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[Rabbi Edward Bernstein](#)

Rabbi, Temple Torah, Boynton Beach, FL, GreenFaith Fellow

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Blessings Triumph Over Curses in Israel

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If [Dr. Itzhak Haviv](#), an oncologist at Bar Ilan University ever wins the Nobel Prize for Medicine, I can say I met him way back when. I can say the same thing for Dr. Hanna Alonim, Director of the [Mifne Center for the Early Intervention in the Treatment of Autism](#) for the Infant and the Family. These two path-breaking individuals were just two of the incredible people I met on my recent visit to Israel that concentrated on the Tfat-Hazor-Rosh Pinah region of the northern Galilee, partner region to the Jewish Federation of Palm Beach County that sponsored this tour for clergy.

I'll come back shortly to Dr. Haviv and Dr. Alonim because their respective stories are inspiring and indicative of the many praiseworthy things that are happening in Israel today. In the meantime, let me note that this week our Torah reading is Parashat Balak. The portion's namesake is the king of Moab who seeks to harm his ancestral cousins, the Israelites and deny them their place among the family of nations. Balak's ace-in-the-hole tactic is to hire Balaam, the most renowned wizard of the day, to go and curse the Israelites. Balaam's reputation is that anything out of his mouth comes true. So, Balak has great confidence that he will easily do away with the Israelites without expending much capital on warfare. Little does Balak know that every time Balaam goes forth to curse the Israelites, out of his mouth come blessings. The most famous of these blessings is the third, which is found at the opening of the Jewish prayer book: *Mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov, mishkenotecha Yisrael*, how good are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel (Numbers 24:5).

In his commentary in the Etz Hayim edition of the Torah, Rabbi Harold Kushner asks: "Why didn't Balak hire Balaam to bless his own people rather than to curse Israel (since 'whom you bless is blessed indeed,' 22:6)?"

This insight rings true today. There is no question that Israel faces great challenges in its constant struggle to achieve lasting peace with the Palestinians and its neighbors in the region. Israeli leaders have made mistakes, as in any country, and yet they are held accountable by their electorate, the vibrant free press, and a strong, independent judiciary. Israel has held fast to democracy even in the face of existential threats on a daily basis. Despite these facts, there are those in the world who pour energy and resources into cursing Israel rather than blessing its neighbors with encouragement to live in harmony with Israel. Alice Walker is the latest example of a respected intellectual who seeks to curse, rather than to bless. The author of the acclaimed novel, "The Color Purple," which did so much to open the eyes of America and the world to the evil of racial segregation in America, recently refused to allow her signature work to be translated into Hebrew so that it could be enjoyed by an Israeli audience seeking to be inspired by her story. Her absurd rationale is that Israel is guilty of apartheid both inside the Green Line and in the Occupied Territories and is therefore not worthy of a translation of her book. As [Rabbi Daniel Gordis writes](#), this is hate speech that should not be tolerated in intellectual circles.

I would love for Alice Walker to be like Balaam and offer blessings rather than curses. I think it would be better for everyone, including the Palestinians, whose cause she claims to champion, who would lead a dignified, prosperous life in the framework of a two-state solution. Fortunately, Israelis are not sitting and waiting for Alice Walker to change course. They are creating their own blessings, whether she or anyone else chooses to recognize them or not. In my recent visit, I was privileged to witness some of these blessings.

In visiting the Tzfat-Hazor-Rosh Pinah region, our group visited the brand new medical school in Tzfat operated by Bar Ilan University. It is the nation's fifth medical school and the first in the Galilee. In just one year of existence, it has grown by leaps and bounds and promises to be a great economic boon for the region that will create jobs for Jews and Arabs alike. In our visit, we were introduced to Dr. Yitzhak Haviv, a renowned oncologist. Born in Israel, he had gone abroad to serve in prestigious positions in Berkeley, Calif., and Melbourne, Australia. He decided to return to Israel and head a laboratory at its new medical school after turning down offers from Harvard and Cambridge. Why? Dr. Haviv told us that he was drawn to an opportunity to build a research department from the ground up. It wouldn't be afraid to think out of the box and explore new methodologies in fighting cancer. Dr. Haviv is renowned for bridging oncology research, the mapping of the human genome and the field of [personalized medicine](#). Too often, he says, clinical treatment of cancer relies on uniform methods of treatment when, in fact, each person is different. Dr. Haviv's pathbreaking methodology goes for the source of the cancer in ways not sufficiently advanced by other modes of therapy. He has saved numerous lives already, even some suffering advanced or rare cases of cancer, and promises to be at the forefront of major advances in his field for years to come.

Our visit at Mifne in Rosh Pinah was every bit as awe-inspiring. According to founder and director Dr. Hanna Alomim, most parents of autistic children say that their children seemed perfectly normal for their first two years or so until they started missing benchmarks in their development. Dr. Alonim says that, in fact, autism can be detected much earlier and that the earlier the detection the greater chance the child has for successful therapy and a mainstream lifestyle. Mifne (which means "turn") has

pioneered an innovative and holistic approach to autism treatment in which the child and his or her entire nuclear family take residence at the Mifne center for up to three weeks. The team of professionals are able to address simultaneously the varying needs of the child, the parents and the siblings. Hundreds of children from around the world from all backgrounds have benefitted from Mifne. The exporting of Mifne's methodology around the world has the potential to lead to great breakthroughs in curtailing the anguish that autism has wrought for our society over the last generation.

My recent exposure to Dr. Haviv and Dr. Alomim reinforced for me the blessings of the think-out-of-the-box mentality that is embraced in Israeli society (and extensively profiled in Dan Senor and Saul Singer's book, "[Start-Up Nation](#)"). There are those around the world who seek to curse and delegitimize Israel, much as Balak seeks to do in the biblical narrative. Rather than bemoan the state of the Jewish State as isolated and unappreciated, day after day ordinary Israelis are creating blessings on the ground that are improving lives for everyone of all stripes on our planet. After this most recent visit, I believe that in due time more and more people will defy the naysayers and say *Mah tovu ohalekha Yaakov*, how good are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel.

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