

To Offer and Receive Blessing : Parshat NASO 2020

There are times when we could all use a blessing – this is certainly one of those times. What a painful time in our world, as the pandemic continues, and in our country, as we are graphically reminded of the inequality and injustice that persists here. So, yes, we could all use some blessing. And at the center of this week’s parsha, Naso, we have one of the most magnificent blessings ever. Right in the midst of a series of unrelated, lengthy narratives, a few brief lines appear, what is known as *birkat kohanim* – the priestly blessing. These are some of the most enduring words in all of Torah. In five concise verses, we read:

“God spoke to Moses, saying, Speak to Aaron and to his sons, saying: This is how you shall bless the children of Israel. Say to them:

May God bless you and watch over you; May God’s face shine upon you and be gracious to you; May God’s face be lifted towards you and grant you peace.

They shall set my name on the children of Israel, and I shall bless them.”

Along with the *shema*, these are our most ancient words of prayer still used today. They are part of our daily prayers, and are traditionally used by parents to bless their children at the start of Shabbat on Friday nights, as well as for other special occasions, like a wedding.

Let’s take a brief tour through this passage, what it tells us about blessing and how we might use it.

The exquisitely structured prayer begins small and expands with each line, giving the sense of growing blessing - in Hebrew, it starts with 3 compact words, (*y’varachecha Adonai v’yishmerecha*) then it moves to 5 words (*Ya’er Adonai panav eilecha v’y’chuneka*) and finally to a crescendo of 7 words (*yeesa Adonai panav eilecha v’yasem lecha Shalom.*) These three brief lines contain 6 verbs – God is asked to bless, to protect, to shine light, to offer grace, to lift God’s face towards one, and then – for the ultimate gift which contains them all – to grant peace.

We notice something unusual in this blessing. Jewish prayer formulae are almost always composed in the plural, we Jews are relentlessly focused on community. This one is different. Even though the priests recited these words to large groups of people, the blessing is directed at individuals. It is written with the singular pronoun “you.” The 19th Century commentator known as the Netziv explains that the prayer asks that each person be granted blessings appropriate to his or her needs. We might draw from that the idea that Divine blessing is not generic – although there are overarching themes that we all share; at any given time, blessing is not about the same thing for everyone – rather it is personal to each person’s needs, dreams and yearnings. God cherishes each one of us as individuals, writes Rabbi Shai Held, and we pray for blessing accordingly.

So as the priests blessed the people in the ancient Temple courtyard, even as they received this blessing in a group, the singular pronouns suggest a hope that God would meet each individual, offering what that person needed of God's protection, light, grace and so on...

We see, then, a paradox. If we imagine that the blessings here are personalized, we note that the Priests are instructed to use a script, the same words for everyone, the same words that we use to this day. Why is that?

By giving a blessing script, the Torah emphasizes the fact that the priests are not the source of the blessing – they do not compose the words. The priests are only the conduits of blessing. Blessing comes from God, so people must use words authored by God. The Torah makes that clear in our parsha's postscript to the blessing – “Thus they (the priests) shall place My name on the people of Israel, and I myself will bless them.” God is the blesser. The words make certain that we remember that – with Adonai emphatically mentioned at the start of each line. Humans, no matter how powerful, are still humans. People are not God.

People are not God. And yet. And yet. Think about how this blessing is constructed. People address it to other people – may God bless you... we do not address God. Even the priests in the ancient ritual faced the people, not God. The priests faced the people, and to this day people face one another and say - May Adonai bless you and guard you. The ritual pulls the recipient into the moment. We are not spectators, watching the kohanim talk to God; or watching our parent ask God to bless us. Rather, one human being says to another: May God's face shine upon you. There is something very powerful about that 'you' – it is an I-thou moment.

And there is no doubt that even though the ultimate source of blessing may be the divine, people have been given the power to draw down that blessing. The Torah says it clearly: God says, “When the *kohanim* ask for my blessing, I myself will bless the people.” God *wants* to see people blessing each other. And we all want and need the power to bless.

In fact, think about how we have taken ownership of this blessing. In Torah times, it was only an elite, exclusive group – the *kohanim* – who were to offer this blessing. Over the centuries, this blessing has come to belong to any one of us who wants to bless: parents, *kohen* or not *kohen*, Jews and non-Jews, women or men, when we feel it is a moment that we want to ask blessing for another human being.

In his book, *7 Prayers that Can Change Your Life*, Leonard Felder suggests using this prayer to transform our anger or annoyance with another person, by quietly, mentally reciting this blessing towards them. I have tried this – and it works! In blessing practices used in meditation, these words are used to bless others and also oneself, in one's mind.

When we wish well for another person, when we ask God's blessing for them, we open ourselves to tolerance and to love. Might that change how we act towards one

another? What would a world look like in which people were always asking blessing for others, and doing it directly to their faces?

While blessing ultimately comes from God, we give it and receive it through other people. We do not create the gifts of the world, but we *do* find them and pass them on – to our children, to loved ones, to friends, to those celebrating special milestones – all those for whom we ask blessing through this prayer. God needs us to carry God's blessings into the world. It is not that we are 'merely conduits' of God's blessing; rather we have the awesome power to be the conduits of God's gifts in the world.

May the Holy One bless you and protect you
May the Holy One shine the Divine face upon you
and give you grace
May the Holy One lift up the Divine face towards you
and grant you wholeness and peace, Shalom.

Shabbat Shalom