

A recently discovered 2800 year-old MiddleEastern inscription mentions “Balaam”: the most powerful and famous Magic Man, with great powers. But we knew Balaam from a Torah story: Israel’s enemy king Balak used him as his secret weapon to defeat Israel. He gave Balaam lots of gold, hired him to defeat the Israelites, by giving them the ultimate curse from the most powerful sorcerer!

But things didn’t quite work out: making a long story short... Balaam stood at the top of a cliff overlooking the Israelites’ encamping, and when he came to say his curse, the words that came out were: Mah Tovv ohalekha Yaakov..” “How lovely are your tents, O Jacob!...” . And time and again, he tried to curse, and all his curses were turned into more blessings!

Now every year, we begin our HIGH HOLY DAYS repeating: Mah Tovv!! - the words of the sorcerer hired by our enemies to curse and end us! Isn’t that strange?

Personally for me, hearing Mah Tovv is a very special moment:

I hear this Mah Tovv, with most beautiful music; great musicians and singers (some soloists I have seen growing here from babies!). My thoughts turn to those days when I saw the rehearsing/practices/sound preparations.. So we start the High Holy Days - these days for which so many of us worked and prepared and volunteered and gave. If these weren’t already Holy Days, the dedication love and effort so many of you put in them would surely be enough to make these Days Holy! As we sing Mah Tovv I think of how we keep this going, year after year, and here we go again!

Still - why, of thousand prayers and Bible verses we could say, do we start with THOSE words?? Enemy words, intended to curse?? And this is how we Jews “celebrate” the New Year?!

If it were up to me we would start the New Year with only good thoughts, best wishes, happy plans and joyful visions!!

Our tradition has hidden a powerful message for us here: happy and great wishes are good - we should be so lucky; but we know, from our historic experience, and our own personal experiences, that the new year will bring a fair amount of those things we don’t want, don’t wish for, and which are simply not Good news!! Curses - things that hurt us, challenge us, difficulties, Bad News.

Our first impulse is to fight those; to avoid those; to escape from those; to not think about them. That’s why Mah tovuv!! There will be challenges - they may be difficulties; we may go thru hurt and pain. But these curses can be turned into blessings just as the sorcerer’s curse became mah tovuv!

Many wisdom traditions (Jewish, Sufi, Daoist) tell this Story:

A farmer gets a horse, which soon runs away. A neighbor says, "That's bad news." The farmer replies, "Good news, bad news, who can say?"

The horse comes back and brings another horse with him. A neighbor says, "Good news!" The farmer replies, "Good news, bad news, who can say?"

The farmer gives the second horse to his son, who rides it, then is thrown and badly breaks his leg.

"So sorry for your bad news," says the concerned neighbor. "Good news, bad news, who can say?" the farmer replies.

In a week or so, the emperor's men come and take every able-bodied young man to fight in a war. The farmer's son is spared. Bad News, Good news?

We're living in *times that seem way too full of bad news, week after week – can be overwhelming*. So this ancient story resonates especially now with me, and probably many of us.

Reminding us that

- Nothing is "Only Bad", "just bad" - often it is the challenges we face that bring us some unexpected good: a door closes, but another opens.
 - 49 years ago, a teenager boy from Pennsylvania was given **bad news**: his date cancelled on him! Sad. But then, another girl decided to go to the date in her place. 50 years later, this couple has been together, married, children, grandchildren, and I know because they are in this very room right now. *Bad News / Good news*
 - about 6 months ago, in our lobby, talked to BeSH member just lost a job...surely were **Bad News**...and met her again 2 weeks ago: she is happier, found a new direction in her career, rekindled her passion for work, found a more fulfilling job. *Bad News / Good news*
- I know many (in family, in BeSH, friends) who had bad news last year: a health challenge; a family crisis; all sorts of Bad News... There again, I witnessed and learned how people can take the bad news and get much good out of it: it is indeed in tough situations that we find our inner strength, our resilience; challenges lead us to reassess our priorities, and reValue the much good we Do have. It is in tough moments that we find we have loving friends and supporting community; we learn that we can be helped, and how we can similarly help others.
- **Surely, a crisis** is never what we want - whether is personal health, family, or a social problem,- but it is often the turning point leading us to make positive changes; to make healthier choices, take better care of ourselves; a crisis gives us the focus to put all our energies into what's Truly most important; and is what gives us the resolve to take actions and go out to make a difference.

Rebecca Solnit, wrote a book on some of the biggest disasters of the twentieth century — the big northeastern blackouts in 1965 and 2003, 1986 earthquake in Mexico city, the 1989 earthquake San Francisco, New York City 9/11, New Orleans 2005 Hurricane Katrina.

The word *disaster* comes from the Latin compound of *dis- astro*, literally, without a star:

Unlucky, Bad News

Retelling many hard and moving stories, the book's main conclusion is that the "stereotypical notion" that at a disaster there will be rioting, panicking, selfish people who will go crazy and violent and need the government and troops to control them and restore order - **is not what you find!!**

When the actual disasters are studied, as in this inspiring book, the reality is that people **come together** in close community, **help neighbors and whoever they see in need**, go out of their way to lend a hand, and even take the lead in their own rescue, survival and distribution of resources; people act with a **feeling of altruism, generosity, self-sacrifice, and love.**

This book help us see that Reality is Just the opposite of what we see in many Hollywood Movies -where everyone is selfish and will survive at your expense. The reality is that even in disasters people are helpful, and caring, and function best as a community united in empathy.

For me, this reinforces what Old Wisdom-traditions had long taught us: as the Bible says (*Judges 14*) "*The sweet surges from the sour*": it is the biggest challenges that bring the Best out from us! Solnit's book is entitled: ***A Paradise Built in Hell***. A truly insightful image - going through a hell is how we enter the paradise.

This year – these past few years – many of us, at times myself, got overwhelmed with the Bad News around us: bad news in our polarized country, bad news for the Jews, Bad News uncovered by the MeeToo movement, bad news for equality fairness and justice in our towns. It's hard to even turn on the news sometimes...

So this RH, let's start a New Year embracing the lessons from all Wisdom traditions, old and new:

1. Let's not rush to fear and despair. Bad and Good news can be a matter of perspective, and time. Often things must get worse now, so they can get better moving forward. Often it is when things become bad enough, that they cause the reaction for better, and feed in us the impulse to change for better.
2. As the curse turned to blessings of Mah Tov, Bad can be turned into Good, when we join with others in caring, in empathy, and with joint action.

I'll end by quoting my Moroccan Grandma Ester: whenever she was told of some bad news, the first words to come out of her mouth: "Sera Por Bien!!" "This too shall be for good!" Gam zu letova! As a kid, I never understood that! It drove me crazy; "how can you say any good about what is surely bad?!" Now I get it:
-she was Not denying the bad, but trusting we are resilient, and that good is around the corner.
-she was speaking from the awareness that, if we stop and look, recovery happens all around us, a hundred times every day!

- Also, her attitude was about appreciating how the very difficulties we face also make us grow in some new way that wasn't there before; so after the pain passes, we find that we gained in understanding, in empathy, and in the depth of our appreciation for the blessings we do have. Hopefully, just like it did for my Grandma, this wisdom saves us from sinking into despair, giving us instead the impulse to go out and do our part, to bring out the best of us, and keep bringing the good and *sweet out from the sour*.

Mah Tovv – Shanah Tovah – May everything be for good this year.