaged in idol worship. His father and mother are cursed for causing him to worship idols. Likewise, the rest of the curses refer to sins that are the result of adultery.” From here we see that not even making an idol, but engaging in conduct that eventually leads to idol worship brings down a curse.

Ibin Ezra takes it for granted that our verse requires the idol to be set up in secret. These twelve verses are curses for people that are sinning in secret. It is obviously a sin to sin with idol worship. However, there is an additional curse for one who sins in secret.

Chizkuni also points out the secrecy of these sins. They are all when done in the privacy of one's home so there cannot be witnesses and therefore it is up to HaShem to curse and punish them. That is why the idol in our verse is set up in secret.

The Sforno explains the importance of and delineated that these sins are done in secret, by individuals. He says that the curse is on the "man" who engages in the sin. It is important to note that the individual here is cursed, because previously, the entire People were responsible even when the leaders sinned and the People could not object, i.e. the sin of the Spies. He says all of the "cursed be" mentioned here had first been intoned as a blessing for all the people refraining from becoming guilty of the sins that are mentioned here. The principal reason for these lines is to curse the sinners who violate these commandments so that they alone will bear the burden of their guilt, the people at large not sharing in that responsibility. The reason is that the sinners referred to were in the main the leaders of the people, so that the ordinary Israelite did not have the power to protest the carryings on of their leaders. This thought has been stated clearly by Ezekiel 22,6-7 "every one of the princes of Israel in their midst used his strength for the shedding of blood." In that same chapter the prophet specifically singled out most of the twelve sins listed in our paragraph here. These obscenities were all carried out in Jerusalem; however, this does not mean that all the inhabitants of the city were guilty of these sins. Mostly it was the highly placed members of society who were guilty of them. When the sins of the population at large are mentioned, these sins are generally attributed to the city in which these sins have been carried out.

The Daas Zekeinim brings the Gemara in Sota as an example of a way that creating idol worship will only carry a curse but not a corporal punishment. Then he says, "if you were to ask what makes the twelve sins subject to a curse for the sinner different from violating any of the

other of HaShem's commandments, one answer may be that all these commandments when violated are known only to the sinner and the Creator. No human being can take the sinner to court for something he had not witnessed and warned the offender not to commit." Thus, sinning in secret is a way to be cursed and not brought to beis din for punishment. Since beis din cannot correct the conduct it is HaShem that provides the curse.

Rashbam says that these twelve sins are specifically done in private. In the public they will be dealt with in the courts. However, leaders cannot stop anyone from sinning in private, so those that do have to suffer a curse to forewarn them from sinning. In fact, when looking at the list of twelve we notice that engaging in relations with a neighbor's wife is not on the list. This is because he may be seen entering the house. However, with sisters, mothers-in-law, and wives of fathers, etc, there is a perfect reason for entering the house of a family or relative. These curses for sins done in secret are then explained later when it says, "Concealed acts are for HaShem our Lord; but with overt acts, it is for us and our children forever, to engage in concert with all of the words of the Torah." (Deuteronomy 29:28).

The Malbim says something different on the secrecy of the graven image. "He makes it hidden because he is hiding his haughtiness and making the idol like a humble person. The Sons of Noah and the Avos were commanded regarding idol worship and they were careful to avoid it. Avraham was thrown in a fire because of it, Rivkah says her life should be shortened if her son would marry the daughters of idol worshipers, Yitzchok had his eyes dimmed because of the idolatrous incense burning of Esau's wives, and Yaakov instructed his family to rid themselves of anything idol related when they entered the Land." Thus, the curse is that this person is trying to hide and sin but he is acting in contrary to the mesorah of our Avos.

Now that we see that the secrecy is part of the sin that is to be cursed, we understand the end of our verse. The entire People had to say Amen after each of these curses. As these are sins that are done in private it is incumbent on every person to monitor themselves. Additionally, it is an affirmation to continue the heritage of our forefathers and foremothers. Part of that heritage is distancing ourselves from sin and from idol worship, even in our own home. That can explain why the Gemara says that even making an idol is worthy of a curse, even before it is actually worshiped. The lesson here is that even when we are individuals we are still part of the People. While our actions will not necessarily doom the rest of the People, we each have a responsibility to act in concordance with the Torah. Bringing down a curse on a part of the People is still not joining the rest of the People as a whole. It is haughtiness to sin in private, even if it is disguised as humbleness. This is because sinning in private makes the sinner feel above or removed from the watchful eyes of Hashem and the mesorah given to us by the Avos. In private, no one sees, so there will be no consequences.

We may feel that sinning in private can do no harm. The Torah is clear here. It is not only a sin but it carries the weight of a curse. If we must be so careful not to harm the klall in private, we certainly must not remove ourselves from the klall in public. May we all come together as a kehilla, one People, under the One HaShem, and may our tefillos rise as one and be heard and answered, so we all may be written for a Good and Healthy and Peaceful Life.