

Naso: The Priestly Benediction

במדבר ו׳:כ״ב-ז׳:א׳

(כב) וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: (כג) דַּבֵּר אֶל־אַהֲרֹן וְאֶל־בָּנָיו לֵאמֹר כֹּה תְבָרְכוּ
אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אָמֹר לָהֶם: {ס} (כד) יְבָרְכֶךָ יְהוָה וְיִשְׁמְרֶךָ: {ס} (כה)
יָאֵר יְהוָה | פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וַיְחַנְּךָ: {ס} (כו) יִשָּׂא יְהוָה | פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וְיִשֶׁם לְךָ
שְׁלוֹם: {ס} (כז) וְשָׂמוּ אֶת־שְׁמִי עַל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֲנִי אֲבָרְכֶם: {ס} (א)
וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם כָּלֹת מִשָּׁה לְהַקְיִם אֶת־הַמִּשְׁכָּן וַיִּמְשַׁח אֹתוֹ וַיְקַדֵּשׁ אֹתוֹ וְאֶת־כָּל־כֵּלָיו
וְאֶת־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וְאֶת־כָּל־כֵּלָיו וַיִּמְשַׁחֵם וַיְקַדֵּשׁ אֹתָם:

Numbers 6:22-7:1

(22) יהוה spoke to Moses: (23) Speak to Aaron and his sons: Thus shall you bless the people of Israel. Say to them:

(24) יהוה bless you and protect you!

(25) יהוה deal kindly and graciously with you!

(26) יהוה bestow [divine] favor upon you and grant you peace! (27) Thus they shall link My name with the people of Israel, and I will bless them. (1) On the day that Moses finished setting up the Tabernacle, he anointed and consecrated it and all its furnishings, as well as the altar and its utensils. When he had anointed and consecrated them,

Y'varech'cha Adonai v'yishm'recha.

May God bless you and keep you.

Ya-eir Adonai panav eilecha vichuneka.

May God's light shine upon you, and my God be gracious to you.

Yisa Adonai panav eilecha v'yaseim l'cha shalom.

May you feel God's presence within you always, and may you find peace.

~Translation from Mishkan T'filah

Numbers 6:22-27

(22) The Eternal spoke to Moses: (23) Speak to Aaron and his sons: Thus shall you bless the people of Israel. Say to them:

(24) The **Eternal** bless you and protect you!

(25) The **Eternal** deal kindly and graciously with you!

(26) The **Eternal** bestow favour upon you and grant you peace!

(27) Thus they shall link My name with the people of Israel, and I, I will bless them.

ויקרא ט':כ"ב

(כב) וישא אהרן את ידיו אל העם ויברכם וירד מעשת החטאת והעלה והשלים:

Leviticus 9:22

(22) Aaron lifted his hands toward the people and blessed them; and he stepped down after offering the sin offering, the burnt offering, and the offering of well-being.

II Samuel 6:18

(18) When David finished sacrificing the burnt offerings and the offerings of well-being, he blessed the people in the name of the LORD of Hosts.

Each of its three verses contain two blessings, yet the verses expand in length from three to five to seven words, suggesting that God's blessing expands.

In 1979, archeologists discovered in Jerusalem two small silver scrolls dated to the late 7th or early 6th century B.C.E., inscribed with a text nearly identical to

the Priestly Blessing. Although their function remains unknown, these silver scrolls provide the earliest known parallel to a biblical text and probably served as protective amulets.

~The Torah: A Women's Commentary, p. 829

The first blessing is material, the second spiritual, the third combines both.

~N. Leibowitz

"May God bless you," with possessions; "and protect you," from these possessions possessing you. May God guard you from sin and shield you from all destructive influences that so often follow in the wake of earthly prosperity.

~J. H. Hertz

Shalom has a much wider meaning [than abstinence from strife] and involves prosperity, good health, wholeness, and completeness in every way.

~N. H. Snaith

(collected from Gleanings in The Torah: A Modern Commentary, p. 944)

In prevailing Ashkenazic practice of the Orthodox, the blessings are pronounced only on the holy days. Those men whose families have by name or tradition preserved the memory of their priestly status leave the service in order to wash themselves or be assisted in the washing by members of Levitical families. When they return they mount the rostrum (which used to be called *duchan*). They cover themselves with their prayer shawls so that they might concentrate on the holiness of the moment and also so that the congregation not be distracted by looking at their faces and by seeing them as people they know in everyday life, rather than as representatives of an ancient clan. They lift their hands and spread their fingers to create a simile of the Hebrew letter Ψ (*shin*, the first letter of *Shaddai*, Almighty). The benediction is then intoned in a special sing-song that is meant to impress the listeners with the awesomeness of the moment.

~The Torah: A Modern Commentary, p. 940

QUESTION: What are your reflections on this ritual? Have you ever experienced it yourself?

May God bless and keep you always
May your wishes all come true
May you always do for others
And let others do for you
May you build a ladder to the stars
And climb on every rung
And may you stay
Forever young...

~Forever Young, by Bob Dylan (aka Robert Allen Zimmerman)

QUESTION: What does it mean to be one who offers blessing?

Rashi says something that may be helpful here: saying to them...this is a full (spelling, indicating:) do not bless them in haste, nor in hurried excitement, but with full consciousness (*kavannah*), and with a whole heart.

Rashi believes that the priests were commanded to have the proper reverence as well as the proper wording. Perhaps then we can say that the priests were chosen not only as vessels of blessing, but also as role models of caring for the people. Maybe God didn't need the priests to deliver a blessing, maybe God needed the *kohanim* (priests) to show the other Israelites what it meant to be reverent and loving, to wish the best for someone else, to pray for another with a "whole heart."

In other words, God did not want these ritual leaders to have Divine powers, but rather, a full humanity — and maybe that's why these words still move us today.

~RABBI NEAL J.

LOEVINGER, <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/human-vessels-for-blessing/>

The verses that surround the priestly blessing (vv. 22, 27) raise important questions: Why does God dictate to the priests the exact formula they are to use in blessing the people? And why does God emphasize after dictating the words that "I myself will bless them"?

The answer to both questions is the same: The Torah wants to underscore the fact that the priests are not the source of blessing. They are, rather, its conduits. "The blessing issues solely from [God]; the priests' function is to channel it." (Bible Scholar Jacob Milgrom) The same point is driven home by the (syntactically unnecessary) repetition of God's name (YHWH, "the Lord") as the beginning of each line of the formula—these are actions that God and God alone will perform. To imagine that the priests are themselves the source of blessing, or to assume that they have some mysterious capacity to guarantee it, is to expose them to the ever-present danger of grandiosity—and worse, it is to open the door to exploitation of the weak and vulnerable by those believed to have magic powers at their disposal.

~Rabbi Shai Held, *The Heart of Torah*, Vol 2, p. 104

And when we bless others with these words, the place in which we find ourselves becomes a holy place. We learn this lesson in the very next verse, when Moses completes the Tabernacle. Ibn Ezra connects these verses, noting, "For on the day that Aaron raised his hands toward the people and blessed them, the dedication of the Tabernacle took place." Only after the people have been blessed could the structure that allowed for God to dwell among them be complete—the blessing allows for the dedication, and in essence is the way through which the dedication begins. This teaches a great lesson: holy community must precede holy space. At the same time that humanity is given the power to offer blessings, humanity is also given the additional power to transform ordinary places into holy ones. Sanctity is a matter of human declaration. The power is in our hands.

~ELISA F.

KOPPEL, <https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/torah-commentary/blessing-faces-and-places>

Notes from Rabbi Rick Jacobson's podcast...

Naso - to lift up. Counting the leaders of the ancient Israelites. Lifting their heads - to help them see what might be possible. Naso connects to "yisa"

Sneezes - bless you. we don't think about that. How does a person bless another person? Is it the words we speak or a formula we say?

priests recite this blessing as part of the ritual service of the people

progression - 3 words, 5 words, 7 words - symmetry

We say this at Friday night dinner

Is this the only way to bless others? It's not just the words we say.

Shavuot - story: great Reb Zusya - going to spend Shavuot in the town of the Maggid of Mezerich. on the journey, he gets distracted, and wanders off the road into the forest. "God, give me for just one hour - the power of the ancient priests to bless those around me" He felt the power - but no one was there - trying to find someone. Hour is over and the spiritual energy leaves his body - didn't have time to get to Mezerich, goes to a tavern - going to have to spend the holiday there with a couple he doesn't know. As he sees the couple - they don't know anything about Shavuot. He brings joy and song and teaches them into the night. I didn't have the power to bless - but what did I just spend the day doing? I brought joy, hope, learning to others.

<https://reformjudaism.org/podcasts/other-hand-ten-minutes-torah/other-hand-ten-minutes-torah-naso-what-blessing>

Using traditional prayer therefore requires us to bring meaning to the sounds we utter. That meaning can be on the emotional level or the cognitive one, or a combination of both. This is not merely a question of understanding Hebrew. Even if one understands the language, words can be meaningless if they are recited totally by rote or with no attempt to understand them. The more we understand the words and what lies behind them, the greater the opportunity to use them well.

Prayer requires *kavana*, which implies not only concentration but meaning and intention in expressing ourselves before God. The word *kavana* basically

means “to aim.” There must be intent in whatever we say, an aiming toward closeness to God.

What is needed, therefore, is a synthesis of the old and the new. The old is the received text (the *keva*), the words so many others have said and still say. The new is the personal feelings and the individual meaning, which changes every time we say these words, if we say them with fervor and intention, if they are accompanied by *kavana*.

Rabbi Reuven

Hammer, <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/fixed-prayer-and-spontaneity/>

My favorite interpretation comes from Rabbi Naphtali Zevi Yehudah Berlin’s “*Ha’amek Davar*.” He suggests that the blessing is vague so that it might convey “whatever is appropriate for each person to be blessed with.” Likewise, each person should be blessed according to “everything that is in need of blessing, protection from whatever causes trouble” (“*Ha’amek Davar*” on Numbers 6:24-26)

Midrash Tanhuma imagines God telling the *kohanim*, “From the beginning I have blessed My people; from now on the blessings are transmitted to you. You are to bless My children.” This transition from divine blessing to human blessing began when Isaac and Jacob blessed their sons (*Tanhuma Nasso* 8-9). We can use this argument to give *all* humans the power and permission to bless each other.

~Rabbi Leah

Berkowitz, <https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/torah-commentary/power-and-permission-bless>

QUESTION: What blessing do you need to hear this morning? What blessing can you offer this group?