

## Blessings and Curses: Outdated Theology?

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The woman in the hospital bed looked at me with distress. “Rabbi,” she asked, “What did I do to deserve this?”

“This,” was metastatic cancer, destined to take the young woman’s life. Her spiritual distress was based in theology we heard from the Torah tonight. We have all heard of, and many of us have read, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, by Rabbi Harold Kushner. Despite Rabbi Kushner’s title, the Torah suggests that bad things do not happen to good people, or at least not unless they have done something very bad. We read that blessings will come to those who perform God’s commandments. Curses will befall those who ignore the mitzvot.

That theology haunted the cancer patient. She had no trouble enumerating her sins. Even Moses had his failings, and she was no Moses. Had she contracted this horrible disease because of her misdeeds? Was her family suffering because of her wrongdoing? Would her punishment go even beyond her death? The Torah suggests that the answer to each of these wrenching questions is “yes.”

In the ancient world, this theology was comforting. As people confronted tragedy and disaster, logic offered them two choices: One possibility was that they lived in a world thoroughly out of control, with no order, with no God. The other option was to believe that God, who created us, remains in charge of the universe. Whatever happens is God’s will.

Ironically, people were comforted by the idea that they were the cause of their own suffering. They were frightened by the notion of a random universe, with nobody in charge. With God in control, even the most unspeakable tragedy could be re-branded: Nothing that happens is actually bad. If everything is God’s doing, and if God is good, then whatever happens must be good and just, even if we don’t understand the exact reason.

Many people in our modern world continue to embrace that biblical theology. We all know about houses of worship where the message is clear: Worship here, or else. Believe as we do, or you will be consigned to eternal hellfire. Repent, or face divine retribution.

Even some who reject such an oversimplified religion nevertheless cling to the notion that good will be somehow rewarded; and sin, punished. If there is no ultimate reward for goodness, they ask, why should anybody do what is right? If sinners do not suffer, and sin is fun – many sins are lots of fun, in the moment at least – why not ignore the mitzvot or any system of righteous behavior?

Jews have a harder time than most with this kind of theology, particularly after the Holocaust. Do we believe that our people was led to slaughter by the millions because of wrongs they had committed, as a punishment for sin against God?

Before we imagine Jews too smart or too good for such an idea, let me tell you about the Satmar Rebbe. The head of an ultra-Orthodox Hassidic sect, the Satmar Rebbe noted that the Holocaust began in Germany, the same place that Reform Judaism was founded. He reasoned that the Holocaust was God’s punishment upon the whole Jewish people for the dreadful sin of reforming Judaism.

The Satmar Rebbe's arrogance was overwhelming. How dare he, or anyone, presume to know the ways of God? The same is true for the televangelist or the extremist imam, speaking for God, consigning to the fiery furnace those they brand as heathens.

The theology of blessings and curses may be comforting to some. If we reflect, though, we will acknowledge that this biblical belief system leads to blaming victims for their own fate. If we are blessed or cursed, in this world or the next, for our righteousness or our sinfulness, then whatever befalls us is our own doing. Carried to its logical extreme, this theology can lead a zealot to carry out what he or she arrogantly believes to be God's will, like Major Nidal Hassan, the terrorist of Fort Hood.

So what's the alternative?

Some would reject this week's Torah reading and its theology altogether. The potential for harm is great, they would say, and they aren't wrong. To be sure, some good actions do have positive results; and some sins are punished. For example, if we eat right and exercise, we are more likely to live longer, healthier lives. If we are unfaithful in marriage, we are likely to destroy our lives and our families. But these rewards and punishments occur naturally. They do not represent divine retribution or reward. The same might be said of the positive and negative results of other people's actions. If one person drives drunk, an innocent person may be killed. If a scientist discovers an effective treatment for a dreaded disease, lives may be saved. The Holocaust is the quintessential example: Hitler and his accomplices caused death and suffering. Neither God nor the victims was at fault.

Rejecting the theology of blessings and curses also means accepting that some positive and negative events occur randomly, with no particular cause, or at least not one that can be attributed to a divine being, to righteousness or sinfulness. That young woman with cancer was tragically unfortunate. And the same would be true in reverse for those who escape her terrible fate.

This utter rejection of divine blessings and curses is tempting. Modern. Rational.

But Rabbi Kushner suggests a middle course. When bad things happen to good people, and they do, Rabbi Kushner rejects the notion that God is the cause. At the same time, he writes that God is not "exempt from the struggle."

God has created the world in such a way that we all experience the very greatest blessing. We also encounter the most horrific tragedy. Some of these we bring on ourselves, or are caused by the wrongdoing of others. Therefore, in a this-worldly way, we may endorse the theology of blessings and curses. Even still, we may protest that God's creation includes evildoing. And why, why, the random blows of nature?

As the High Holy Days approach, we are taught to make ourselves all too aware of the ways in which our negative actions do bring curse, upon ourselves and others, upon the Earth and upon God.

We are also aware that our goodness can bring blessing, and we are grateful to God that we have that power.

On other occasions, we look to God, not for an explanation, but for comfort. Rabbi Kushner imagines that, when tragedy befalls us, God weeps with us. Even if God does not cause the difficulties in our lives, God knows our distress. God can help us turn some curses into blessing, or to create a blessing even in the midst of sadness. And when tragedy strikes, and no good can come of it, God hears our prayers and even our protests.

Thankfully, we also experience blessing that rains down upon us from we know not where. Let us be grateful for every blessing in our lives and thank God for creating the world in such a way that such gifts are possible. Let those occasions multiply in the new year soon to begin. And let us ever celebrate those blessings, faithful that God rejoices with us.

Amen.