

Blessed Comings and Goings

In this reflection we explore the rabbinic thought patterns concerning a single verse of Scripture:

“Blessed shall you be in your comings and blessed shall you be in your goings” (Deut. 28:6).

Intrigued by the intricacies of the text and its bounty of meanings, the rabbis of old saw something odd about this verse. Surely, they reasoned, the word order should be reversed. On a typical day, a person is seen going out from home and only later coming back in. The text should read, ‘Blessed shall you be in your goings and your comings’. What is the Torah saying through this choice of wording? Ponder this with a friend. How do you reply?

In the Talmud, Rabbi Yohana interprets our verse like this: “Just as your coming into this world was without sin, so be your going out of the world without sin.”¹ In other words, the blessings relate to the experience of birth and death, entering and departing the world.

Convinced? Not all the sages are. Yes, the explanation holds in the case of an individual, but this text is addressed to a whole nation.

Astruc offers an alternative view.² In blessing the people, Moses was assuring them of divine guidance as they entered the promised land. But he was also reassuring them that this blessing would never leave them. Even if they sinned and went out (were exiled) from the land as a result of sin, the Lord would never abandon them. The covenant would remain. Do you find this view more plausible?

Yet even Astruc’s creative interpretation poses difficulties for the attentive reader. Look at the context of this verse. The blessings listed have a concrete, material quality to them. They are about finding comfort in plentiful crops, a safe home, a healthy family. Thus the Midrash³ may offer a better explanation: our verse refers to a person’s daily business affairs—“your coming in for business and your going out for business”—or one’s worldly affairs in general.

Wait a minute! Is the Torah suggesting a crass ‘God will make you rich’ theology? No. Listen to what the *Ha’amek Davar* has to say:

“You will be blessed in all these material things when you go into them and leave them. They will not defile or seduce you; but the blessing of the Lord will stand by you to enable you to overcome all temptation.”⁴

So then, the blessing is not wealth, but virtue. As you strive to be faithful, the Lord will help you to be faithful, even amidst those worldly dealings which can threaten to distract you from your focus on the Lord. For the Lord has made you a holy people, and your relationship with God permeates every moment of your life.

Note the variety of interpretations arising from a single verse of Torah. Where is your own voice in this conversation? On what points do you agree or disagree with the sages? Prayerfully, and creatively attentive to the text, what insights can you offer? •

1. Bava Mezia, 107.

2. Solomon Astruc, late 14th c. Spain.

3. Midrash Devarim, VII, 5.

4. *Ha’amek Davar* is a commentary by a Torah scholar of Belarus known as the *Netziv* (1817-1893).

Bibliography: Eskenazi and Weiss, eds., *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary* (New York, 2008); Freedman and Simon, eds., *Midrash Rabbah* (London/New York, 1983); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Devarim* (New York: Lambda, 1996); Scripture: NJPS.

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