

THE RABBI'S STUDY

לברך

to bless • to curse



When Job has had enough and wants to be done with life, caught as he was between the curiosity of HQBH (Gd in the Heavenly Academy) and Satan (the Prosecuting Angel in the Court of Heaven), his wife said to him—"curse Gd and die". Well, that is how it translates, but really the word she uses, לברך, *levareckh*, means both "bless" and "curse" in Hebrew. Remember this—the way in which a thing turns out in the real world hinges on the action(s) we undertake. She meant in that one utterance also the meaning, "bless Gd and live." A curse and a blessing, a choice of action in rage and hurt or action in recognizing the best even when that's super hard to do in a set of given circumstances, Job's wife captures **the entire human condition in three words.**

The Land of Israel, which I'll just call "the Land" from this point on in the Torah, is also created ritually in an antiphonal chorus ritual between two sacred mountains, as described in Deuteronomy parashat re'eh:

וְהָיָה כִּי יִבְיֹאֵךְ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֶל-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר-אַתָּה
בָּא שָׁמָּה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ וְנָתַתָּה אֶת-הַבְּרָכָה עַל-הָרִי
וְאֶת-הַקְּלָלָה עַל-הָרֵי עִיבָל:

When the ETERNAL your God brings you into the land that you are about to enter and possess, you shall pronounce the blessing at Mount Gerizim and the curse at Mount Ebal.

The model of conducting a service by an antiphonal chorus, meaning one side says one line and the other another line in a call-and-response model, is common to Jewish and biblical rituals. For example, those from traditional backgrounds would hear the words: הוֹדוּ לַיהוָה טוֹב, *hodu Adonai ki tov*, praise the Eternal for he is good, and would respond automatically, כִּי לְעוֹלָם, *ki le-olam chasdo*, for his mercy spans all time and space. One party creates a reality, the other affirms it; both voices are necessary to demarcate the start and end of the new world created in these paired utterances.

But here in the ritual of call-and-response blessings and curses, something very particular and unusual is happening. One chorus aspires with words of blessing, and the other replies the warning words of a curse.

These blessings and curses are cast from Mount Gerazim, which was likely the original "Temple mount" and remains so for our Samaritan cousins, the remnants of the 10 tribes destroyed in 722 BCE with the sack of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. One mountain is the north and west pole of space and morality, one the south and east pole, and between them exists the whole world. Therefore, Joshua's ritual of curse and blessing call-and-response choruses affirms the nature of human existence.

Humanity is never quite blessed and never quite cursed; we live in freedom to choose motion towards the polarity of the good and the blessed or to drift in an undisciplined way toward the realm of curses. We can choose שִׂנְאָת חִינָם, *sinat hinam*, hate for one another, where we identify the totality of each person by the single worst action we recall, or we can choose (תְּשׁוּבָה), return to being the best that we were always supposed to be, where we see the person as a complex whole of good and mistakes, whereby we choose to recognize and amplify the good, הַכֶּרֶת הַטוֹב, *hakarat ha-tov*, and help them to be the best they can when they are in error.

הַכֶּרֶת הַטוֹב
Hakarat ha-tov
recognizing the good

When I studied in Israel for the rabbinate, Rabbi Dr. Yehoyada Amir remarked in Hebrew about the Israeli declaration of independence, the latest call-and-response between the Jews who aspire to the best and the hopeful future of survival in the world on the other hand, and the world that in turn still does not tolerate Jews, even to this very day, on the other hand.

**“The Jewish family belongs to the Land,
the Land does not belong to us.**

— Rabbi Dr. Yehoyada Amir

To live in the Land, he continued, requires Gd's codes of moral and good behavior to be chosen over and over again, against the drift and ease of not resisting the pole of cursed actions. Therefore, he concluded, the Land, now known as the State of Israel, requires that we comport ourselves as a "light to all nations." Gd does not bless us with this status; we make this status with the work of our hands, and every choice that echoes between Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerazim, the poles of curse and blessing.

Because in the end, a blessing is a curse and a curse is a blessing, as Job's wife brilliantly brought forth millennia ago. What differentiates the two is how we act, and how we consciously choose to amplify the good and assist its efflorescence in the world, הַכֶּרֶת הַטוֹב; we are to act as good denizens of the Land, whether that Land is in our hearts as Torah or the ground beneath our feet on which we act in the literal State of Israel.

To be of our family, to be the People Israel, is both a state of the heart whenever we act as Jews—a spiritual discipline—and a state of choice and behavior and compassion and mercy—as a worldly discipline—wherever we stand as Jews. Wherever and whenever, the choice is always yours and the choice of הַכֶּרֶת הַטוֹב, *hakarat ha-tov*, finding and amplifying the good, is always going to be hard but is always right there, somewhere deep and quiet. **Curse Gd and die through your actions, or blese Gd and live.** Or, if you like a reminder from the birth of Exile itself, listen to the words of the prophet Isaiah in our haftara:

Remember these words and those of Job's unnamed wife, each and every moment you have to choose your own actions or see the actions of your fellow (whom, I will remind you, you are commanded and obligated to love as yourself (Lev. 19:17-18)):

לֹא-תִשָּׂא אֶת-אָחִיךָ בְּלִבְבְּךָ הוֹכֵחַ תּוֹכִיחַ אֶת-עַמִּיתְךָ:
וְלֹא-תִשָּׂא עָלֶיךָ חֲטָא:

You shall not hate your kinsfolk in your heart. Do indeed reprove your kindred through *tochechah* (the ethical announcement of an error and the showing of the path of restoration of *teshuvah*) but incur no guilt on their account.

לֹא-תִקָּם וְלֹא-תִטָּר אֶת-בְּנֵי עַמְךָ
וְאֶהְבֶּתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ אֲנִי יְהוָה:

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against members of your people. Love your fellow as yourself: I am GOD.

(Lev. 19:17-18)

Choose therefore the good, and choose to see it; bless Gd and live; find the good sparks of light in the darkest of shadows and amplify them; love your kinsfolk in your heart, and be the blessing the world and our People need.