



The Power of Blessing

Practicing Jews engage with the Torah at least weekly, studying an assigned portion of the scripture on a schedule that holds true whether you're in Amsterdam, Tel Aviv, New York or Tucson. One of these portions (*parsha*, *parshot* in Hebrew) is *Kedushim*, Leviticus 19:1-20:27, generally read near Mother's Day. So, it is appropriate that the Biblical roots of this month's article are found in *Kedushim*.

Leviticus 19:14 says, "You shall not curse the deaf nor put a stumbling block before the blind. You shall fear your God, I am the LORD." In case you skimmed those last lines, go back and read again, carefully. Obviously this is an important commandment. "You shall fear your God," is a phrase used to remind us all that there is a force far beyond our understanding; a warning against pride, presumption or arrogance. The close juxtaposition of this reminder to the commandment tells us that God considers it vital that we pay attention. So, let's study this for a bit.

Why is it important not to put a stumbling block before the blind? Because they can't see it and will not be able to avoid it. Sighted people make slight corrections to the direction of their movement all the time. Most of us don't even notice that we're doing it, in fact, because it is instinctual. But, the blind don't have the same visual cues to help them make those corrections. They must rely on a guide (a person, animal or cane) to help them in this regard. So, what's the problem? The guide will see the stumbling block and steer the blind person around it, right?

When I was small, there was "a blind family" in our congregation, the Fosters. Now, the mother and father were both blind, the two older girls had normal vision and the youngest, a boy, had very poor vision. You'd think that the mother and father would have relied on their sighted children for help, but they did nothing of the sort. Both of the adults used canes in public and he also had a dog that went with him to work. Neither of them used canes or guides of any type in their own home.

Visitors to their home, and I was one fairly often, learned not to move anything without letting someone know. Mr. and Mrs. Foster knew where things were

and could easily navigate around furniture and walls. I never heard them count paces or anything like that, but they had some way of knowing how many steps they could take in one direction. They never took an extra step. Until the day that a neighbor moved a trash can out from under a desk. I saw Mrs. Foster nearing the trash can, but couldn't warn her in time. She stumbled, fell and broke her arm. I understand on a visceral level what the problem is about putting a stumbling block in front of the blind. And I will never forget that living lesson.

But, what is the problem with cursing the deaf? After all, they can't hear it and it's not like they'll physically trip and get hurt. If they can't hear the curse, they can't be psychologically affected by it. And the spoken word alone just isn't that powerful. Or is it?

Remember that God created the world by speaking. Look back at Genesis 1 and 2. You'll find that both accounts of creation relate that God's spoken words brought everything into existence. Well, everything except us. God fashioned us directly, making us *b'tselem Elohim*, in God's image. If the words of God have the power to create, and we are fashioned "by the hand of God" in God's image, what makes us think that our words are without power?

Our words convey our ideas, intentions and desires. If we curse the deaf, though they can't hear it, we have unleashed power against them. And because they can't hear the curse, they can't take precautions against it. So, using our words against those who can't hear them is the same as placing something harmful in the path of those who can't see it. And God wants us to know that we must do neither.

Remember Deuteronomy 30:19, Parshat Vayelech, "I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse." This coupling of blessing and curse is no accident. Prayer-our words and intentions-is powerful. It can be a blessing, like the surgeon's knife which restores a person to life. Or it can be a curse, like the attacker's knife which may take a person's life. If we do not choose blessing, we choose curse. If we do not use our prayerful intentions to bless, we are cursing.

I think back to times when I prayed, "Please God, let me win this. Let it be mine." I did not mean anything more than that I wanted to be victorious, I wanted the prize. But, my prayer was wider than that. It could have easily been reworded as, "Please don't let any of them succeed. Don't give any of them the good thing I want for mine." Phrased that way, the curse is obvious to me,

though it wasn't when I originally prayed. This is a small curse and may seem insignificant. But, what if it lead to other things?

In the musical "Oklahoma," there is a malevolent character named Jud Fry who looms over the love story of Laurey and Curly. There is a song about Jud Fry with the lyric ". . . beneath those two dirty shirts he always wore . . . he loved everybody and everything in the whole world. Only he never let on . . ."

When I hear this song, I generally laugh along with Curly and the others. But, sometimes, I wonder what started Jud Fry along that path. Why did he withdraw from life? Could it perhaps have been the feeling that he was not good enough? Maybe he lost the big spelling bee, or didn't get the blue ribbon for reading in school. And maybe the child who did prayed, "don't let Jud have it." Such a little thing. And yet, it might have been the first step down the road to what Jud became.

Back to our verse from Leviticus. Remember the warning against pride, presumption and arrogance? It is not for us to judge what is a little thing and what is not. We are not nearly wise enough to do so. We must leave that to God. And we must use the power of our words and intentions for blessing.

May you be blessed with all you need.