

Parashat Balak – Summer Sermon Series
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"Yeshuat Hashem k'heref ayin." This translates as *"The salvation of God is like the blink of an eye."* – According to the Midrash, (Pesikta Zutra, Esther 4:17) we are taught to always have hope because a curse can convert into a blessing at any moment, as God can change everything in the blink of an eye.

Good morning, my name is Marisa LaKind and I'm honored to speak to you. A Dvar Torah could be given on today's parasha about the ills of assimilation or on the significance of fidelity in a marriage. However, to me, today's parasha is about the relationship between curses and blessings and the transformation of a curse into a blessing.

In the parasha, the king of the Moabites, sought the help of Balam, a prophet or sorcerer, to curse the Israelites because he feared how numerous they had become. However, each time the Balam tried to bestow a curse, God intervened and blessed the Israelites.

The Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hassidism, was fascinated by the idea that evil concealed a seed of good. The Baal Shem Tov taught that evil was a temporary manifestation of the as-yet-hidden good; it had a subsidiary function, acting as a kind of footstool to the good. He was concerned with liberating the good within the evil. The Baal Shem Tov stressed the necessity of transforming "evil" into "good," the unholy into the holy.

I'm sure we can all think of curses in our own lives which were footstools to good or eventually recognizable as blessings. Maybe the loss of a job which caused financial difficulty and stress on the family led to a better position, one which provided a better quality of life and allowed more time with the kids or an opportunity to change career paths and pursue one's passion. Or maybe a divorce led to finding one's Beshert.

However at times it becomes more difficult to recognize the particular blessing. Sometimes, the pain that we encounter in our lives is

overwhelming and seems insurmountable. In such moments, we are amazed by those who are able to find the Godliness in a situation and find the relationship between curses and blessings.

Sometimes the blessing is simply the ability to summon the strength to transform a personal tragedy into a triumph, to turn one's tragedy into a human achievement.

For example, losing a loved one prematurely as a result of disease or mental illness and then working toward furthering that cause close to them or their loved one demonstrates harvesting the seed of good in evil and deserves an inordinate amount of credit.

Consider Rachelle Fraenkel, mother of the murdered Israeli Teen, Naftali Fraenkel, who has been extremely vocal about her love of the Jewish people, and Israel and her appreciation of her community's support. She has very publicly recognized the good in this very evil predicament.

In order to find gratitude during challenging life situations, we have to look beyond ourselves and, at the same time, deep within ourselves. Doing that requires a tremendous amount of inner strength, which we can draw from the support of our community and God's loving-kindness. Both our friends and our faith can enable us to transcend the challenge and find a blessing embedded within a curse—and perhaps even change a curse into a blessing.

Channah, in Shmuel Chapter 1, Verse 6 is cursed with the inability to bear children. ***“Sagar Adonai B’ad Rachmah”*** God had closed her womb. Every year she went to the sanctuary and prayed for a child.

She pleaded with God not to forget her and promised that if God remembered her she would give her child to God all the days of his life. And God remembered Channah and she bore a son, *Shmuel*. And when Channah's son became old enough, she brought him to the sanctuary and said to the Priest ***Al HaNa'ar HaZeh Hitpallalti - “For this boy I prayed”*** and the Lord granted me my request, which I asked of Him.

When God remembers Channah, her curse becomes a blessing. He changed everything for Channah in the blink of an eye. She sees that life is good and that God has blessed her with a son.

Just as metal is molded and shaped by fire, so are we shaped and transformed by the challenges, tragedy and fire in our lives. This realization enables us to see that curses and blessings are actually opposite ends of the same continuum, both part of the eternal cycle of life. However, our fate lies in the choices we make. The Moabite King chose to listen to God.

The Moabite King said to the prophet or sorcerer, "Don't curse them and don't bless them!" In reply, the prophet said, "Whatever *Adonai* says, that I must do." Seeing that it pleased God to bless Israel . . . the prophet turned his face toward the wilderness - *the spirit of God came upon him* (Numbers 23:25; 24:1-2).

Today's Torah Portion tells us that the sorcerer was moved by the Israelites sense of community and solidarity. He said, "*How good are your tents O Jacob, and your sanctuaries O Israel.*" This intended curse was turned into a blessing.

The Torah Portion also reminds us that when we remain a unified nation, working toward a common goal, while retaining individuality and holiness, no nation, no magic and no curses can harm us. The State of Israel is a perfect example of this.

"It pleased God to bless Israel". We see this a number of times in the Tanakh. Sure, we are the chosen people, but could the power to overcome unspeakable odds, persevere and be blessed be in our DNA? After all, we are a people who have endured persecution for over 3,000 years. What does that do to the makeup of the individuals within that people? I would argue that it makes them resilient and powerful enough to turn curses into blessings.

Like Channah, in Shmuel, I too am blessed with a son, actually two miraculous sons - and this necklace that I am wearing reminds me of my two greatest blessings. This necklace is a very special gift from my husband Gary from this past mother's day - it reads ***"Al Ha'Narim Ha'Elu Hitpallalti"*** ***For these boys I prayed.*** It is derived from the words Channah uttered to Eli, the priest, "*For this boy I prayed*" when she brought Shmuel to the sanctuary so that he may devote his life's work to God.

This necklace is extremely sentimental to me and I will explain why.

On April 23rd we learned that our son, Masada, had a very large Ventricular Septal Defect or hole in his heart and that he would need open heart surgery. The next month was a nightmarish blur - filled with countless doctor's appointments, home health care, hospitalizations, mourning, and most of all intense fear. We were consumed with grief and I believe we ourselves began to feel heartache for what was happening to his little heart. Our perfect little baby would need to have his chest cracked open, his heart stopped and would bear the scar the rest of his life. We researched the very serious diagnosis, prognosis and all the risks involved. Regardless of the risks - surgery was going to happen as he was in heart failure.

We began deliberating God's existence and considered the difficulty in having faith when our precious baby's health was cursed so. However, we had to remember that God can change everything in the blink of an eye.

I believe God listens to our prayers and helps us through the most difficult of times. Although frightened to death of losing Masada, something going wrong and everything in between, I knew in my heart that God would make Masada right. Our curse, Masada's curse - the VSD - later became a blessing in that God guided us to a righteous, compassionate and skilled pediatric cardiologist and world renowned surgeon who healed his heart. Whether God turned Masada's curse into a blessing or whether we did through our faith and hope, support of each other and remembering that **YESHUAT HASHEM K'HEREF AYIN** - Balam, or the evil eye, did not succeed in cursing us.

So, the necklace does not just remind me that that I prayed for children as Channah did, during the first 6 years of my marriage, but the necklace reminds me of the time I prayed for my precious baby's health and our curse turned into a blessing.

I thank you for the opportunity to share this with you this morning. I love this congregation and feel extremely blessed to be part of it. My fervent prayer for all of us this Shabbat is twofold. First, that we strive for a stronger sense of solidarity within the Jewish community to hopefully deter the Balaams of the world, and next, that we choose to realize the blessings in the world and in our lives.