



VAYIKRA

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Why Curses? The Kabbalah of Curses

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WHY CURSES?

THE KABBALAH OF CURSES

ABSTRACT

How would you react to someone cursing you? The very word “curse” sends a chill up our spines. So what should our reaction be to the curses we find in the Torah?

Skeptics tend to dismiss the Torah as a primitive book presenting an angry, vengeful G-d. One part often singled out by them is its curses – some of them enumerated in this week’s Torah portion. They ask: Why would G-d stoop to cursing His people?

Indeed, the Torah states that G-d created flawed mortals, so why would He curse them with cruel punishments for behaving like who they are – human? Is this sadism? Does G-d have nothing better to do? And how do these curses help us have a loving relationship with Him? Do they not accomplish the opposite? Moreover, Torah is called a Torah of love and life, her paths are pleasant. How is that consistent with... curses?!

A cryptic story in the Talmud cites the author of the chief work of Kabbalah known as the Zohar, Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, whose *yahrzeit* we honored this past week on *Lag B’Omer*. This story reveals for us a fascinating mystical way to look at the biblical “curses” – and at all difficult challenges in our own lives, for that matter – not as curses but as concealed blessings.

1. A Cursing Parrot (Joke)

Miri received a parrot as a gift. But the parrot had a very bad attitude and worse vocabulary. Every other word was a curse, and those words that weren’t curses were to say the least, rude.

Miri tried to change the bird’s attitude by constantly saying polite things and playing soft music. But nothing worked.

She then yelled at the bird, but he only got worse. She shook him, and he got more angry and more rude. Finally in a moment of desperation, Miri put the parrot in the freezer to get a minute of peace.

For a few moments she heard the bird swearing, squawking, kicking and screaming and then, suddenly there was absolute quiet. Miri was frightened that she might have actually hurt him, and so she quickly opened the freezer door. The parrot calmly stepped out onto Miri’s extended arm and said:

“I’m very sorry that I offended you with my language and my actions, and I ask your forgiveness. I will endeavor to correct my behavior, and I am sure it will never happen again.”

Miri was astounded at the change in the bird’s attitude and for a moment speechless. And then he said, “And may I ask what the chicken did?”

2. Blessings and Curses: The Jewish Theory of Relativity

Curses and blessings can be very relative.

The Jewish theory of relativity goes like this: “Three hairs on your head may not be much. But three hairs in the soup...”

According to this theory, a curse for one person can be a blessing for another. And vice versa. As the verse by Edmund Waller, the 17th century poet, goes:

Vexed sailors cursed the rain
For which poor shepherds prayed in vain.

A classic Jewish curse is better known as a back-handed blessing. Meaning it is phrased like a blessing, but it is no blessing at all. For example: “His luck should be as bright as a new moon.”

This serves to introduce our subject today – the strange phenomenon of the Torah, the back-handed curse. Though phrased like a *curse*, it is in fact a blessing.

And this is the proper time to speak of curses because this week’s Torah reading deals with this subject – and it is a highly controversial one.

3. Why is G-d So Angry?

The question has been frequently asked: How do we explain the curses enumerated in the Torah?

Many people are turned off when they read the terrible misfortunes that will befall them if they sin. These curses create the impression that G-d is a very angry entity, filled with wrath and vengeance. So what possible benefit – besides fear and alienation – could these curses contain?

In fact, they only add ammunition to the skeptics’ claim that the Torah is a primitive book. One chapter often singled out by them is this week’s double Torah reading – *Parshat Behar-Bechukotai* – the latter of which lists a series of curses. Why would G-d stoop to cursing His people?

The Torah states that G-d created flawed mortals, so why would He curse them with cruel punishments for behaving like who they are – human? Is this sadism? Does G-d have nothing better to do?

Indeed, Torah is called *Torat chesed* and *Torat chaim*, a Torah of love and a Torah of life. “The entire Torah was given to bring peace (*shalom*) to the world, as it is written¹ Her ways are ways of pleasantness and all her paths are peace.”² How are curses consistent with this?

And how do these curses help us have a loving relationship with Him? Do they not accomplish the opposite?

4. The Curses

It is true that this week’s Torah reading lists forty-nine curses that will befall those who transgress G-d’s law³.

For the record, this is the first of three places in the Torah where we read what is known as the *tochacha* (“admonition” or “rebuke”), describing the harsh consequences of forsaking divine commandments. The second and third are at the beginning and the end of the Book of Deuteronomy (in *Parshat Devorim* and *Parshat Ki Tavo*).

Traditionally, these sections are read quickly and in a lower tone than the rest of the Torah portion. And no one is invited up to the Torah (for an *aliya*) when it comes to these sections (the Torah reader himself recites the blessings before and after this reading). So why are they there?

5. Bizarre Story

A bizarre Talmudic story⁴ about Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai – whose *yahrzeit* we honored this past week on *Lag B’Omer* – will help answer this question.

Rabbi Shimon once sent his son, Rabbi Eleazar, to visit some distinguished sages, who conferred upon him a strange string of what they called blessings:

“May it be His will that you sow and not reap. That you bring in and not let out. That you invest and not have a return. That your house be destroyed and your inn settled. That your table be confused, and that you should not see a new year.”

Rabbi Eleazar returned to his father shocked: “Not only did they not bless me,” he exclaimed, “they caused me anguish!”

¹ Proverbs 3:17.

² Maimonides end of Laws of Chanukah.

³ Leviticus 26:14-43.

⁴ Talmud, Moed Katan 9b.

“What did they tell you?” asked Rabbi Shimon. After Rabbi Eleazar repeated their words, Rabbi Shimon reassured him: “All their words are really blessings!”

And he explained:

- “Sow and not reap” means that you will have children who will not die in your lifetime.
- “Bring in and not let out” means that your sons will marry and bring in daughters-in-law and they will not die in their lifetime.
- “Invest and not have a return” means that your daughters will marry and their husbands will not die, resulting in your daughters having to return home.
- “Your house be destroyed” means that your grave (which is called a house) will have no use ... and so forth ...

And thus Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai showed his son that every apparent curse was in fact a blessing.

This episode is all nice and fine. But the commentators are troubled by the obvious question: Why did the esteemed sages not bless Rabbi Eleazar in open and direct terms, and instead cloaked their blessing in cryptic language that only Rabbi Shimon was able to decipher?

6. The Explanations

Several different explanations are proffered:

- The sages did so in order to challenge and sharpen Rabbi Eleazar.⁵
- They did so in order to honor Rabbi Shimon, that he be the one to interpret and thus bless his son, so that Rabbi Eleazar would be blessed twice.⁶
- A blessing is more effective when it isn’t pronounced out loud in public (three people is considered a public).⁷
- They did so for Rabbi Eleazar’s good. At times when a blessing is stated outright, the “voice of judgment” (of the “prosecuting angel”) challenges the merit of the recipient, questioning whether he truly deserves this blessing. Therefore, the sages disguised their blessing in language that sounded like a curse, knowing that the “prosecuting angel” cannot read their minds, so as not to provoke and stir up any resistance to these blessings.⁸

⁵ Maharsha.

⁶ Rif. Iyun Yaakov.

⁷ Iyun Yaakov.

⁸ Nezer Hakodesh, cited in Eitz Yosef.

Even after all these explanations, it still seems odd that the sages would use the language of curses to convey a blessing! They could easily have elicited Rabbi Shimon's interpretation or masked their intentions from the "prosecutor" by using neutral language. Why did they have to use terms that would seem "offensive"?

7. Inner Wisdom of the Torah

To understand the deeper meaning of these blessings dressed up in the "garments" of "curses" requires a penetrating look into the forces that lie beneath the surface of existence in general. This will also explain why of all people it was Rabbi Shimon – the author of the Zohar, the chief work of the Kabbalah – who illuminated the inner meaning of these blessings.

The deeper meaning – and inner dimension – of all experience is to be found in what is called the "inner wisdom." There are two types of wisdom, which correspond to two types of experience: 1) The first is conscious or revealed wisdom – which relates to conscious or revealed experience. This is the wisdom of most sciences – physical, social and political – and of the understanding of our empirical and sensory experiences ... what we see, hear, taste, touch and smell. 2) The second is unconscious or hidden wisdom – which relates to the unconscious and hidden dimensions of reality, the supra-sensory energy that makes existence tick.

The Torah, too, has these two corresponding dimensions: 1) the Outer Torah, which is plainly revealed (*nigleh*), and 2) the Inner Torah, which is hidden beneath the surface (*nistar*).

On the surface things may appear one way. Beneath the surface they may appear entirely different, sometimes even diametrically opposed as to the way they seem on the outside.

Take yourself as an example: How much of your outside (body language, facial expressions, conversations) expresses your inner self? Indeed, the deeper you travel into the intimate recesses of your psyche, the fewer words you use. Sometimes a simple laugh, or sigh, or an "oy-vey" expresses volumes. On the deepest level, silence is often the most profound expression of all.

This is because the outer world and the inner world are two entirely different, even dichotomous, paradigms.

8. Curses Disguised as Blessings

The Alter Rebbe, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi – the author of *Tanya* – uses this principle to explain⁹ that the curses of our Torah portion are, in truth, nothing but blessings in disguise.

⁹ In his Likkutei Torah on this week's reading.

On one level – the conscious, revealed dimension – they appear as curses. But even on this level they serve a *blessed* purpose in attacking the negative forces of existence. (No one would consider it a curse when white blood cells mercilessly destroy harmful bacteria in order to protect the body from infection.)

But on an even deeper level – the unconscious, hidden dimension – the inner workings of these apparent curses are nothing but blessings, so profound that they can only be expressed in a concealed and disguised fashion. They are actually greater blessings than the ones we can openly recognize!

9. Unconscious Level of Existence

The Tzemach Tzedek, the grandson of Rabbi Schneur Zalman, uses this concept to explain the bizarre Talmudic story about Rabbi Eleazar and the sages' blessings disguised as curses. He confirms that these blessings originate in the unconscious level of experience.

For this reason, the blessings need to be concealed not just in neutral terms but in the language of the curse. Only then are they truly hidden.

The formula works like this:

The more sublime and intimate the experience, the more concealed it is. Therefore, the most sublime blessings of all are often couched in the most dreadful terms.

This also explains why the great mystic, Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, was the one to recognize the profound blessings bestowed on his son, Rabbi Eleazar:

10. The Mystical View

As the author of the Zohar, the primary work of Kabbalah, Rabbi Shimon is the primary source for the Inner Torah.

Rabbi Shimon, therefore, was most fittingly able to see beneath the surface of the sages' expressions and reveal their inner meaning – the profound blessings they meant to convey ... blessings that come from the “hidden” and “unconscious” cosmic levels, which are greater than blessings expressed in a revealed way.

So to explain the power of Rabbi Eleazar's blessings:

The sages had the foresight to see that, in his lifetime, Rabbi Eleazar would face difficult challenges surrounding his children. In order to preempt any tragedies, the sages ingenuously and intentionally used words that

could sound like curses, so as to “fulfill” (through physical/verbal expression) these premonitions. But, in truth, they infused their negative words with the deeper meaning and intention of blessings, as explained/revealed by Rabbi Shimon.

In effect, by using these negative expressions, the sages bestowed the greatest of all blessings on Rabbi Eleazar – they released him of the need to actually experience any losses, and instead blessed him with good life for himself, his children and their spouses.

11. What This Means to Us

Now let’s put this in practical terms that each of us can relate to.

We, too, must recognize that in our lives we receive two types of blessings, corresponding to our two forms of experience: conscious and unconscious. There are blessings that are apparent and revealed for all to see. But then there are blessings that are camouflaged, sometimes in “garments” that fool the naked eye.

But the naked eye is just that – naked. It sees very little and understands even less.

These deeper blessings can take on the shape of formidable challenges in our lives, or perhaps losses that at the moment seem irreplaceable.

Lest it be misunderstood, by all means we always ask for revealed blessings, and we deserve to see with our naked eye the gifts of life. Yet, when we are faced with a seemingly insurmountable difficulty, we should never underestimate the possibility that it contains profound blessings. And furthermore, that we have the ability to reveal them.

Yes, after all is said and done, we were given the power to reveal the concealed. G-d created us and gave us all the necessary resources, but He concealed some of them in this world of ours.

Think about it: Everything valuable in the world lies hidden. From precious stones to oil, from hidden potential to genius talents. We have the ability – and responsibility – to excavate these resources and bring them to the surface. And usually, the greater the treasure, the deeper it is buried ... and the more exertion is needed to excavate it. How far do we need to dig, how many risks do we need to take to discover the most precious gold, diamonds, or energy sources? The same goes for our souls ... Our most formidable potential is locked in the deepest recesses of our psyches, and it takes great effort to release them.

Just as this is true in our personal lives, the same is true about world events. Though on the surface we face many challenges today (economically and politically), and many threats (such as terrorism and unrest in the Middle East), there is always a deeper reality, even a blessing in disguise, lying beneath. Every crisis, every difficulty – every apparent “curse” – contains a deep blessing. With wisdom, faith, fortitude – and G-d’s help – we can discover it.

12. Concluding Story

A concluding story:

As a child, Rabbi Dov Ber along with the rest of the congregation, would listen to the weekly Torah portion read by his father, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi. One year, his father was out of town on the Shabbat when *Parshat Ki Tavo* is read, which includes 98 curses.

After hearing the reading by a substitute rabbi, the child was emotionally upset for a couple of weeks. He was asked, “Why were you not disturbed this way when this admonition was read in past years?” The boy replied, “When father reads it, no curses are heard.”

Yes, it all depends on who is doing the reading. We all project our attitudes on others. When “our father reads” – our father who sees the inner soul even in the darkest places – we hear blessings.

May we all open our ears to hear “our father” read and reveal the profound blessings in all of our lives. Amen.