

Parshat Nasso: Birkhat Kohanim

For me, one of the most special moments in the week takes place on a regular basis, each Friday night. The family is gathered together, just back from shul. We have sung "Shalom Aleichem" and "Eshet Chayil". And then, the children approach me (and in our family, they approach their mother too). For each one, I put my hands on their little head in time honoured fashion (remember Yaakov?) and I have the special privilege of giving my children a Bracha; the blessing of God. I - their father - become the vehicle for God's blessing to be bestowed upon my children. It is quite an incredible feeling and, somehow, despite the fact that it happens week after week, it never ceases to be an emotional, almost magical moment.

"Yevarechecha Hashem VeYishm'recha
- May God bless you and protect you!
May God's face shine towards you and deal kindly
and graciously with you!
May God turn his face to you and grant you peace!"
(Sefer Bamidbar 6:24-26)

Obviously, living in Israel, we are also privileged to experience this blessing on a daily basis at Shacharit. The origin of this blessing may be found in our parsha and it is here that we will begin our weekly investigation into the lines and pages of Torah.

THE PRIESTLY BLESSING

In the Torah, this blessing does not belong to parents and children at all. In the Torah this blessing is entrusted to the Kohanim. And in the Torah, this blessing is not an intimate family occasion but rather a blessing that takes place on the national stage; a very public event.

"The Lord spoke to Moses: Speak to Aharon and his sons: Thus shall you bless the Children of Israel. Say to them ; 'May God bless you and protect you.... ' Thus shall they link My name with the people of Israel, and I will bless them.'" (Sefer Bamidbar 6:22-27)

Let us begin with some questions. The text, the content, of the blessing is difficult to decipher. It contains three separate lines of blessing. Does each progressive line add something new? - and the blessings are phrased in the most general of terms. They are phrased without recourse to detail or specifics, they are most vague in nature.

But at a more philosophical level, we may pose a further point of inquiry. The Kohanim bless the nation of Israel on behalf of God; man blessing man for God. Why do we need to resort to this mechanism? Can we not receive God's blessing directly without the intervention of a human mediator? By the same token, we may ask the question as to whether it is the priests who bless Israel or whether it is God Himself who is bestowing the blessing.

WHOSE BLESSING?

The question that we have posed actually exposes a nagging ambiguity inherent in the very fabric of this short text. The Kohanim are instructed, "Thus shall you bless the Children of Israel" - indicating that it is the priests who are the source of the blessing. However, at the same time, the passage concludes with the phrase, "and I will bless them", clearly pointing to God as the One who issues the blessing. Who is the source of the blessing here?

The Rashbam states emphatically that the priests act only to induce, or encourage God's blessing. In reality however, it is God alone who blesses the nation.

"Thus shall you bless the Israelites: ... Do not bless them with your own personal blessing ... but PRAY TO ME THAT I SHOULD BLESS THEM ... and I will listen to your request precisely, as it states 'I will place my name on the Israelites'(v.37)"

For the Rashbam, the priestly blessing is the formula whereby man can petition God to bless Israel. The Abarbanel shares this approach. He wants to differentiate between the multiple usage of the word "bless" in this passage. He gives three possible applications of the term "blessing".

"Blessing' is a term with multiple meaning. Sometimes it refers to God's goodness towards His creations, as is stated, "And God blessed Abraham with everything" (Gen 24) in other places we talk of a blessing from man to God in the sense of song and praise, for example "And David blessed the Lord" (I Chronicles 29) and sometimes we talk about a blessing from one person to another which is not the bestowing of goodness nor praise and thanks but rather a prayer and a plea for mercy on behalf of the recipient of the blessing that God may bestow His blessings upon him.

In this instance, the verse states, "Speak to Aharon and his sons: Thus shall you bless the Children of Israel. Say to them". Aharon and his sons should not think that they are the ones who are bestowing the blessing.... for they are doing nothing other than issuing a prayer to God that He bless Israel. Hence it uses the phrase - "say to them" - they are merely praying on their behalf, nothing else."

Man can activate, act as a catalyst for the divine blessings, but ultimately, the blessing of man can be no more than a wish or a prayer.

THE ONLY SOURCE OF BLESSING

Hirsch (see Horeb #684) goes even further. He sees laws of the priestly blessings as a call to contemplation.

"The Kohanim ... should bless Israel. How? They should declare that the Name of the One and only God hovers over them, that everything streams forth from Him and that He is the Only Source of all blessing.... Hence it is not the Kohen who blesses or has the power to bless; it is God that blesses. But

Birkhat Kohanim ... taken to heart by the community of Israel is then a prerequisite of the blessing being granted by God. God blesses him who expects the blessing from Him only. Do you wish for a blessing from God? Then think of Him as the Only Source of blessing, and He will bless you."

Demonstrating this lesson, (that the priests are not the source of the blessings) Rav Hirsch notes that the priests may not utter the blessing of their own accord. Rather, a regular Israelite must read the blessings to them, word by word, and they reciprocate repeating each phrase. This demonstrates that the priests are empowered by the community to utter the blessings as God's representatives, but that they are not its source.

But we may still be puzzled. Why does God not bless the nation directly? Why must humans activate the divine blessing? Maybe, we might suggest, together with Hirsch, the following idea, following the order of phrases within the verses.

1. Thus shall you bless the Children of Israel. Say to them:
2. The threefold blessing
3. Thus shall they link My name with the people of Israel
4. and I will bless them

The priests are to bless the people by putting into the public consciousness the notion of God as a source of all goodness. The priests "say" this to the Israelites and thereby "link" God's name with the people. Once this link, this realisation on the part of the people, is established; once the nation understands that their fortunes are intimately tied up with God, then, and only then, will God issue the blessings for the nation. In this mode of thinking, the priestly blessing serves a preparatory cognitive function. It establishes in the minds of the people their connection with God. This is the prerequisite to God's blessings.

[Note: This issue can be raised in every situation of a human blessing in the Bible. Whenever a human is given the power to bless or curse; Abraham, Jacob, Balaam; how does it work? Is it man's blessing or is it God's? Does God let their blessings or curses work without intervention? Why would God send a message to stop Bilaam - Why would God not just ignore his curses failing to activate them? Why would God ever want to give a human being the power to bless and curse? Clearly, every situation must be examined with proper reference to the relevant textual material and context.]

A THREEFOLD BLESSING

Let us now turn our attention to the content of this blessing. It is clear that we have three distinct phrases. We will analyse these phrases in the few lines at our disposal examining, with the assistance of the classical commentaries, the language, and thereby the nature of this blessing and what it means in real terms.

The first phrase:

"May God bless you and protect (lit. keep) you!

Rashi comments:

"MAY GOD BLESS YOU: that your assets be increased. AND PROTECT YOU: that criminals not

come and steal your wealth. A person who gives a gift ... cannot ensure that it will be protected from other people; if he is robbed of his gift what good will it serve? But God is the giver and the protector."

According to Rashi (Ibn Ezra and Seforno follow the same approach), this is a blessing of material wealth and God ensures that the wealth will not just be granted but will also be retained. But the Ha'emek Davar, in a psychologically powerful comment, sees a different meaning to this blessing:

"MAY GOD BLESS YOU: This blessing is directed at Everyman, giving him the blessing that he needs; ... the Torah scholar for his learning, the businessman for his financial success. This is a general blessing that every person should receive a boost and addition to what they have already.

AND PROTECT YOU: Because every blessing needs protection lest it become a trap for a person. A Torah scholar needs protection from pride, haughtiness and bringing God's name into disrepute etc. The entrepreneur needs guardianship so that his wealth not bring him evil... every area of blessing has a requisite protection."

The Ha'emek Davar is different to Rashi. Rashi spoke about material gain and the loss of that material advantage bestowed by God. Wealth can be stolen, gifts can be lost, thus God will protect them. But the Ha'emek Davar sees things in a wider perspective. The blessing might be one of intellectual brilliance, musical talent, an artistic eye, an uncanny business sense, a creative inventive mind. In every walk of life we can be blessed. But every blessing brings potential pitfalls. Money can be a blessing but it can become an obsession. A musical talent can delight hearts worldwide, and can also lead to the heights of arrogance. A creative mind can solve the worlds problems, but creativity must be tempered with a practical approach.

Thus we ask God for both blessing and protection. Not protection from loss of the blessing, but protection from the side effects of the very blessing that we have been so graciously granted!

THE FACE OF GOD

The next two blessings talk about God's face shining towards us, turning in our direction, giving us peace. The commentators attempt to denote a progression:

Nechama Leibowitz notes how even the length of the verses indicate an upward progression, a sense of growth, with the first line containing 3 words, the next, 5 words and the final verse 7 words.

Seforno talks of a progression from material blessings, through Torah and spirituality, to the sublime life of the world to come. But it is clear that the pinnacle of this blessing is peace (indeed the blessing for peace follows on immediately after the priestly blessing in the Synagogue service.) After describing the gifts of God's closeness to man, his response to human prayer, his merciful disposition towards the nation of Israel, the Ha'emek Davar turns to the final phrase:

"AND HE WILL GRANT YOU PEACE: After all the blessings we are blessed with the element which holds it all together. Without a sense of

peace, there can no genuine pleasure from any blessing.”

THE PRIESTLY ROLE: SEFER BAMIDBAR VERSUS VAYIKRA

Last week we spoke of a shift in focus as we begin the book of Bamidbar (Sefer Bamidbar). We proposed that the Torah adopts a wider scope, telling the story of the entire nation rather than focusing on the Sanctuary or the legal codes of Judaism. To that end we noted how the leaders here are the Princes, administrative representatives of the tribes, rather than the priests that seemed in control in Vayikra. We noted how the Torah organises the entire camp of Israel, getting prepared for the conquest of Canaan and the statehood that would follow.

Our parsha continues this theme, in two ways. First, a glance at the end of our parsha will tell the story of “the day that the Sanctuary was completed... and dedicated.” (7:1) What is the ceremony of dedication that is told here? It is a list of the gifts presented by the tribal princes, the political leadership. (You will note, no doubt, that Chapter 7 is a rather repetitive list of the gifts of each leader. It is repetitive because every prince presented an identical offering. In a dramatic demonstration of unity, sweeping one-upmanship under the carpet, the leaders of the nation decided to bring their gifts on the ceremonial opening of the tabernacle, without a sense of competition or rivalry. They consulted and each decided to bring the same gift. In this way, there was no friction, no desire for personal or tribal supremacy, but simply a clear desire for national unity.)

This control of the princes, the political leadership, is in stark contrast to the dedication ceremony as described in Vayikra. There, the dedication ceremony is described from the perspective of the Temple service. The sacrifices are enumerated, the precise service is described in awesome detail. The major figures are Moses, Aaron and the priests.

What is the difference? Simply this: That different books of the Bible have different agendas, a different emphasis, a new story to tell. Whereas Vayikra begins with a focus on the workings of the Tabernacle, Sefer Bamidbar tells the story of the nation. In both accounts of the dedication of the Sanctuary, the ceremony reaches a climax with the revelation of God (see Lev. 9:33-34 and Sefer Bamidbar 7:89), but the process to that divine appearance is very different in each case. In Vayikra, it is the story of the sacrificial rite. In Sefer Bamidbar it is national togetherness.

(Note: I am not claiming that there are contradictions between the books. Rather, I am suggesting - in the spirit of the teachings of Rav Mordechai Breuer - that each book emphasises a particular dimension of the same story. Both accounts of the Tabernacle dedication happened, but the Torah chooses to separate the selfsame event and divide it into two stories. Each story has a different tone and consequently, each account finds itself in a different book of the Torah.)

A NEW IMAGE

Following from this, we might propose that the role of the priest as described in our Parsha is very different from that which we have seen until now. We are accustomed to an image of a priest as a functionary in the Tabernacle, involved

with the sacrifices, diagnosing ritual impurity (eg. Biblical leprosy) and generally involved with the sacred realm of the holy. This is the view from Vayikra.

But here in Bamidbar, we see a new emphasis in the role of the priest. In our parsha, the priest brings God to the people, not just within the Tabernacle, but rather he aims to take God from the Sanctuary into the camp. With the priestly blessings, the priest is the medium through which the divine blessing is bestowed upon all Israel. (And note the difference in the content of the priestly blessing here as opposed to Vayikra; see Rashi on Lev. 9:23 and the Temple orientated blessing there.) Earlier in the parsha, we see the role of the priest in restoring harmony between husband and wife in the event of a marital dispute. Bamidbar lists other ways in which the priest enters the societal structure (see 18:8-20) outside their strict Temple-ritual role. It might be that the priestly blessing, where the nation and the priest intone alternately the blessings of God, represent from the vantage point of the nation, a true meeting point between the God and the nation. It is the priest who serves that role.

Shabbat Shalom.