

Baruch Hashem!

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Rabbi Adam J. Raskin

Congregation Har Shalom, Potomac, MD

Maybe you heard the story about Shmerel wants to borrow a horse from his neighbor, Berel.

"Sure you can borrow my horse," replies Berel. "But one thing you have to know about this horse. He is trained to start galloping when you say '*Baruch Hashem*', and he knows to stop when you say '*Shema Yisrael*.'"

So Shmerel gets on the horse and practices. "Baruch Hashem" he says, and the horse breaks into a trot. "*Shema Yisrael*" he shouts, and sure enough, the horse stops in its tracks. After practicing a few times, he feels confident and begins his journey.

As he is riding along a road, he sees that the road ends up ahead with a steep cliff. Suddenly Shmerel realizes that he has forgotten the word needed to make the horse stop.

"*Ashrei yoshvei vetecha*" he says, desperately. The horse keeps going.

"*Adon Olam*" he shouts.

The horse keeps going.

"*Aleinu L'shabeiach*."

But the horse keeps galloping.

Now fearful that he is about to die, Shmerel does what any good Jew would do when confronted with certain death. He screams out, "*Shema Yisrael*." As trained, the horse stops suddenly -- barely two feet from the edge of the cliff.

Shaking like a leaf, Shmerel pulls out his handkerchief and wipes the sweat from his forehead. "Whew" he exclaims, "Baruch Hashem!"

If you have every have occasion to exchange pleasantries with a frum Jew, a religious Jew who peppers his or her speech with Yiddish expressions, you have probably heard the phrase "Baruch Hashem!" Usually Baruch Hashem comes as a response to a question like, "How are you doing?" Baruch Hashem! Or, "How are you feeling?" Baruch Hashem! Note that the response does not actually answer the question that was asked! It means, "Thank God!" Whether you're in fact feeling really well, not so well, or somewhere in between, Baruch Hashem is a pious expression that in the larger scheme of things, everything is okay. But Baruch Hashem isn't always a response to an inquiry of someone's well being. Sometimes Baruch Hashem begins a sentence or a thought, and not always in the context of something religious or spiritual.

For example, you might say:

Baruch Hashem, the Caps finally broke their losing streak!

Or Baruch Hashem, my son is dating a nice Jewish girl from a wonderful family!

Or Baruch Hashem, they were having a huge sale at Joseph A. Bank and I found this beautiful suit on sale for 75% off!

In these cases, Baruch Hashem is less of an expression of God's will than it is a linguistic idiosyncrasy of certain, usually pretty traditional American Jews.

But Baruch Hashem, or more precisely *Baruch Adonai*, became a Jewish expression long before any Jew ever set foot in America, and long before anyone ever said a Yiddish word.

The very first person to say Baruch Hashem was...Noah! In Genesis 9:26, Noah says *Baruch Adonai, Elohei Shem*...Blessed be Adonai, the God of Shem. You may recall that when Noah gets drunk after the flood, it is his son Shem who goes out of his way to protect his father's dignity. Praised the Lord, he exclaims, as he blesses Shem with prosperity and strength. Our patriarch Abraham, the very first Jew traces his lineage to none other than Shem.

The second person to say Baruch Hashem in the Torah is...Eliezer! The servant of Abraham who is dispatched to find a wife for Isaac. When Eliezer meets the gorgeous, kind, generous, welcoming Rebekkah, who brings him camels and him water, and invites him to eat and spend the night in her father's house, he exclaims: "Baruch Hashem!" Blessed be the Lord, *Elohei Adoni Avraham*, the God of my master Abraham, *asher lo azav et chasdo va'amito me'im adoni*: Blessed be the Lord Who has not withheld His steadfast faithfulness to my master! If the Torah had emojis, this would definitely call for the one where the eyes are two big red hearts!

The third and final character in the Bible who shouts Baruch Hashem, is the namesake of this morning's parasha, Yitro. When Yitro, Moses's father-in-law, hears all the reports of how God utterly vanquished Pharaoh and the Egyptians, freeing the Jewish people from slavery he says: *Baruch Hashem! Asher hitzil etchem miyad Mitzrayim!* Blessed be God, Who saved you, who rescued you from Egypt. Most sources believe that Yitro himself became a convert, because he was so impressed by what God did for the Israelites, leaving behind his pagan, polytheistic, Moabite past for the one God of Israel.

So if you've been paying attention so far, you may have noticed a common denominator among these three Biblical personalities who—like our frum friends—really seem to like the expression *Baruch Hashem*. Not only were Noah, Eliezer (whose full name in Genesis 15 is *Damesek Eliezer*, or Eliezer from Damascus), and Yitro not frum Jews, they were not Jews at all when they praised the God of Israel for miraculous, remarkable things they witnessed in the world! So an expression of praise that is now very much associated with religious Jews actually originated *with non-Jews*.

I think that provides ample license for what I'm about to suggest. I would love to hear more people use the expression *Baruch Hashem* when they are asked about their well-being. I happen to be one of those people who frequently says *Baruch Hashem*. In fact, when I came to *Har Shalom*, I asked that the beautiful personal stationary that the shul provided me have a little *Bet-apostrophe-Hey* printed in the top corner, that being the abbreviation for *Baruch Hashem*. The reason I love this expression is that it forces me to think more broadly about my place in the world. It is an expression that reminds me of context and the bigger picture of my life. Sure, I could kvetch to you about various stresses or aggravation. We've all got our *tsurris* and strife. Or I could tell you when you ask how I am, *Baruch Hashem*. You know what, Thank God I'm alive; Thank God I have a wonderful family, a comfortable home, a great community; Thank God I have my health, my job, my friends. Even with all the craziness in the world and in our country, I still thank God that I live in this country at this particular time in history. I can either be myopic and focused on what agitates or aggravates me, or I can take a step back and realize that even when I do have troubles or challenges, I also have so many blessings and so much good fortune in my life. Now I don't ever want to minimize someone's suffering, or to suggest that we don't have a right to feel hurt, angry, or discouraged at times. We should know who the people are in our lives that we can trust and with whom we can share those struggles, find comfort and reassurance. But I maintain that saying *Baruch Hashem* is not about the specifics, it's about a larger world view, a broader context for our lives.

To put it another way, we can either be *Baruch Hashem* Jews or *Oy Gevalt* Jews. You can view your life, the world with wonder and thankfulness, or you can see it as a long list of complications and disappointments. I don't know about you, but I'd prefer the former. So at the Kiddush after services, when someone greets you and asks you how you're doing, answer with a heartfelt *Baruch Hashem*, and be grateful that you are alive, that you're here, and that you're part of a community where people care about you enough to ask how you're doing, and really mean it.