

Go, and Be a Blessing! Lech Lecha 2020, Rabbi Rena Kieval

Go! Lech lecha! this week's Torah portion opens with God's call to Abraham, to follow God to a new place and become the founder of a new nation. And, God's call opens with a whole series of statements about blessing – bracha. In Avram's relationship with this new God, God tells him: you will be blessed, those who bless you will be blessed, those who curse you will be cursed, you will be a source of blessing to others, and finally – and most dramatically – God makes one of the most powerful statements in all of Torah, saying to Abraham: and you should *be* a blessing. Be a blessing!

These early parts of Torah are filled with blessings and curses. At the dawn of creation, just 2 parshas ago, God blesses animals, humans *and* the seventh day. When Adam and Eve, and the serpent, disobey God, the snake is cursed by having to crawl on its belly and by being the eternal enemy of woman. The blessing of human fertility is not taken away but is altered as women are promised anguish in the birth process. The earth itself is called cursed, with Adam needing to toil and struggle to draw food from it. Then, after Cain murders Abel – he is “cursed on the land,” (*aroor atah ba'aretz*) by having no home, having to wander.

It seems that God started with a world of blessing, and then the blessings seem to be undone, bit by bit. So God tries again with Noah. The ark is built and filled with the living things of the world in all of their magnificent diversity. After the flood, God says, I will no longer curse the earth – *lo oseef l'kallel od et ha-adamah* - on account of humans. God's blessing there is that the earth and the natural order will be sustained. God then blesses Noah and his family with a charge to be fruitful and fill the earth. Before that story ends, one of Noah's sons, Cham, the progenitor of Canaan, is cursed by God for dishonoring his father.

As the world comes into being, it is through blessing and curse that the Torah teaches notions of good and evil. Blessing reflects God's approval, and comes with following God's ways: treating others well. Blessing means the ability to create life, to have peace, to have the orderly cycles of nature. Curse, in contrast, comes from cruelty, disrespect to others and disobedience to God. Curse is associated with stagnation, struggle and unrest.

So far, all the blessings in the Torah have two sides to them – on the one hand, they are promises by God to give certain gifts. At the same time, they are also a charge: asking *us* to behave in ways that will bring blessing, asking us - as God said to Abraham - to be a blessing in this world. We receive God's blessings, and we are also responsible to create blessing and give it.

So we see that as we read on in the Torah, the idea of being a blessing expands even further. Blessing is no longer something that comes only from God

to people, rather we start to see people blessing other people. What power is given to us mere humans: to bless. When we offer blessing to each other, either explicitly in words or in the way we behave, we live out God's early promises and charges to Abraham and to all living things. We see that we need to actualize blessing in the world in the way that we act, particularly towards one another.

This week especially, and throughout these anxious days of pandemic and political upheaval, Lech Lecha calls upon us to ask ourselves each day: how can I be a blessing today? In the face of our challenges, our curses, both global and personal, let us pray that each of us can fill the world with ever more blessing. Let each one of us bring into the world the gifts of life and goodness and peace.

Shabbat Shalom