

Parashat Balak 5777, 2017:

Blessings and Curses Revisited

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, Shayna Yehudit bat Avraham Manes and Rivka, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, Shoshana Elka bat Etel Dina and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Our *parasha* contains one of the best-known *pasukim* (verses) and *berachot* (blessings) given to the Jewish people, “How goodly (*mah tovu*) are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel!” (*Sefer Bamidbar* 24:5, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) This verse has been part of our *tefilot* (prayers) since Gaonic times (6th-11th centuries CE). A telling example of this inclusion is found in Rav Amram Gaon’s 9th century work, *Seder Rav Amram Gaon*: “Upon entering a synagogue, one should say, ‘How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel!’” (*Blessings and Requests*, s.v. *hanichnas l’bait*) Moreover, and closer to our own time, the highly respected halachist, Rabbi Yechiel Michel Epstein (1829- 1908), codified this practice in his work, *Aruch HaShulchan*: “The text of prayers preceding *Baruch She’amar* [introductory prayer to *Pesukei d’Zimra*] is printed in prayer books: When [a person] enters a synagogue, he should say “How goodly are your tents, O Jacob.” (*Orech Chaim* I:46:16) It should be noted that Rav Epstein based his statement on earlier *poskim* (halachic decisors) such as the Maharil (1365-1427) and Rabbi Moshe Isserles (1530-1572) as found in his work *Darchei Moshe* on the *Tur*.

In contrast, according to Rabbi Johanan's view in the *Talmud Bavli*, Balaam's "blessing" was actually a curse in disguise, uttered for the sole purpose of denying our people houses of worship and study ("tents") and a long-term political existence ("dwelling places"):

R. Johanan said: From the blessings of that wicked man [i.e. Balaam] you may learn his intentions [to actually bring evil upon them]. Thus he wished to curse them that they [the Jewish people] should possess no synagogues or houses of Torah learning, [this is deduced from,] "How goodly are your tents, O Jacob," - that the Divine Presence should not rest upon them, "and your dwelling places, O Israel," - that their kingdom should not endure... (*Sanhedrin* 105b, translation, *The Soncino Talmud*, with my emendations)

Rabbi Johanan's position was strongly endorsed by the Maharshah (Rabbi Shlomo Luria, 1510-1573) in a responsum:

And in the morning when I enter the synagogue, I begin with the verse, "But I, with Your great loving-kindness, shall enter Your House; I shall prostrate myself toward Your Holy Temple in the fear of You." (*Sefer Tehillim* 5:8) I, therefore skip the [standard] first verse, "How goodly are your tents, O Jacob..." since this was uttered by Balaam - and he said it as a curse." (*Responsa Maharshah*, number 64, translation my own)

It should be noted that this line of reasoning was apparently followed, as well, by Rabbi David Abudarham (flourished 1340) in the highly influential study of the *siddur* that bears his name, wherein *Mah Tov* is not included as part of the liturgy. In addition, it is absent in the *Kol Bo*, an anonymous and prominent work composed by one of the *Rishonim* who likely lived during the 14th century.

If such significant figures in the history of Halacha opposed the daily recitation of *Mah Tov*, why was it subsequently integrated into our daily prayer experience? HaRav Yosef Tzvi Rimon, Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Har Etzion, suggests that Rabbi Abba b. Kahana's

analysis, which follows Rabbi Johanan's above-cited statement in *Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin*, offers us the key to answering our question:

All of them [i.e. the blessings] reverted to a curse, except in regard to the synagogues and *yeshivot*, for it is written, "But the L-rd, your G-d, did not want to listen to Balaam. So the L-rd, your G-d, transformed the curse into a blessing for you, because the L-rd, your G-d, loves you" (*Sefer Devarim* 23:6) - the curse [pursuant to the synagogues and *yeshivot*], but not the curses. (Translation, *The Soncino Talmud*, with my emendations)

Rav Rimon explains this passage in the following manner:

Only the blessing of "How goodly (*mah tovu*) are your tents, O Jacob" remained throughout the generations. This blessing, in its simplest terms refers to the tents of the Jewish people. Our Sages of blessed memory, however, understood that the blessing, in actuality, refers to the synagogues and *yeshivot* of our nation. The *Gemara* states in their regard that the initial curse was not fulfilled. Moreover, in each and every generation, synagogues and *yeshivot* have steadfastly stood in the midst of our nation – even during the most difficult of times. Therefore, it is quite logical to suggest that we say "*Mah Tov*" precisely because this prayer of Balaam was never turned in to evil – even unto our own historical moment. (<http://jobkatif.org.il/balak-2/>, translation and underlining my own)

Next, Rav Rimon builds upon this explanation and offers us a truly inspirational message:

Moreover, it is possible that this verse [i.e. *mah tovu*] comes to strengthen us when we enter a synagogue for it proclaims, "No person will ever be able to destroy and diminish the eternity of the Jewish people." This is so, [for we see] that even in the instance wherein someone attempted to harm and to curse us – his efforts came to naught due to Hashem turning his curse into a blessing. As the text states: "So the L-rd, your G-d, transformed the curse into a blessing for you, because the L-rd, your G-d, loves you." (*Sefer Devarim* 23:6) **The Holy One Blessed be He loves us and ever worries about our fate.** In addition, it is possible that we say this verse in order to enable us to recognize **Hashem's favorable vision of His nation** – so that we know that it is ever His will to bless and never to curse us. (Bolding appears in the original Hebrew text)

According to Rav Rimon, *Mah Tov* emerges as a spiritual rallying cry for our people and a constant reminder of Hashem's steadfast love for us. Moreover, it can serve as our watchword as we face the unceasing trials and tribulations of living in a world that is far too often radically at odds with all that Hashem deems to be righteous and holy.

May the Almighty ever look favorably upon us and fulfill His stirring words in the *Birkat Kohanim*: “May the L-rd bless you and watch over you. May the L-rd cause His countenance to shine to you and favor you. May the L-rd raise His countenance toward you and grant you peace.” (*Sefer Bamidbar* 6-24-26) *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org> They may also be found on YUTorah.org using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha’s name.

The email list, *b’chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

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*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik’s](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3)