Balak 5778 – Tansforming Curse into Blessing

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My son Micah refuses to say “God bless you” or “gesundheit” when someone sneezes. He is not callous, nor does he harbor any ill will toward the sneezer. Rather, he explains that it doesn’t make any more sense to invoke God’s blessing on someone because of a sneeze than it does to wish this upon one who does any other bodily function, like breathing. There is some logic to this argument. After all, I have never heard someone say God bless you to one who has just vomited!

So this got me looking at the origin of this custom. There seem to be two common origin stories for the saying of God bless you. The older one is based on a belief that a sneeze might accidentally expel the *neshamah* – the soul – from a person’s body, based on the idea that the soul was embodied in the air inside of a person.  We ask for God’s blessing to prevent this from occurring. A variant on this same idea is that the sneeze expels evil spirits, in the same way that one who hits a hornet’s nest expels the hornets, and therefore you need God’s protection from these unleashed spirits.

The second story often told explains that during the times of the Bubonic plague, the coughing and sneezing were often the first symptoms to appear. Pope Gregory I (Gregory the Great) either suggested or mandated, depending on the version of this legend, that people say “God bless you” after a person sneezed in hopes that this prayer would protect them from an otherwise certain death.

Given that one of these stories comes from almost certain pagan origins and the other from Catholic tradition, perhaps Micah’s protest is on to something here. In fact in Hebrew one says lav-ri-ut or liv-ri-ut – and I checked to be sure that either one is ok according to the Ha-Akadami l’lashon Ivrit – which means, “to your health” and God is not invoked at all. This still doesn’t answer Micah’s question about why we only do this for sneezes, but it does raise a separate question: When and how do we invoke God’s blessing and what does it mean for God to bless someone.

There are certain times that are clear – we know that each morning at minyan we add in the quintessential blessing of God: Yivrech’cha HaShem Vyishmarecha – may God bless you and watch over you. We also invoke this blessing for our children on Shabbat, for a bride and groom on their wedding day, and as part of the final preparations of a body for burial. In addition, we ask God “yivarekh vyirapeh et hacholim” – to bless and to heal those who are ill. Wouldn’t it be enough to say to heal them? But blessing invokes something different than healing. It has a protective nature to it, as well as a relationship with the one who is blessed.

All of this comes to mind, of course, because this week’s parasha deals almost entirely with the nature of blessing and curses. Balak, the Moabite King, hires Bilaam the prophet to curse the Israelites. Balak makes clear the reason for his interest in the curse: he invokes Pharaohs words to describe the people as “atzum hu mimeni” – too numerous for me. He needs Bilaam to curse them so that he can defeat the Israelites and drive them out of the land – which he apparently would not have been able to do without the curse. Bilaam turns to God who says Do not go with them, “do not curse that people for they are blessed.” Here and later throughout this parasha, we see this idea played out – because God has already blessed the people – raised them up and promised to protect them, Bilaam is not able to curse them.

In the back and forth that ensues, Bilaam keeps trying to do Balak’s bidding and curse the people, but each time he blesses them. Balak, who is understandably frustrated with the results of his scheme, first yells at Bilaam and tells him “What have you done to me? Here I brought you to damn my enemies and instead you have blessed them.” Bilaam explains this is what he meant when he said he can only say what God tells him to say. Balak doesn’t give up and has him do this again, with the same results. Now Balak tells him not to curse or bless them, but Bilaam is enjoying himself and gives another blessing and here he recites the well known verse “Mah tovu ohaaleacha ya’akov.” And then he adds on one more blessing for good measure.

It is interesting here to note that for the rabbis, Bilaam is considered to be quite evil, despite his apparent fidelity to the word of God. But they also emphasize Bilaam’s free will. The commentator Or HaChayim notes that when the text says לא תלך **עםהם**, "you must not go **with them**," i.e. God forbade Bileam to travel with the first set of emissaries, who were low-level and not worthy of Bilaam’s dignity.. Had G'd only said "you must not go," God would not have had a recourse to allow Biaam to go later.” But, he notes “G'd knew that Bileam wanted to do evil and that eventually he would accompany Balak's emissaries. Inasmuch as G'd does not prevent man from exercising his choice, He eventually agreed for Bileam to go, allowing him to travel.”

So where does that leave us? Bilaam claims that he can only do what God tells him; God grants free will; Bilaam still goes to curse. The curse is transformed into blessing.

Bilaam’s claim that he can only do what God tells him and the emphasis of God granting him free will appear to be in contradiction. After all, if Bilaam had free will to go, even though God didn’t want him to go, then shouldn’t he have also had the free will to say what he wanted, regardless of what God had said? Was it Bilaam or God who shifted what were supposed to be curses into a blessing instead?

This to me, then raises one of the important questions of this parasha for us –how do we transform an intent of curse into a reality of blessing? I believe the free will is essential for this notion. For me, the curses that we encounter are those things over which, for whatever reason, we have no control. Each of us is granted a life with both blessing and curse, much of which we cannot explain. Why have many of us had the good fortune to have been raised in loving homes with parents who look out for our best interests while others do not have that benefit. Why were we fortunate to be raised in a country that protected our rights whereas others have been raised under brutal dictatorships? Or, on the other hand, why did cancer strike this person down and not someone else? I don’t think most of us would argue that all of this was based solely on merit.

But the most fascinating part for me are the people who are able to turn what appears to be a curse into what becomes a blessing. The parent whose child dies, but then goes on to start an organization to benefit others who face the same situation. The man who loses his job and uses the opportunity to begin a new and even more rewarding career. The woman who is told all her life, “no you can’t” and who goes out there and shows the world, “Yes we can.” They take whatever tragic situation they have been cursed to endure and find a way to somehow make it a blessing.

The truth is, we each have those moments, not only as individuals, but also as a nation. Different people may have different ideas of what represents a blessing and what represents a curse. But we have a measuring stick by which we can make this judgement of what is blessing and what is curse. Noting that many of the people are going to disobey God and be struck down at the very end of this parashsa, Or HaChayim raises and answer the question of how can you call the Israelites blessed, when we know they will sin, be punished, and often be struck down by God for their actions. He explains that “The termברוך  is only applied to the righteous since righteousness is at the root of all blessing. God chose to equate a righteous person or nation with a blessed person or nation, respectively.”

So while we maintain our free will, God also provides us a roadmap on how to turn curses into blessings – we do so by bringing an increased level of righteousness into the world. To speak out against those who treat others poorly, to ensure that the laws and policies of our nation are established in a way that will increase freedom and equality for all. To defend those who are defenseless. This is the mandate from our Torah and the meaning of tzedek, tzedek, tirdof – it is not enough to merely look out and proclaim Mah Tovu – we are responsible to actively seek to increase the level of justice, kindness and compassion in our society to ensure that we will be blessed, to be under God’s protective wing.

And so now I finally have an answer – or at least a partial answer – to Micah’s question. I say partial because I still can’t answer why we don’t say anything at other times, but wishing a God bless you or Lavriyut after a sneeze is a method by which we display our kindness and compassion, even to total strangers on a train. And to the degree that we can take from this one small action and apply it to even bigger issues, we each have the opportunity to take actions that will increase the righteousness in our world and, therefore, to bring blessing to all of those around us.

Shabbat shalom