

Torah Table Talk – *Sacred Words*

Baruch Attah: God's Blessings and Our's

Parshat Lech L'cha, Genesis 12:1-17:26

Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt

With love to their grandchildren

Elka, Joshua, Lindsay, Oren z"l, Jenny, David, Lauren, Kayla, Zenna, and Emily

One of the most common words in the Jewish lexicon is *barukh*. Hundreds of blessings and prayers in the Jewish liturgy either begin or end with the words *barukh attah*; we are instructed to recite no less than one hundred *b'rachot* each day. In the opening chapters of the Torah focus we learn that God 'blessed' certain (but not all) of his creations: fish, fowl, *adam* (humanity), the Sabbath, and the descendants of Noah.

The blessing which God gives Abram, however, is different from the previous *b'rachot* in Genesis. We find the word *barukh* four times in the first three verses of *Parshat Lech L'cha*, emphasizing the importance of God's call. God will bless Abram and he will become a blessing; those who bless Abram will in turn be blessed. The earlier blessings in Genesis are a statement of fact in the present tense while Abram's blessing is a promise for the future. Abram's 'blessing' do not appear to refer to concrete characteristics but rather to a relationship that Abram will share with others and to an inner spiritual quality.

What is most surprising about the word *barukh*, is that it appears to work in two directions. God blesses human beings but we offer God our blessings as well. What does it mean to 'bless' God? Does God need our blessings? And what is the connection between these two different uses of the same word?

Genesis 12:2-3

I will make you a great nation, and I will *bless* you; I will make your name great and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and curse him who curses you; and all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by you.

Sources

Rashi's Commentary

I will bless you: This blessing alludes to wealth.

You shall be a blessing: the blessings are placed in your hands. Until now they were in My hands. I blessed Adam and Noah but henceforth you will bless whoever you desire.

Another interpretation: "I will make you a great nation:" that is why we say in the daily prayers 'the God of Abraham.' "I will bless you:" that is why we say in the daily prayer 'the God of Isaac.' "And I will make your name great:" that is why we say in the daily prayers 'the God of Jacob.' You might think that the prayer should be included with all of them; therefore, the texts states, "You shall be a blessing." With your name, Abraham, the prayer will be concluded and not with their names.

All the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by you: There are many interpretations but this is the plain meaning of the text: a person shall say to his child, 'may you be like Abraham.' This is true for every occurrence of these words in the Bible. The following text proves this interpretation: "Through you shall Israel bless, saying, 'May God make you as Ephraim and Manasseh.'" (Genesis 48:20) That is, the blessing of Joseph's children will be the prototype by which Jews will bless their children; so too, when future generations wish to bless one another they will do so by invoking the name of Abraham.

Nahum Sarna, JPS Torah Commentary

And all the families of the earth/ shall bless themselves by you: This rendering understands the Hebrew *ve-nivrekhu* as reflexive. People will take your own good fortune as the desired measure when invoking blessings on themselves. A more likely translation of the verb is as a passive: "shall be blessed through – because of – you. God promises to Abram would then proceed in three stages from particular to the universal: a blessing on Abram personally, a blessing or curse on those with whom he interacts, a blessing

on the entire human race. (Note – Sarna also points out that if you read the entire passage in Genesis, there are a comprehensive set of promises containing seven elements (most appropriate to the book of Genesis). It is interesting to note that land is not one of the promises which God makes to Abram in these verses.)

Bereshit Rabbah 39:2

When the Holy One said to Abraham, "Go you forth from your native land" (Gen. 12:1), what did Abraham resemble? A vial of scent with a tight-fitting lid put away in a corner so that its fragrance could not go forth. As soon as it was moved from that place [and opened], its fragrance began to go forth. So the Holy One said to Abraham: Abraham, many good deeds are in you. Travel about from place to place, and the greatness of your name will go forth in My world. "Go you forth...and I will make you a great nation."

Samson Raphael Hirsch (From the *Etz Hayim Humash*)

Hirsch takes this not as a promise by as a command. To merit the promised reward you must so live as to be a blessing to the world.

Talmud Ta'anit 8b

Rabbi Isaac said: A blessing is possible only in that which is hidden from the eye, as is said, "The Lord will command the blessing for you only in that which is hidden* from you" (Deut. 28:8). The school of Rabbi Ishmael taught: Blessing is possible only in things not under the direct control of the eye, as is said, "The Lord will command the blessing for thee [only] in that which is hidden from you." Our masters taught: One who enters his barn to measure the new grain should recite the prayer "May it be Your will, *Adonai* our God, to send blessing upon the work of our hands." Once he measures, he should say, "Blessed be He who sends blessing into this heap." If, however, he measures and then recites the prayer, it is a vain prayer – a blessing cannot be found in anything already weighed, anything already measured; anything already counted, but only in what is hidden from sight. *The word translated here as hidden, *b'asamekha* literally means, "in your barns;" the rabbis interpret it as deriving from the word *samui*, "hidden."

Commentary

Like all Hebrew words, *barukh* comes from a three letter root: *bet - reish - khuf*. The authors of the *Etz Hayim* commentary write: "'to bless' or to sanctify is to set something apart as special. It means partaking of a higher level of spiritual worth. The concept could be invoked only when there were human beings in the world." This is only partially true since God already invoked a blessing for fish and fowl on the fifth day of creation before humanity was created. It would appear that the word *barukh* can have different meanings. Sometimes a *b'rakhah* is a way of acknowledging the uniqueness of creation and the presence of God in universe; it is a way of expressing wonder. Sometimes a *b'rakhah* is a way of wishing others well. But what does it mean to be a blessing? The call for Abram to go forth adds a new dimension to the meaning of *b'rakhah*. God alone will no longer be the source of blessing. Abram will God's partner in bringing blessings the world. He will become the means through which people will bless one another.

But we also use this word when we speak of God. How can we 'bless' God? Certainly God is not in need of our blessing. The words *barukh attah* are sometimes translated as "Praised are You," though I prefer to read this statement not as an expression of wonder but as a statement about the nature of God: *Barukh*, like similar words in Hebrew such as *rachum* (merciful) and *chanun* (gracious), is an adjective. In effect, we are saying, "You are the Source of Blessing," just as God is a source of mercy and grace. Still, translations fail us; why are we called to praise God at the beginning of the morning and evening service in the *borkhu*?

In the sources above, the sages offer a variety of different interpretations of Abram's *b'rakhah*. Is it a material blessing? Is it present in the way Abram and his descendents will influence others? Does it have to do with God's protective presence? Or is the blessing a challenge; is Abraham called upon to 'be a blessing,' as Hirsch suggests? I find Rashi's interpretation particularly cogent; from this time forth, Abram's descendents are given the power to bless. We no longer look to God alone for blessings; we must create blessings in the world through our actions and words. What's more, the sages appeared to shy away from measuring physical, material blessings. Blessings are present not in what we can count or quantify but in the way we see the world. A rich

and a poor person both are called on to recite a *b'rakhah* and acknowledge God as a Source of Blessing. It is not what they have but how they see the world that is the source of blessing.

Questions to Ponder

1. How can we, “be a blessing” to others? What is it about the children of Abraham that might lead others to use as a way of invoking a blessing?
2. It has been suggested that the word *barukh* comes from the Hebrew root word *berekh*, which means knee. What is the connection between blessing, praise and the word knee?
3. A vain prayer is a term for a prayer for something that cannot be fulfilled. The classic example of this is the case of a person who sees smoke coming from his neighborhood – one should not pray that his house should not be on fire since the fire is obviously already burning. (On the other hand it would be appropriate to pray for the safety of ones family.) Why is it a vain blessing to pray for a blessing once you have already measured the grain? How does asking for a blessing before one counts the grain influence ones attitude toward it?
4. How do you understand the connection between God blessing human beings and our offering b'rakhot to God? How are these acts different and how are they the same?

Torah Table Talk is sponsored by the Oceanside Jewish Center in New York. For more information on TTT contact me at Haravmark@optonline.net. If you would like to subscribe to TTT please send an e-mail to Tabletalk@oceansidejewishcenter.org. To remove your address from this list, send a blank email to tabletalk-unsubscribe@oceansidejewishcenter.org. For an archive of TTT, go to <http://www.oceansidejewishcenter.org/rebmark/RabbiGreenspan.html>. To download TTT you need Adobe Acrobat Reader; <http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/readstep2.html>

*“All it takes to study Torah is an open heart,
a curious mind and a desire to grow a Jewish soul.”*

Copyright 2009 Rabbi Mark B Greenspan