



Uriel da Costa instructing the young Spinoza, postcard reproduction of painting by Samuel Hirszenberg (1901). Born a Catholic, returned to Judaism and eventually landed as a critic of both rabbinic and priestly institutions.

There are two stories that come to mind with the topic of curses. It is difficult to tell which one of them is more famous. One is a story of one who *curses* others—Karapet of Tiflis—the other is a story of one who becomes *cursed*: Baruch Spinoza. The story about Karapet of Tiflis curse is from the introductory chapter of Gurdjieff's book *Belsebub's tales to his grandson*. While Spinoza, who was cursed for real by a righteous community, is a 17th century document from Amsterdam.



The St. Karapet—Armenian Church on a hill over Tiflis.

Let us start with Karapet, since he was mentioned first: he was literally a whistle-blower at a train-station in the Georgian capital, Tiflis. According to Gurdjieff (Mr. G), Karapet's morning-job was to pull a rope and let steam into the station's whistle, for the railway-workers to wake up in the morning. The station was on a hill over Tiflis/Tbilisi and so woke up every one else too. Before sounding the whistle, according to Mr. G, Karapet cursed all the citizens of the city, before they woke up and cursed him.

In this way, he was seeking to establish balance in the universe. There more than one layer in this story. Mr. G claims that the railway in Tiflis/Tbilisi—which was built in 1872—was on a hill towering over the city, and that this was the reason the steam-whistle could be heard all over. However, the actual railway station is located downtown. What is on the spot indicated by Mr. G is the Armenian Church of St. Karapet. Why call a saint a *whistle blower*, and the congregants *railway-workers*?

It makes the informed reader wonder—*where is the curse? And—who is cursing? Finally—to whom is the curse directed? Does the curse have sexual connotations? Is Mr. G implying that the church is a*

*whorehouse/gay-bar/etc.*? Evidently, we will not get to answer these questions here. However, we know enough to understand that the basic structure of the curse is to transmit across layers.

It likely owes its ritual effectiveness to this communicative property. It contains the reality of what it intends to transmit. I think we will agree that *no* curse is produced by accident. In order to be a curse, it has to be *designed*. For those submitted to it, however, it is likely accidental: unaware of the intention which only will appear with the work of time. What in its inception can be experienced as a coy and gentle caress, can reveal itself in time with a much darker/deeper intent at work.

The games we play with the unconscious and the games it plays with us. In comparison, the curse of Baruch Spinoza by the rabbinate of Amsterdam, lacked this subtlety. The interrogation of Spinoza—to determine the evil of his ways—may have been subtle. Of this we know but little. The curse here is direct and features the most severe form of excommunication (the other, milder ones, are *herem* and *niddah*). It is not in the moment like Karapet's curse, but *forever*.

While one continues debating this—but in the general and Jewish world—it has not been lifted. And in its inception the curse would transmit to anyone in contact with the mild-mannered Spinoza. Is there something to separate between the two curses? Evidently, in both cases, what is at work is the expedition of human souls. But whereas underlying the lost-and-found riddle in Mr. G's story, there is an act of theft and stash; the opposite is likely the case with Spinoza's ban.

In the rabbinic world, theft is the most generic of human sins, as it comprises murder: murder understood as the stealing of someone else's time. We are left to speculate, since disagreement and criticism is part and parcel of Jewish culture (religious and secular). What is a more likely concern is that Spinoza was threatening to take away time off Talmud/Torah studies in generations to come. His brilliance and mildness could have threatened to have such an impact.

Beyond these two examples, are there other functions of the curse that should be considered? Perhaps. Could it be that a function of the curse might be to cut through ambiguity: for instance, between lost & found vs. stolen & stashed. Is it a ritual procedure with the rhetoric function of bringing clarity to a suspected theft: to determine whether something has been stolen or simply misplaced? The liar who has stolen something, may claim that what is stolen is misplaced.

Conversely, the liar will also tempt such claims that what is misplaced is in fact stolen. If so, are there ways of designing curses to define which one it is. In our time, with fake news, political clowning and artificial intelligence, this is evidently a relevant question to ask. With this take on a curse, however, its function is not to harm: but rather to get people out of harm's way, from other people who may be working to harm. It could also help the latter category to take awareness of it.

The closest I have got to this line of work is Alejandro Jodorowsky's approach and practices work with [psychomagic](#). Consider the story of a well-known judge in Buenos Aires, who is a *habitué* of mundane restaurant where everyone knows him. He is wealthy and respected. But he is struggling with some problems to which this exercise is addressed: take on a hobo attire, nail golden coins under your shoes, stand outside the restaurant to beg, and have porcelain eyes in your pocket...

Intuitively, devising this ritual act reveals an understanding of the diagnostic/prognostic curse—our present topic—in its principle and grammar. It is out of the comfort zone, but its purpose is not to bind or harm. Rather it is a vehicle for a specific errand in the *contact zone*, that in turn is open to refinement and precisation. It depends on a profound and timely understandings of certain tasks and their occasions, for certain necessary/needed encounters to take place.

For instance, in encounters with the above category of *liar*: who will attempt to blur the boundary between misplaced and stolen. If the lie is effective s/he is also likely to be confused by it, and it would take some well placed and -timed initiatives, to reveal the lie as such. That is, liars will reveal themselves. This sort of guile is not to misguide others. On the contrary. This sort of curse is investigative in spirit and forensic in its working materials. But, one may ask, is it pedagogic?



Sergei Paradzanov (1969)  
The Colour of pomegranates