

## Bereshit 2003

### Curses: Foiled Again

One of my favorite midrashim is one of the first ones I ever learned. Bereshit Rabba tells us that one of the reasons God began the Torah with the letter bet, the second letter of the alphabet, rather than aleph, the first letter, is because bet stands for bracha, blessing. Aleph, however, is the first letter of the word arur, curse. So our rabbis teach us that God wanted to create the world with a blessing, and not a curse.

I like this midrash because it reflects Judaism's perspective on the world. Clearly our rabbis had and projected an optimistic and hopeful outlook, and this is something they bequeathed to us as our spiritual heritage.

I have been pondering this notion a great deal recently -- beginning the world with a blessing and not a curse in light of recent events, specifically -- the collapse of the Boston Red Sox and the Chicago Cubs in the baseball playoff series. Many people may wonder: Perhaps the interpretation of the opening word of the torah doesn't apply in those two cities. Is it possible that the commentary does not apply to these two baseball teams? Could it be that they actually do have some kind of curse?

As many of you may know, this is not far-fetched to look for an answer in the Bible, for the Torah is very interested in the subject of baseball. Moving beyond the commentary on the opening letter, the first word of the torah, and the name of this morning's Torah portion is bereshit, which means "in the big inning". And for the Cubs and Red Sox, in both instances, the top of the eighth of the seventh game was clearly the "big inning."

What a series. Even people who do not regularly follow baseball were lured into the drama and the question of whether or not there is such a thing as the curse. And who can help but feel anything but empathy and rahmones for the poor kid who reached out to catch a foul ball and wound up preventing the Cubs from getting a crucial second out in the next to last inning. He had to be escorted out of the stadium by a police guard, and made a public apology to the city. It is something he will have to live with for the rest of his life.

I certainly hope my colleagues in Chicago speak to their fellow Chicagoans about the importance of compassion and forgiveness, so that he will not be the subject of further scorn or derision.

By now, the attention of most people who follow baseball has moved on to the World Series. Among the many articles and commentaries written about the fateful game, and the collapse in the eighth inning, there were those who tried to take the onus away from the unfortunate young man by pointing out that the Cubs had no one to blame but themselves. The Cubs players were the ones who committed the errors which resulted in the loss. But there were those who said that there is something to this curse thing, and that he really should not be blamed, because he was merely the agent of the curse.

So the question to ponder this morning is --- is there such a thing as a curse? How would our tradition respond?

If you look up the word, “curse” in the following anthologies:

Joseph Telushkin’s “Book of Jewish Literacy,” Philip Birnbaum’s, “Book of Jewish Concepts,” and the Encyclopedia Judaica, there are no entries whatsoever.

If you look up the word “curse” in Leo Rosten’s, “Treasury of Jewish Quotations”, that is a different story. Rosten, the author of “The Joys of Yiddish” of course refers primarily to the rich treasury of curses that exist in Yiddish. Rather than resort to fisticuffs, he contends, Jews would use their wit to do battle. So he offers a few classic examples of curses, in which the wit and irony is apparent:

May all your teeth fall out, except for one. And then may you have a toothache.

May you grow like a beet – with your head in the ground and your feet in the air.

May you be treated like a treasure – and be buried with care and affection.

(Obviously, they are much richer in the original.)

May you be like a lulav. So that they will shake you for eight days, and then be put away and ignored the rest of the year.

(And these are the ones I can say on the pulpit!)

But the curses that Rosten lists are verbal incantations. No one imagines that they will really occur. What about the more substantive kind? The kind that seem to plague the Cubs and Red Sox.

In fact, the Bible has several passages where curses are listed in quite explicit detail. In Deuteronomy, and elsewhere, a number of curses are listed which may befall the people. In these sections the calamity that will occur is listed in excruciating detail.

Yet here is the distinction --- in every instance where the Torah speaks of a curse, it also talks of a blessing. In so doing, it makes it clear that the choice is in our hands.

And that is the message of this morning’s torah reading as well.

After Cain commits the first homicide, by killing his brother, he is told by God, “Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground. Therefore, you shall be more cursed than the ground... You shall become a ceaseless wanderer on earth.” Yet once Cain repents and expresses his regret and sorrow for his deed, God lessens the punishment.

When Adam eats of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, it results ultimately in the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Yet it is clear that the choice was one made by the

first human and his companion, Eve. They must live with the consequences of their choice, but the outcome was not predetermined at the outset.

By speaking of blessings at the same time it introduces curses, the Bible lets us know that the choice is in our hands, and the decision is ours. Consequently, the determination of our fate is not made for us, but something we determine by our actions.

The message of the opening chapters of the Bible, Parashat Bereshit affirms, as it reiterates elsewhere, later in the Torah, we must decide and choose – bracha o klala, the blessing or the curse.

All of which means, for Cubs and Sox fans --- there is always next year.

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