

Curses!

The power of speech

In this week’s portion, *Toldot*, we read:

And it came to pass that, when Isaac was old, his eyes were dim, so that he could not see. [Gen. 27:1]

The Talmud comments:

-Rabbi Eleazar bar Hanina also said: Do not let the blessing of an ordinary man be of light import in your eyes, for two men great in their generation received from ordinary men blessings which were fulfilled in them. They were David and Daniel. David was blessed by Araunah, as it is written,

And Araunah said to the king, “The Lord your God accept you.”
[2Sam. 24:23]

Daniel was blessed by [King] Darius, as it is written

Your God, whom you serve continually, He will save you. [Dan. 6:17]

Rabbi Eleazar also said in the name of Rabbi Hanina: Do not let the curse of an ordinary man be of light import in your eyes, because Abimelech cursed Sarah, saying:

Behold, he is to you a covering of the eyes. [Gen. 20:16],
and this was fulfilled in her seed, [as it says],

And it came to pass that, when Isaac was old, his eyes were dim.
[Gen. 27:1]

[Meg. 15a]

-*Kesut* [meaning “covering”] can be read as *kesiyat* [meaning “blinding”].
[Meg. 28a]

-Rabbi Yitzhaq again said: The curse of an ordinary man should never be considered a trifling matter in your eyes, for when Abimelech called a curse upon Sarah it was fulfilled in her seed, as it says, “Behold, he is to you a covering of the eyes”, [which means]: “Since you have covered the truth from me and not disclosed that [Abraham] was your husband, and have thus caused me all this trouble, let it be the will [of Heaven] that there shall be to you a covering of the eyes”. And this was actually fulfilled in her seed, as it is written: “And it came to pass that when Isaac was old and his eyes were dim so that he could not see.”

[B. K. 93a]

In other words, blessings and curses are effective, no matter who pronounces them.

-Blessing: Verbal call for good things to happen to a person, with the power to make it happen.

-Curse: Verbal call for harm to a person, with the power to make it happen.

Torah on curses

So deeply rooted is this belief that the Torah prohibits cursing:

-He who curses his father or his mother shall surely be put to death.

[Exodus 21:17, Lev. 20:9]

-You shall not curse the ruler of your people. [Exodus 22:27]

-You shall not curse (even) the deaf. [Leviticus 19:14]

Implication: It's not just psychological (the deaf can't hear you), but real: Your curse may come to pass.

The most dreaded Torah portion is *Ki Tisa*, where God lists all the curses to befall on those who will not follow His commandments.

[Deuteronomy 27-28] Section is called "*tokheḥah*" (chastisement) and read in shul in a low voice.

But it shall come to pass, if you will not listen to the voice of the Lord your God, to take care to do all his commandments and his statutes which I command you this day, that all these curses shall come upon you, and overtake you. [Deut. 15:15]

Follows a long string of dreaded curses, beginning with:

Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the field... [Deut. 15:16]

And ending with:

Also, every illness and every plague, that is not written in this Book of the Torah, the Lord will bring it upon you, until you are destroyed. [Deut 28:61]

Not even exclusive: What you dread most, whatever it is, shall happen to you!

Talmud on curses

Talmud frequently emphasizes the tremendous power of speech.

Story:

[The Chaldean] Bar Hedyā was an interpreter of dreams. He used to give a favorable interpretation to those who paid him and an unfavorable interpretation to those who did not pay him.

Abaye and Rava each had a dream. Abaye gave him a zuz, but Rava did not give him anything. [So, to Abaye he gave many good interpretations and to Rava many bad ones]...

One day Rava [learned the teaching:] “[What actually happens] follows the interpretation [given to] dreams”. He [understood that the interpreter was *making* these bad things happen to him and] exclaimed: You wretch! It all depended on you and you gave me all this pain!... May it be God's will that [you] be delivered up to the [Roman] Government, and that they have no mercy on [you]!

Bar Hedyā said to himself: What am I to do? A curse uttered by a Sage, even when undeserved, comes to pass. How much more so this [one], which was deserved!

He [went] into exile, for a Master has said: “Exile procures atonement for iniquity”. He... fled to the Romans [but refused to interpret dreams for them unless they paid him. They refused, and bad things happened to them, so they executed him.] [Ber. 56a]

-A curse by a Sage is effective even if undeserved. [Makkot 11a]

-If you pronounce an undeserved curse, it will fall back on you, so let yourself be cursed rather than curse another. [Sanhedrin 49a]

Rabbi Hanan said: He who invokes the judgment of Heaven against his fellow is himself punished first... Rabbi Abbahu said: A man should always strive to be persecuted rather than to persecute... [B. K. 93a]

-If a woman curses her parents-in-law in the presence of her husband, he can divorce her without the compensation written in their ketubah. [Mishna, Ket. 72a]

Siddur on curses

After Amidah, we say:

My God, guard my tongue from evil and my lips from speaking deceitfully.
And to those who curse me, let my soul be silent, and let my soul be [humble] like dust to everyone.

Curses in modern times

-“Evil Eye” belief: Envy causes harm. Compliments are frequently followed by *Kenahora* (Ken ayin hara), or “*b’li ayin hara*” -- “without the evil eye”.

-Pulsa Denura. Curse of Jewish mystical origin:

-Aramaic for “lashes of fire”. Ceremony to block forgiveness of someone’s sins, so all curses in the Torah befall him and he dies.

-Source: Hebrew magical manuals. [Sefer ha-Razim; Harba de-Moshe]

-Origin of phrase: Talmud: The angel Metatron makes a mistake and is lashed with 60 lashes of fire (“Pulsei Denura”). [Hagigah 15a]

-Not sanctioned by rabbis.

Israeli saying: "You have not made it in Israeli politics until you've been cursed by the *Pulsa Denura*." Best-known cases:

-In October 1995, member of Israel's Gush Emunim (Bloc of the Faithful) recited one against Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhaq Rabin. Rabin was assassinated within a month.

-In July 2005, opponents of Gaza pullout recited it against Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. Six months later, Sharon had two strokes and fell in a coma, dying in 2014 without awakening.

-Tecumseh's Curse: Indian leader Tecumseh was defeated in the Battle of Tippecanoe (1811) by William Henry Harrison. Tecumseh issued a curse, predicting death in office to any President elected in years that are multiples of twenty.

-Worked from initial target (Harrison, elected 1840) to Kennedy (elected 1960), through Lincoln, Garfield, McKinley, Harding, and Roosevelt.

-Reagan (elected 1980) was shot but survived.

-Bush (elected 2000) survived close assassination attempt (2005 grenade thrown at him and president of Georgia failed to explode).

What to think of it

-Is it real, or does it affect you only if you believe in it?

-Is there telekinesis, mind over matter? Are there powers of the brain we haven't learned to control? Many claims, but no reproducible evidence so far.

-Lubavitcher Rebbe: No reason to be afraid of curses. To bring God's blessings, increase your study of Torah and observance of mitzvot. Go to a synagogue where the priestly blessing (*Birkat Kohanim*) is recited, because God's blessings are far more powerful than any person's curses.