BS”D

*Parshas Toldos*

In their life, the wicked first have rest and peace, but at the end suffer when they have to face the fact that they lived a meaningless life.

“Blessed Are Those Who Bless You”

By Rabbi Chaim Zev Citron

The blessings Yitzchak gives Yaakov start with the words, “And may G-d give you of the dew of the heavens and the fat of the earth, much grain and wine.”

Rashi comments on the words, “of the dew of the heavens:” “It means in the literal sense. There are many different interpretations in Aggadic Midrash.”

Why does Rashi have to tell us there are Midrashic explanations? If they are necessary for the understanding of the Biblical text, Rashi should quote them. If they are unnecessary, why does Rashi even mention them?

The Maharal explains that first Rashi tells us that Yitzchak’s blessing was to be taken literally. Dew from the heavens, fat of the earth, grain and wine. But surely the blessing must have a deeper spiritual meaning as well! Rashi indicates this by referencing the Midrash. It is not necessary for Rashi to give specific spiritual interpretations. It suffices to say there are many levels of spiritual meaning in the blessings besides the simple one. For details, you can check the Midrash.

I’ll cite the interpretations from the Midrash:

The dew of the heavens refers to the manna which was known as “the bread of the heavens.” The fat of the earth refers to the well of Miriam which accompanied the Jews through the desert and from which a stream of water emerged. The water contained varieties of fatty fish, thus the fat of the earth. The grain refers to the young men of Israel, for they study Torah which is compared to grain. The wine refers to the young women of Israel who sing praises to G-d.

One more interpretation: “Dew of the heaven” is the written Torah whose words are given from Heaven. “Fat of the earth” is the Mishnah (the Hebrew letters in fat are the same as the letters in Mishnah: Sh, M, N, H), for the halacha is decided here on earth by men. The grain is the Talmud, the dialogue and discussion leading to the final halacha, which is like grain, the staff of life. The wine is the spiritual part of Torah, the Aggadah, that brings joy to the heart.

The Midrash goes on to explain the difference between Yitzchak’s blessing in which he said, “Cursed be those who curse you. Blessed be those who bless you,” and Bilaam’s blessing in which he, said, “Blessed be those who bless you, cursed be those who curse you.”

The enemy, like Bilaam, starts with a blessing but ends with a curse. This is the way of the wicked. In their own lives, first they have rest and peace, but at the end they suffer.

One who loves, like Yitzchak, starts with a curse but ends with a blessing. This parallels their own lives. They start with suffering and end with peace.

I think that the idea that the righteous suffer in the beginning does not necessarily refer only to actual suffering. A righteous person knows that to accomplish great things, he must work hard, be self-disciplined, and forgo an indulgent lifestyle. Only by this sacrifice, this “suffering” as it were, will he be able to achieve a meaningful and fulfilled life. The ultimate result of this approach is “peace at the end.”

Whereas the wicked want “rest and peace” from the start. They indulge in all their whims. They don’t practice restraint and self-discipline. They enjoy themselves for the short while. But ultimately they must face the fact that they lived a meaningless life of no genuine accomplishment. This is the “suffering at the end,” the dead end of a wasted life.

The Midrash continues. If a non-Jew says a blessing to G-d, you should respond Amen. This is, in fact, the halacha. Since the non-Jew is reciting the text of a blessing, we may assume he is sincerely blessing the true G-d and we should respond appropriately with Amen.

Now if the non-Jew blesses you with G-d’s name, one opinion holds you should not respond with Amen. We don’t want to acknowledge that his blessing us has any power.

However, Rabbi Tanchuma said that you should respond with Amen. For does not the Torah say, “Those who bless you shall be blessed?” A blessing of anyone should be acknowledged. Even an idolater who wishes you well is doing a positive thing and is rewarded by Hashem.

The Midrash continues with a story:

Rabbi Yishmael was blessed by an idolater. He responded, “The response to your blessing has already been stated (in the Torah).” Another time an idolater cursed him. Rabbi Yishmael responded in the same manner: “The response to your blessing has already been stated.”

Rabbi Yishmael was asked, how come he responded the same way to a blessing and to a curse? He replied, “My response is what the Torah said: ‘Those who bless you shall be blessed, those who curse you shall be cursed.”

We must live righteous lives. We must be worthy of receiving the Divine blessing, the blessing that Yitzchak gave Yaakov. We must realize that we must sacrifice our own pettiness and self-centeredness to be worthy of the blessing “at the end.” And we must acknowledge others who get this message and who appreciate it and who bless us. They, too, are worthy of the A-lmighty’s blessing.