## To Bless or to Curse Parashat Balak Beth Shalom, Cambridge 26 June 2010

ויאמר בלק אל בלעם, מה עשית לי? לקוב אוביי לקחתיך והנה ברכת ברך.

"Then Balak said to Balaam, 'What have you done to me? Here I brought you do curse my enemies [in the new translation: to damn my enemies], and instead you have blessed them!" (Num. 23:11).

These words—blessing and curse—are among the most important in the Bible, as we will see clearly when we move into the Book of Deuteronomy in the coming weeks, with long lists of blessings and curses (e.g. Deut. 26: 27:14-28:19). I would like to speak with you today about these terms, these concepts, that appear in so many familiar places.

Let me begin with an American example. The spring of 2008 was the peak of the presidential primary season, and in the Democratic Party, Barak Obama and Hillary Clinton were running neck and neck. Virtually every political speech by candidates in the US ends with the words, "God bless you, and God bless America." In the midst of the intense campaigns, opponents to Obama started publicizing on the Internet video-clips of an African-American preacher saying, in the midst of a sermon, "God damn America". 1

What was the relevance of this to the campaign? The preacher was the Reverend Dr. Jeremiah Wright of Chicago, an African-American Baptist pastor of the mega-church to which Obama had belonged for many years. Indeed, he was Obama's pastor, his Rebbe, whom Obama acknowledged have had a major influence on him. Suddenly Obama was on the spot; he diffused the issue by giving gave a beautifully nuanced and moving speech to the NAACP, distancing himself from the Rev. Wright yet explaining the context of in which—reviewing the legacy of slavery and oppression—a liberal, popular, intellectual African-American preacher might say such words.

Now I have read a number of sermons by Dr Wright, and heard recordings of him delivering a few. He is a phenomenally powerful and inspirational preacher, by no means a terrorist or a traitor, and he has been inspiring listeners for well more than 30 years. Yet to the extent to which is known and remember in the general public, it will now be primarily with this one phrase, "God damn American." I remember thinking that this is not worse than things that the prophets said, like Jeremiah, in the context of self-criticism, not worse than those curses listed in Deuteronomy. Why were the words so powerful?

And in our own tradition: What *is* a blessing? What happens when we say the words over our children at the end of the worship service,

"Yevarekhekhah Adonai", May God bless you? When we say at a Bar Mitzvah or an Ufruf, Mi She-berakh avoteinu ve-imoteinu . . . hu yevarekh ploni ben ploni", May the one who blessed our ancestors . . . bless [and we fill in the name]. Or when we say, at the beginning of every ritual act and so many of our liturgical passages, "Barukh atah Adonai, Blessed are You, O Lord"? Perhaps we can learn something about this concept by comparing two well known stories from the Torah.

I would suggest that there are two very different understandings of the nature of the blessing in the Bible. In the first conception, the words of the blessing as well as the curse have the capacity to change the external reality. The actual words of the blessing have a kind of magical power, which brings benefit to the person who is blessed. And it is not only the words, it is also the character of the person who says them. If he is a holy person, and then he says the right words in the right place at the right time, in the right way, it is impossible to nullify or cancel out the efficacy of the blessing. The opposite is true for the curse.

We see this concept exemplified in the well-known story of Jacob and Esau. As we all remember, Esau was the first-born, and his father Isaac loved him especially. Old and almost blind, Isaac knows that he will die in the near future, and he wants to give Esau his blessing before he dies. But while Esau is out fulfilling his father's request to hunt some game and prepare it as a special dish, Jacob—sent by his mother—comes, pretends to be Esau, and receives the blessing intended for his brother.

Esau returns, prepares the food his father craved, and requests the blessing that was due to him. Isaac realizes that he has blessed Isaac in error; that was not what he intended, not what he wanted. But he cannot do anything about it. The blessing determines that Jacob will rule over his brother, and these words have a decisive power. The narrative implies that it makes no difference that the words were said in error; it makes no difference what Jacob will do in the future. The words of the blessing themselves are like magic, compelling God to bring them about, and no power can resist them.

Now obviously, there are many problems with this concept. The most obvious: how can it be possible that a human being—even a pious, holy human being—can compel God to carry out his own will by uttering certain words in a certain way? Is it conceivable that one person, even a wise and holy person, can compel God to do good or evil on behalf of another person simply by the words he says?

But there is a different concept of blessing in the Bible, and we see the contrast between the two conceptions precisely in the story of our parashah. As Nehama Leibowitz wrote, "the whole of our sidra is concerned with discrediting superstition and the belief in magical powers" (Studies Bamidbar, Numbers, p. 303).

Balak, the King of Moab, sends emissaries to bring Balaam in order to curse the people of Israel. Balaam is known as a wise man, adept in the ways of magic. That is why Balak assumes that Balaam has special powers. If Balaam will say the right words, in the right place, after the proper sacrifices have been offered to God—the seven altars with the seven bulls and the seven rams—then his words will have the power to bring harm to this alien people.

Balaam does all of these things. But at the decisive moment, when he sees the Israelites dwelling in peace and security, he realizes that despite all of his rituals and the words he has prepared, he has no power to harm this people. And, unlike some of the rabbinic interpretations of the passage, this is not because God overpowers him and forces him to utter something that he does not want to say. It is because no ritual, no words, can overturn the reality that he sees.

How many times have we experienced an aspect of this dynamic? We have preconceived ideas, prejudices, about a group of people - Christians, Muslims, orthodox Jews, certain ethnic groups, etc. We may even with them ill, curse them in our minds or in spoken words. And then we have an opportunity to encounter them, to observe them, to sit down and listen to them, get to know them as human beings. And we suddenly realize that facing them, as individuals, observing them as a group, the swear words or curses that once came so naturally when they were an abstraction evaporate from our mouths and our minds. We simply cannot say the words, because they do not fit the reality we have come to experience.

The blessing and the curse do not *change* the reality, they *describe* the reality. A people that is divided by quarrels and internal strife, a people of low moral standards, bereft of faith in its self and its God—that is a cursed people, and no words of blessing are capable of changing it. A people that lives according to high moral standards, that believes I its own future—that is a blessed people. And all words of curse are incapable of harming it.

The name of our congregation - like many others - is "Beth Shalom". Do the words themselves guarantee that our community will be characterized by serenity, mutual respect and tranquil co-operation? Of course not. There are some communities that have broken away from large congregations after turbulent and bitter infighting—and they have chosen for their break-away congregation the name Beth Shalom. The name expresses an aspiration, not a reality. Is a congregation named <code>Sha'arei Tzedek</code>, "Gates of Righteousness", or <code>Sha'arei Emeth</code>, "Gates of Truth", more righteous or truthful than synagogues just named after their location? Or <code>B'nai Emunah</code>, "Children of Faith" more faithful? Is New York's great Reform synagogue Temple Emanu-El, "God is with us" guaranteed to be more spiritual than others? Of course not: its members have to make the effort to transform a name into a reality. Hopefully such names will at times serve as an incentive, and therefore have a psychological impact

Perhaps the most famous words of our parashah are the ones that have been incorporated into the Siddur at the beginning of the worship service. Mah tovu ohalekha Ya'akov, mishkenotekha Yisra'el. But even these words do not by themselves transform a synagogue, a study hall, a Jewish home, into something beautiful and good. We ourselves have to make it happen. To make this congregation as a whole, and the home of each of its families, a true Beit Shalom, a house of peace for which the words mah tovu ohalekha Ya'akov, first uttered by a pagan magician and prophet of antiquity, will be realized in our lives.

<sup>1</sup> Following is the immediate context for the statement in his sermon of 13 March 2003: "The government gives them the drugs, builds bigger prisons, passes a three-strike law and then wants us to sing 'God Bless America.' No, no, no, not 'God bless American'. God damn America, that's in the Bible for killing innocent people. God damn America for treating our citizens as less than human. God damn America for as long as she acts like she is God and she is supreme." The video-tape clip shown repeatedly in the media included only the

words, "No, no, no, not 'God bless American'. God damn America, that's in the Bible."