

Blessing and Cursing Abraham

In this week’s Torah portion, *Lech Lecha*, God speaks to Abraham for the first time and tells him:

וְאָבְרָכָה מְבָרְכֶיךָ וּמְקַלְלֶיךָ אֶעָר

Va-avar-khah mi-varkhe-kha um'kallel-kha a'or. [Genesis 12:3]

This is usually translated as:

And I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you.

But that is not quite the correct translation. The Torah actually says:

And I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse.

What is the difference? There are actually four interesting differences. Let’s explore them.

First question: What is wrong with the usual translation: “I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you”? It implies that *first* a person blesses or curses Abraham, and *then* God does the same to him. But God is actually saying: “I will bless those who bless you as soon as they plan to bless you, even before they actually do it. However, I will curse those who curse you only *after* they actually curse you. I will not curse them just for thinking about cursing you.”

Indeed, the Talmud teaches that God does not punish for mere evil thoughts, but only for evil acts:

[There is no punishment for mere intention to commit evil], for it is said [in the Book of Psalms]:

If I saw iniquity in my heart, The Lord would not hear. [Ps. 66:18]

When intention [is followed by action] the Holy One, blessed be He, combines it with the action [and punishes both]. When intention [is not followed by action] the Holy One, blessed be He, does not combine it with the action [and there is therefore no punishment.] [Kiddushin 40a]

You get credit for planning to perform a mitzvah, even if later it turns out you can’t do it. However, you are punished for a transgression only after you carry it out.

Here is what is particularly artful in this teaching. On the one hand, the rabbis could not very well say that bad thoughts are punished, because Judaism is clearly a religion of action, and not a religion of thought or belief. But on the other hand, they are reluctant to allow unbridled bad thoughts. If you go off in a corner and fantasize about doing terrible things to someone you don't like, it is very unhealthy. So the rabbis steer us away from it by warning us that, if bad thoughts are followed by bad actions, the punishment will be *both* for the thoughts and the action. In other words, you will get extra punishment just for the bad thoughts. But if *all* you have is the bad thoughts, there is no punishment. However, there is still a need to repent for having them, because they are unhealthy, and we do so on Yom Kippur, we repent:

עַל חֵטָא שֶׁחָטָאנוּ לְפָנֶיךָ בְּהַרְהוּר הַלֵּב

Al chet shechatanu lefanecha b'harhor ha-lev.

For the sin that we have committed before You by sinful thoughts.

This insightful teaching takes human nature into account, as the Talmud always does.

The Talmud further says:

הַרְהוּרֵי עֲבֵירָה קָשׁוּ מֵעֲבִירָה -- *Hirhurei 'averah kashu me'averah.* [Yoma 29a]

Sinful thoughts are harder than sin.

Rashi understands this to mean that refraining from having of bad thoughts is *more difficult* than refraining from committing bad actions. It is more difficult to stop yourself from having bad thoughts than to stop yourself from acting on them, because they can invade your mind in spite of your efforts. This extra difficulty brings a greater reward, because the Mishnah teaches:

The reward for doing a good deed is in proportion to its difficulty. [Avot 5:26]

Ohr HaHayyim, from 18th-century Morocco, adds an interesting insight:

If God were to curse the potential curser before he cursed Abraham, the man would never know *why* God cursed him.

As an aside, the Baal HaTurim, from 14th-century Spain, notes that “And he who curses you, I will curse” has the same gematria as Bilaam, the evil gentile prophet who wanted to curse the Jews. [Kitzur Baal HaTurim]

Second question: The two words God uses for curse are different: *mekallelcha* for “the one who curses you,” but *a’or*, from a different root, for “I will curse”. Why?

A'or stems from *ohr*, meaning “light.” A commentator wrote that God told Abraham: If someone curses you, I will open his eyes to see the light and he will understand who you are.

Third question: The verse continues with God telling Abraham:

וְנִבְרְכוּ בְךָ כָּל מִשְׁפָּחֹת הָאָדָמָה:

And all the families of the earth will bless themselves by you.

If so, then everybody will love Abraham. Who, then, is “the one who curses him”?

The Sfat Emet, from 19th-century Poland, explains that God is telling Abraham: “Don’t be frightened and abandon your mission, because even those who openly curse and oppose you will envy you in their hearts and pray that their children should be like you when they grow up.”

Is that a general statement about antisemites? They hate the Jews because the Jews are successful, but don’t want to admit that that is the reason, yet wish their children will espouse the qualities that made the Jews great?

Fourth question:

And I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. Why is the plural used for people blessing Abraham and the singular for one who curses Abraham?

Radak and Tur HaAroch say that it is not customary to use the plural when speaking of curses. In this case, God expects few people, if any, to curse Abraham. The Midrash suggests that the plural refers to the future priests among Abraham’s descendants who will be commanded to bless Israel. So who will bless *them*? God is saying: “I will bless them Myself”. [Midrash Tanchuma, Lech Lecha 4]

Others take the verse literally: “The one who curses you I will curse” refers to only one person! Targum Jonathan says that that person is Balaam, the evil prophet who wanted to curse all Israel; while Rabbenu Bahya believes it is Nimrod, who the Midrash says tried to kill Abraham by throwing him in a fiery furnace. [Genesis R. 38:13]

Protection: Is “I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you” a promise of protection? Certainly, history has shown that the worst antisemites don’t last long, witness Nazi Germany, but that tolerance and kindness to Jews are rewarded, witness the United States. Many other nations, such as Spain, are in between, rising when Jews are tolerated, falling when they are not. But there is no promise that bad things will not happen to us, or even that good things will happen to us, only that there will be reward for those who wish us well and punishment for those who harm us. Indeed, terrible things have happened to us Jews, even though the perpetrators were eventually punished.

Chazzak ve-ematz!

Be strong and of good courage! Do not be afraid and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you. He will not fail you nor forsake you. [Deut. 31:6]

Shabbat shalom.