

Parashat Naso

Richard Elliott Friedman

A new form of expression that enters biblical narrative in the book of Numbers is prayer. In earlier books there have been depictions of individuals in prayer, but Numbers includes a formal prayer, commanded to be said verbatim by the priests, known as the priestly benediction. This blessing has been pronounced upon the congregation by those of priestly descent presumably from the biblical period until the present day (in some synagogues). It has come to be of special interest recently. While staying in Jerusalem in the summer of 1978, I looked out my window and watched a team of archaeologists working below. They had uncovered Jewish tombs of the Iron Age. I (and they) did not know it then, but inscriptions in thin silver foil that they discovered were later painstakingly unrolled and found to bear the words of the priestly benediction. The silver foil inscriptions are the oldest known texts of a passage from the Bible.

Marc Brettler

This prayer is compactly structured, with each verse longer than the one before it, as if to suggest the growing outpouring of divine blessings. We know of several Mesopotamian parallels, and a slightly shorter version, written on silver (probably an amulet) in the seventh or sixth century BCE was found in a burial trove in Jerusalem. The final verse, often translated as "...peace," is better understood- both in its original context and especially in its familial setting here- in the sense of "personal well-being."

Elliott Dorff

Because we are commanded to emulate God, our understanding of what God is being asked to do here has consequences for human behavior.

1. May God give you all life's good and keep from you the bad.
 - a. Consequence: we should strive to bring people blessing, not trouble.
2. May God smile on you and give you more than you deserve.
 - a. Consequence: we should treat others graciously even beyond what they deserve.
3. May God face you and make peace with you.
 - a. Consequence: when we quarrel with others, we should look them in the face and make peace.

RaSHI

Line 1: May God bless you that your possessions should be blessed. And guard you that bandits should not come against you to take your property. For one who gives a gift to his servant is unable to guard it against all people who may wish to take it, and once robbers come against the servant and take the gift from him, what benefit does he have from this gift? But God is both the giver and the guard.

Line 2: May God illuminate God's countenance toward you. May God show you a smiling countenance, a radiant countenance, and may God give you grace.

Line 3: May God lift God's countenance to you- may God suppress anger.

Nechama Leibowitz

Line 1: In the first verse, we learn that “bless you” refers to material goods: you shall prosper with abundance of possessions and wealth. “Keep you” is added so that we may be protected from the evils that such prosperity inevitably brings. From keeping us away from ego, selfishness, or even foolishness as a result of our wealth. Think of King David, who was wealthy and drunk with power but was not “kept” from sending Bathsheba’s husband to die.

Line 2: The second verse is commonly understood to refer to the spiritual blessing of insight into the Torah. The idea that our spiritual needs cannot be met until our material needs are fulfilled is ingratiated in our tradition.

Line 3: Many commentators understood the final verse as combining both material and spiritual blessings. The Priestly Benediction, understood in this light, underscores one of the fundamental premises of our tradition: the acknowledged relationship between material and spiritual well-being.

Lawrence Kushner

The priestly blessing is composed of three verses, each one has two parts. May God do this and may God do that. One tradition suggests that the first clause is causally connected to the second, in the language of symbolic logic, they are “if-then” clauses. If God blesses you, then you will be protected. If God deals kindly with you, then you will be dealt with graciously. And, if God bestows favor on you, then you will be granted peace.

But this only raises the obvious question: if that’s the goal, why not then just ask for the blessings in the second clause to begin with? Perhaps it is because you can ask for blessing, kindness, and favor but not for protection, grace, and peace- they are something else. Not even the high priest can coax those out of God. They are beyond asking even though they may be the reason for the request!

Richard Elliott Friedman

The culminating wish of peace in the priestly benediction is particularly poignant because Numbers is the first book of the Bible so far to concentrate on war. Certainly peace can mean a secure condition for an individual generally rather than being limited to meaning an absence of war, but the issue of war is so much a part of Numbers that the reference to peace in this significant position is nonetheless quite striking. It appears in the beginning section of the book as part of the preparation at Mount Sinai for the journey to come. The people’s journey then comes to include substantial doses of reality in the form of confrontations with hostile groups. Israel’s only experience of war before this is in the brief account of an attack by the Amalekites shortly after the exodus as the people first approach Horeb. Indeed, the book of Exodus reports that the reason the Israelites go to the Red Sea on the way out of Egypt instead of taking the more obvious route is because God fears they are not ready for war (13:17). When the Egyptian army pursues them, Moses instructs them, “God will fight for you...” (14:14); and again in the Song of the Sea, it is the deity who is described as a warrior (15:3). Genesis recounts only one battle, in which Abraham becomes involved because of the capture of his nephew Lot. Leviticus includes no battles, and the word “war” does not occur in it. Deuteronomy treats the subject of war through legislation but not through narrative other than to refer to episodes in Numbers. It is Numbers alone among the Five Books of Moses that especially develops this worst of human conditions through the narrative of specific military encounters. And it is Numbers that says, “May God give you peace!”

Bradley Artson

As I stood in the Israel museum, fixated upon the silver plaque containing these sacred words, I started to cry. I cried because of the privilege we Jews enjoy in a spiritual continuity which extends back to the very beginnings of our people. Who else can share in the prayers of their most distant ancestors the way we can? The Chinese don't worship the same gods their ancestors did, the modern Greeks don't pray to the Olympians... But, every day, I find myself blessed through the same timeless words which moved my unknown ancestor- and all the generations of Jews in between as well. And what about the future? Here, too, the prayer plays its part: each Friday night, my wife and I bless our twins. Like other Jewish parents throughout time, we place our hands on our children's heads and we bless them with these words, the same words that God told Aaron to use when blessing the Jewish people. Recently, my two year old son responded to my blessing him by putting his hands on my head. Still too young to speak the words himself, his gesture was itself a blessing for me. In his act, I felt the surge of history and the promise of God's ancient covenant fulfilled: assuring me that the continuity I prize will continue, that the Torah will remain a commanding presence and a gift of love for yet another generation.

Much in human history changes- our customs, fads, styles, and cultures swell and shift throughout the years. But three things remain eternal- the human heart retains the same needs, urges, and concerns across time; the God of Israel has not changed despite our shifting perceptions of who God is; and the bridge between the human heart and the God of Israel- the Torah and the mitzvot- is still the encapsulation of the brit, the covenant, which binds our people to each other throughout time and to our God, who transcends time. That, indeed, is quite a blessing.