

The Appropriate Response to a Blessing

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I have an outlook of the world that prompts me to look at the bigger picture, explore the long-term goals and strategies of the work I'm involved with and the life I lead. I like to view the blessings that come my way and respond to them accordingly. It is this outlook that lead me to read this week's Parasha with a specific lens.

Bilaam the non-Jewish Prophet, bestows on the Jewish people a seemingly incredible blessing¹. The blessing continues to state the abundance of the Jewish people, their connection with Hashem, the strength that they embody, and the hierarchical status of the nation of Israel. The blessing ends a warning to those who will curse us².

With a deep reading, one can see that this is an extremely intense blessing, full of many layers, and establishing the potential for a very sanctified response³, but our Rabbis also state that this has the potential for calamity and might actually be seen as a curse⁴.

Chapter 25 seems to give us the response of the Jewish people to this blessing⁵.

The Jewish people make a mockery of themselves, God, and the blessings that they received, having been elevated to a status of holiness, not just by God and their status as a people, but by the greatest non-Jewish prophet to have ever existed, described by our sages as being as great as Moshe himself.

How do we engage with this response by the Jewish people, and should we view this poetic statement of Bilaam as a blessing or a curse? One of the interesting rabbinic connections made regarding this week's Parasha is that of Avraham and Bilaam⁶

Bilaam blessed the Jewish people by stating that they were a collection of godly tents, a camp, that was isolated from the world around them, yet the Jewish people are from the progeny of Abraham, whose tent was alone, but open on all sides, welcoming to all those who passed by.

The Jewish people responded to this blessing of Bilaam, by being an open tent of Abraham while thinking that their isolationism would ultimately prevail. They extend the welcome to the women of Moab, and through their arrogance as bestowed by the blessing, they engage with the Moabite women and their gods following the instruction of Bilaam, rather than remembering the teachings of Abraham.

His tent was open, but all who would come by were inspired to engage with God.

The Israelites response didn't look at the wider world, it looked at the blessing as a statement that could be enacted on here and now. They were haughty in their response, they didn't project the long term, they thought about the here and now, thinking that the blessings of this foreign prophet would protect them without realizing that if they had look backwards at their history, all the way through the protection that God had previously offered up to the teachings of their very founder, they would have been able to rebuff the advances of the Moabites and reject their false gods without fear of retribution.

This I think is the answer to the question of whether it was a blessing or a curse. From Bilaam's perspective it was most definitely a blessing, but from the vantage point of the Jewish people, it is likely to be considered a curse.

Regarding our response, I think we need to understand the importance of realizing who and what we are. We are a people so full of potential, one that has the power to spread the light of the Almighty, in a manner that benefits the world around us. However, we also have the potential to fall into a terrible trap, where we think that we can be above the world around us, more important, greater than the other nations of the world.

Often we quote things like the brilliance of the Jewish mind, the fact that we have so many Nobel Laureates, or that our nation holds the most moral army in the world, or that we have given far more than our numbers would account for.

While all of these might be true, and may be responses to the manifold blessings bestowed upon us, they must be balanced with a realistic approach of both our flaws and our mission; to neglect the inverse, is to reject the teachings of Abraham our father, and give into the so called blessings of Bilaam. To neglect the inverse is to fall into the trap that our people fell into, during this week's Parasha, and this will see our ultimate demise.

We must look at the bigger picture, we must look at our past, we must look at our potential, we must look at the blessings, and we must ensure that they are able to fully impact the world around us. We must embody the potential of our people, we must do this as individuals, as a community, and as a people.

All citations can be found in **A New Page of Talmud**