

Parshat Balak: A Blueprint for Blessings

Yael Turitz Kaplan '27

I've been thinking a lot about blessings lately. This summer, I am privileged to be completing a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE), where I work as a chaplain in a hospital. Often, when I introduce myself to patients as a chaplain, the first thing they ask for is a blessing.

But what is a blessing? As Jews, we say them constantly—before we eat, after we go to the bathroom, as we usher in Shabbat each week—but what does it really mean to bless someone or something? Is it a form of prayer? An acknowledgement of holiness? A compliment? A moment of gratitude?

This week's parsha gives us some excellent examples of blessings. Twice Bilaam tries to curse Bnei Yisrael, and twice, none other than God Himself intervenes and places words of blessing in his mouth instead. What better place to look for how we are meant to give brachot than God's own formulation of blessings!?

Both of God's blessings (found in Bamidbar 23) are about the people's relationship with God. Bnei Yisrael are praiseworthy because God said they were praiseworthy, and they are successful in their wars and endeavors because God made it so. "How can I damn whom God has not damned, how can I doom when God has not doomed?" asks Bilaam (Bamidbar 23:8). "Their God is with them, and their King's acclaim in their midst; God who freed them from Egypt is for them like the horns of the wild ox," says the second blessing (Bamidbar 23:21). The focus is not on what qualities the people of Bnei Yisrael themselves possess, but on their relationship with the Divine. I think this aspect is key for understanding blessings in a Jewish context.

The first two times the word for blessing, *brakha*, is mentioned in the Torah both occur during the creation story. On day six of creation, we read:

God created man in His image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. God blessed them and God said to them: "Be fertile and increase; fill the earth and master it" (Bereishit 1:27-28).

Here, the blessing God gives to God's newest creations seems more like a charge, an action they have to undertake as part of their ongoing relationship with the one who created them.

Similarly, on the seventh day, after God rests, the Torah tells us: "And God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it" (Bereishit 2:3). In his commentary on this verse, Ibn Ezra suggests that "a blessing means an increase in wellbeing. On the Sabbath, the body is blessed with a renewal of its strength and the soul with an increase in its intellectual and reasoning capabilities." It is possible to understand this in a metaphysical sense—to say that something almost magical happens on Shabbat, a renewal of body

and soul by God. The brakha of Shabbat, then, is that it is a weekly encounter between human beings and God.

This is echoed in a famous midrash told about Avraham Avinu. When he is told to leave his father's land and sojourn to the land of Canaan, God says to Avraham: "I will make of you a great nation, And I will bless you; I will make your name great, And you shall be a blessing" (Bereishit 12:2).

Midrash Rabbah tells us that, in this moment, God bestowed upon Avraham the right to bestow blessing:

Rabbi Berekhya said: "I will bless you" is already written; why does the verse state [further]: "And you shall be a blessing?" The explanation is that He said to him: "Until this point I was required to bless My world. From now on, the blessings are passed to you; whomever you deem worthy to bless, bless him" (Bereishit Rabbah 39:11).

Avraham, the first person to have a true relationship with the Divine, is the first person who can bestow blessings upon other people because brakhot are actually about that very relationship. When we make a brakha, we not only acknowledge but actively take part in our everlasting relationship with God. In a sense, giving a brakha is a godly endeavor, perhaps the closest divine encounter we can reach as human beings. "If you ask me what Judaism is," Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik wrote in his *Blessings and Thanksgivings*, "I will respond: Judaism is contained in the words 'Barukh Ata.' The recognition that the Almighty, as it were, needs our brakhot, means that He, as it were, needs to be discovered by us and needs our constant aspiration to seek and find Him" (p.125).

The third time Bilaam is asked to curse Bnei Yisrael, he does not need God to tell him how to bless them instead. After having two intense personal encounters with the Divine, he now knows what it means to bless someone, and he composes the final brakha himself. When he says "ma tovu ohalekha Yaakov, how great are your tents, Jacob" (Bamidbar 24:5), a line that will go on to be canonized in Jewish liturgy for generations to come, he is not speaking of Bnei Yisrael's physical tents or even of their character, but he is making a comment about and partaking in the everlasting bond between God and the Jewish people. How good is that bond, how awesome that God dwells amongst them!

To bestow blessing is to acknowledge the link between the Divine and the human. For many of the patients I see, this link so often feels tenuous, if not completely severed. When they ask for a blessing, they are asking for me to help them restore that bond, to help them reconnect to a God they fear has abandoned them. There are no perfect words to say that can instantaneously rebuild that relationship, and I often struggle to find any words to say in these moments. But the lesson I'm taking from this week's parsha is that the very act of blessing itself can serve as an opening for engaging in a



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relationship with God. By offering blessings to others, I hope that I might play a small role in helping people reconstitute their spiritual lives.

Yael Turitz Kaplan is originally from Silver Spring, Maryland. She is passionate about Jewish education and wants to help make Torah accessible and inspiring for the next generation. Previously, Yael spent four years working as a special education teacher at The Shefa School. While there, Yael earned a masters in special education and Jewish education from Touro College, and she holds a BA in religion from Barnard College.