

Curses

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The famous or infamous Israeli secular left wing politician, Yossi Sarid, wrote an article in the Israeli paper Haaretz (3/22/09) in response to a report that a prominent Israeli Sephardi rabbi had cursed him. In the words of his article, the important rabbi said, "After the reading of the Megilla on Purim, the names of the wicked and the righteous are mentioned; the righteous – Esther and Mordechai – are mentioned favorably, and the wicked are mentioned and cursed: Damned be Haman, damned be Yossi Sarid."

Actually the word used, arrur, means "cursed" rather than "damned"; but that is a minor refinement reflecting the greater Christian cultural influence on either Yossi Sarid or his translator. Naturally, Yossi said it was like water off a duck's back. It is a sad reflection on the primitive state of current Judaism as well as a salutary proof that a curse is meaningless and pointless (unless one is so naive or credulous as to think that nasty words have any effect).

To quote Mr Sarid's article:

Just before Purim nine years ago, Yaakov's father, gave a similar instruction after I refused, as minister of education, to pay coalition prostitution fees to the Shas party. That was when he said: "When reading the Scroll of Esther, and when you say 'cursed be Haman', say also, 'cursed be Yossi Sarid'... God will let his blood be on his own head, and will impose on him the vengeance that was wreaked on Haman."

The vengeance that was wreaked on Haman? As everybody knows, they hanged his 10 sons on trees even though they had done no wrong. But, oy! I do not have so many children for a lynching – or for child allowances.

These are your shepherds, Israel – Ovadia for Shas and Yaakov for national unity, as he is one of the heads of "the Council of Rabbis of the Torah and the Land" to which the National Union party pays allegiance.

The two parties of these two spiritual leaders will now be the mainstays on which Benjamin Netanyahu's government is based, and they are even preparing an independent education ministry for them. Only a chosen people can permit itself such cuckoos in the nest of government.

Divine curses might give one cause for concern, but the Bible does use "popular" language; so, like Maimonides, I suspect they were intended to deal with a specific audience at a specific time. But that humans could have the

power to randomly condemn a human being, without due process, simply by uttering words or spells, is reminiscent of medieval witchcraft and I can only understand its power as auto-suggestive. Superstitious folk think that if they break a mirror they will have bad luck and then every accident or event that happens during the day, that would normally not be noticed, takes on significance and is proof of the bad luck, so that it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Humans have believed in witchcraft all through history but that does not mean that curses have intrinsic power or effectiveness.

I can understand the positive impact of a really good man, a Tsaddik, and his encouragement and "blessing". Though too many of those who masquerade as Tsaddikim nowadays are charlatans. And the proof is that a genuine Tsaddik would not go round using hurtful language so cavalierly.

I have been cursed so many times by former pupils, parents, congregants, and just plain nutcases that I am amazed to find myself at my age healthy, happy, and thankful to the Almighty for all the wonderful things I have been privileged to enjoy and experience. One curse I recall delivered in Yiddish that I should suffer an agonizing death and be buried alive at an early age has so far neither transpired nor has it cost me a moment's distress. So if anyone out there feels like giving me a good curse, and it will make them feel any better, then please, be my guest.

Of course it will be argued that I should not "open my mouth to the Satan" nor give the Evil Eye (another mythical imposter) a chance to get me, and I guess it is possible that tomorrow a crazy cab driver might mow me down as I return from a heavenly performance at the Met—but, I'll worry about that when it happens, just as I will worry about burning in Purgatory if that situation arises.

No dear readers, I do not give a fig for any of these dangers. I believe them to be totally and completely silly. I am only sorry that so many people I have met do not feel the same way and suffer agonies over perceived curses they suffer from.

Of course unspeakable things happen, horrible things, diseases of all sorts; but no one can show that they are the result of curses. My father always used to quote to us Numbers 23:23, "There is no magic in Jacob and no witchcraft in Israel." Our actions determine, in as far as anything in life can be determined. The saints who died in the Holocaust were not cursed but simply caught up in the awesome great mill of life that turns first one way then the other and is powered by human criminals as well as good people, by actions and error, not random words or curses flying in the wind.

The Bible says, "Those who bless you will be blessed and those who curse you will be cursed", and I take that to mean that those who wish evil will be hoist with their own petard and conversely those who help and praise others are more likely to be dealt kindly with in return. God's curses in the Bible are ways of saying we will face the consequences of our own actions as individuals or as a nation. They are poetic, not legal or scientific statements. Blessings are expectations and wishes, and so are curses. But the determining factor is who you are and what you do.

We are commanded to be careful how we use language. Words can, of course, hurt. Curses are ways witchdoctors, or rabbis behaving like them, exercise power over the naive, of which there are far too many. The only response is, like Yossi Sarid's, to laugh it off and get on with one's life. All exorcisms and lifting of curses I am happy to carry out on your behalf will be free of charge.