God you are humiliating because everyone is created in the image of God. And the resultant punishment, according to the Netziv, is a naturally occurring one: the world will inevitably descend into a state of **anarchy** if this type of antisocial behavior is tolerated. God's world is created in a fashion that does not allow it to endure such behavior. The Netziv's understanding of God's involvement in the details perhaps reflects a theology of minimal divine providence. Yet this type of behavior may have far-reaching, **universal** ramifications.

I invite you to engage with the interpretations of the five commentators provided and consider which theologies or lessons resonate with you and which do not.

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דבר אחר | A Different Perspective

Kedushah in the Choir

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This week's parashah opens with a statement on holiness: "You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy" (Lev. 19:2). In the original Hebrew, the word "you" in this verse is in the plural form, implying that anyone can attain holiness the capacity for holiness is not only for those who are spiritually gifted. The plural "you" might also suggest that holiness is best achieved in the context of a community, rather than as a solo effort.

Similarly, someone who sings in a choir derives benefit from the group. Many of us have had the experience of adding our untrained voices to a community chorus, and finding that the whole is indeed greater than the parts. The act of making music in a group magnifies one's individual artistry.

Salamone Rossi (ca. 1570–1630) was the first Jewish composer to write choral music. Among his compositions is *Keter*—the title of which is taken from the opening word, *keter* (crown), of the *Kedushah* in the Sephardic rite. The entire line reads, "Your crown of holiness is acclaimed by throngs of angels on high and by your people assembled below."

Visit **jtsa.edu/keter** to hear a performance of Rossi's *Keter* by Rhythm and Jews, the University of Chicago's Jewish *a cappella* group, that brings Rossi's music into the 21st century and illustrates how holiness can be captured in choral singing.

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Parashat Kedoshim 5776 פרשת קדשים תשע"ו

"You Shall Fear Your God": Theological, Moral, and Psychological Implications

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There are many exhortations in Leviticus 19, but only two of them conclude with "**you shall fear your God,** I am the Lord." We will focus on **Leviticus 19:14**—

> You shall not curse the deaf, and before the blind you shall not place a stumbling block; rather you shall fear your God, I am the Lord

—and five traditional Jewish interpretations, to examine how the phrase "you shall fear your God" informs our understanding of the injunctions not to curse the deaf and not to place a stumbling block before the blind.

Ibn Ezra (Rabbi Abraham ben Meir Ibn Ezra, 1093–1167, Spain) offers a **literal** interpretation:

> Don't curse the deaf [just] because you have the power, and similarly, do not [literally] place a stumbling block before the blind [just because you have the power]. Fear God, who can punish you and make you deaf or blind.

For Ibn Ezra, the phrase "fear your God" is intended to instill the fear of God's imminent punishment for such egregious offenses.

Not so **Rashi** (R. Shelomo Yitzhaki, France, 1040–1105). He, instead, offers a **metaphorical** reading of "before the blind you are not to place a stumbling block":

> Before someone blind in the matter [at hand], you shall not give advice which is unsuitable for him.

Eschewing the literal interpretation, Rashi is suggesting that "placing a stumbling block" means giving unsuitable advice—i.e., taking unfair advantage of a person who is intellectually blind, so to speak, and does not possess the knowledge or experience to make an informed decision. What is the textual justification for Rashi's figurative reading? He writes:

> "Fear your God," since people are unable to determine if the intent of the person [giving the advice] is for good or for bad, and he is thereby able to evade [the charge of evil intent] by saying, "My intent was for the best." Therefore, it is said

> concerning him, "Fear your God"—the one who is cognizant of the [nature] of your thoughts.

In other words, Rashi is saying that people may not know your true intentions, but God certainly does — so don't give bad advice.

Rashi's metaphorical reading and Ibn Ezra's literal one affect the theological implications of their comments: Rashi emphasizes God's omniscience (God discerns our inner thoughts); Ibn Ezra emphasizes God's omnipotence (God has the power to punish us). For **Rashi**, "fear of God" means we need to **internalize** God's will so it can prompt us to do what is right; for **Ibn Ezra**, "fear of God" is the fear of some tangible **external** punishment. Rashi's theology may reflect a more conceptualized and mature understanding of God, and Ibn Ezra's a younger person's or a less nuanced one. Or perhaps, the theology one embraces may depend on the moment, on one's life situation.

Rabbenu Bahye (Bahye ben Asher, 1255–1340, Spain) understands deafness and blindness in this verse **paradigmatically**—whereby the blind and deaf are **emblematic** of all those we do not **fear**:

> And the purpose of this [admonition not to curse the deaf] is so that a person may become restrained in his speech and not accustom his soul to a negative [character] trait; and the prohibition is not intended for the protection of the victim; rather it is for the protection of the person doing the cursing: for if a person restrains himself from [cursing] the deaf, all the more so concerning one who can hear. [Cursing] the "deaf person" serves as a paradigm for all other [similar offenses] . . . [where people take advantage of others] since they do not fear them.

Rashi and Ibn Ezra both explain the injunction from the **perspective of the victim**: the Torah is trying to protect the helpless. **Bahye**, on the other hand, explains the injunction from the **perspective of the potential curser**, stating that "the prohibition is not for the sake of the victim but rather for his [the curser's] own sake." Bahye is suggesting that the prohibition is intended for the purpose of **spiritual/ethical training**, extolling the virtue of restraint—i.e., restraining from negative speech even when it will have no direct effect on another person. Bahye's comment is **psychologically** based.

Why, according to Bahye, does our verse conclude with the phrase "you shall fear your God"? For Bahye, "people curse the deaf and cause the blind to stumble since they do not **fear** them. That is why [the verse] concludes, 'You shall **fear** your God.'"

Bahye is, in effect, saying that the person who commits these offenses is a cowardly person; the reason he might feel free to afflict the deaf or blind is that he is not afraid of them. But the afflicter had better fear God, because God is aware of the offense, even if no one else is. That is why Bahye concludes his comment as follows:

> And that is the intention of the statement of our Rabbis of blessed memory in Avot 2:1: "Know what is above from you: a seeing eye, a listening ear, and all your deeds being inscribed in a book."

Abarbanel (Isaac ben Judah Abrabanel, 1437–1508, Portugal/Italy) adds an entirely new theology, stating that all the prohibitions mentioned in Leviticus 19:11–14 are **juxtaposed**, one following the other,

> so one should see that [even though] [these laws could be logically deduced and legislated by an enlightened society] since they are humane, [they are, nevertheless, included in the Torah] in order to caution that one should not refrain from robbery, swearing falsely, dealing dishonestly, cursing the deaf because logic dictates, but rather because God has forbidden them . . . that the [reason] you refrain from doing any of these repulsive things should not be that they would be prohibited by humanly/logically derived law, but rather because God commanded them for the sake of complying with God's will.

In other words, refrain not because it's intuitively the right thing to do or not to do (Rashi), and not only because one fears punishment (Ibn Ezra), and not because one fears people (Bahye), but rather for the fear/awe/respect of God and His laws. Consequently, according to Abarbanel, not only are our actions or restraint being legislated, our intentions are as well: our intentions are of utmost importance when observing God's commandments.

Finally, the **Netziv** (Naftali Tzevi Yehudah Berlin, 1816–1893, Russia/Poland), like Abarbanel, invokes the principle of **juxtaposition**, but employs it very differently:

> Not cursing the deaf and not placing a stumbling block before the blind is also a matter of preserving peace and dignity among humankind, as I have written—the way you treat your friend, so will he treat you.

The Netziv is saying that the previous verse—"You shall not oppress/defraud your neighbor, nor rob him; the wages of a hired servant shall not abide with you all night until the morning" (Lev. 19:13)—will have the effect of preserving peace and dignity just like "not cursing the deaf and not placing a stumbling block before the blind."

The Netziv provides an explanation for the inclusion of the phrase "fear your God" that is different from all the others:

> Whom are you humiliating? Whom are you cursing?: the image of the Omnipresent One, Blessed be He. And the one who does not think so is like one who himself does not embody the image of God. And this attitude [literally, matter] results in a lack of peace because the [people/the world] becomes lawless like animals and beasts.

The implied **theology** of the comment of the Netziv is derived from his understanding of the words "fear your God." The nature of the offense is counterintuitive: it is actually