

People Blessing People

Parashat Naso, May 31, 2014; 2 Sivan 5774

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When I was a kid, I distinctly and vividly remember that at the conclusion of Friday night services at my Reform temple in Cleveland, my rabbi would come to the center of the bimah to bless the congregation. He would lift his arms high in the air, spreading his fingers above the heads of the congregation, and intone the priestly benediction. May God bless you and keep you. May God's countenance shine down upon you and be gracious to you. And May God bless you with peace. The organ would play softly in the background, and I remember gazing up at him, several steps above us, wearing his black pulpit robe, saying words like countenance that I definitely didn't understand...but I knew in my *kishkes* that something holy, something almost magical was going on. In fact, that spectacle of my rabbi blessing the congregation is one of my earliest memories of being in a synagogue.

It's actually appropriate that this priestly blessing ritual was my earliest synagogue memory, because as it turns out, the priestly blessing which comes from this morning's parasha in Numbers 6:24-26 happens to be the oldest Biblical fragment ever to be found. In 1979 an archeologist digging at *Ketef Hinnom*, a site just to the southwest of the Old City of Jerusalem unearthed a tiny silver scroll, literally one inch by 3 and a quarter inches. After carefully, painstakingly unrolling this silver scroll, what was written on it was none other than the ancient words of this blessing. The scroll was dated to 600 BCE, and today you can see it on display at the Israel Museum. Apparently the scroll was worn as an amulet or a charm, by one of our ancestors living in Jerusalem, some 2,600 years ago.

The blessing is powerful in its simplicity...the first line has three words, the second, five and the third seven. God's name is the second word of each stanza, and the traditional understanding is that the first line is for material blessing, the second is for spiritual blessing, and the third is for shalom, for peace. Who could want anything more than those three incredible gifts? Whether today or 2,600 years ago. It is also powerful in its performance.

Vay'dabeir Hashem el Moshe leymor... God spoke to Moses saying...*Dabeir el Aharon v'el banav laymor...* speak to Aaron and his children, saying:

Ko tivarchu et b'nai Yisrael... Thus shall you bless the people of Israel...In other words, whenever there is an occasion to publicly bless the Jewish people, this is how you should do, these are the words you should use, and these are the specific people who have the special responsibility to do it. People like Ben Katz, and his ancestors, as well as his descendants...The kohanim, the hereditary priests who trace their lineage to Moses's brother Aaron.

But it's this last detail that has engendered some controversy over the ages. First and foremost, how is it that one person can bless another person? As much as we adore Ben Katz, does he have more power, more authority, more of a "connection" for blessing the Jewish people than I do? After all, he's a Kohen, but I'm just an Israelite! A Midrash imagines the Jewish people challenging God with that very question! Why do we need the priests to bless us, when You,

God, could just bless us Yourself? To which the Midrash has God answering the people by saying, *Sha shtil*... You know what that means? It's Yiddish for pipe down and be quiet. Although I have commanded the kohanim to bless you, the blessings do not come from them but from Me; for I Myself stand over them to bless you." By the way the Torah emphasizes the fact that it's God who's doing the blessing when it says: *Ve'samu et sh'mi al b'nai Yisrael*, By blessing the people in this manner, you will link My name with the People of Israel, *va'ani avar'chem*...and I will bless them.¹ Not they, I. And if you remember all the way back in Genesis, when God has His very first conversation with Abraham, the very first Jew, God says: *Va'avarecha m'var'che'cha* I will bless those who bless you.² That seems to suggest that God approves of the idea of people blessing other people.

And as for the idea that kohanim at least back then were on a higher level of holiness than the average Israelite--just as we expect policemen to be more obedient of the law, and dentists to be more conscious of dental hygiene, and veterinarians to be loving toward animals, the fact that the job of the kohanim was precisely the *avodat ha'kodesh* the sacred service of the tabernacle and later the Holy Temple—because they were in the God-business so to speak, we can expect that as a whole, as an aggregate they are attuned to matters of spirituality and therefore have this unique privilege to be the conduits of God's blessing the Jewish people. That's not to say that every single Kohen is deeply religious or spiritual, but as a group as a category of Jews who honor this part of their identity and heritage, there is in fact such an assumption.

Nowadays in most Orthodox synagogues, modern kohanim are in fact called forward to bless the congregation during the musaf amidah on festivals in a procedure called "duchenen." The Yiddish word *duchen* comes from the Hebrew *duchan*, which was the platform Aaron and the other kohanim stood upon when blessing the people. In modern day *duchenen*, all kohanim remove their shoes, wash their hands then come up to the front of the sanctuary, making that Vulcan sign with their hands, as they cover their head and hands with the tallit, and intone the priestly blessing. In Israel, *duchenen* takes place not only on the *chagim*, but every single day! It's one of the spiritual advantages of living in the land of Israel. In Reform congregations in America, which I really haven't personally attended since my childhood, I understand that it is common practice for rabbis to conclude the services in the way that my rabbi did when I was a child...using this blessing. And I even spoke to Leslie, my Presbyterian executive assistant yesterday who told me that her minister uses the priestly benediction every Sunday to conclude his service! It seems that the one place that you are not likely to hear it or see it done with the traditional choreography or panache is in most Conservative synagogues. In our rush to erase all distinctions among Jews, the ritual of the priestly benediction became lost to us! By the way I'm also concerned that if we don't preserve the Kohen and Levi *aliyot* during the Torah reading, in a generation or two people will no longer remember that they are descendants of those tribes. Why would they, if there's no special role or distinction for them? My daughter Nessa has been learning about the tribes of Israel in school, and she recently asked me "Abba, what *shevet* are we?" What tribe are we? I told her I don't know...the only people who know their tribal ancestry to this day are Kohanim and Levi'im. But wouldn't you love to know more about your ancestry? I know I would. I would also love to see a resurgence in the practice of *duchenen*, the use of the Priestly Blessing in the traditional form in our synagogues. Although my childhood

¹ Numbers 6:27

² Genesis 12:3

rabbi was not a Kohen as far as I know, and he definitely wasn't blessing us during musaf, because there was no musaf in that service, the fact that I remember that moment so intensely, the fact that as a kid I looked forward to that moment in services because it made my spine tingle a little bit, and because I felt a sense of awe in that moment...I think we need more of those kind of moments in our services! In a remarkably radical essay the great theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote: "Our services are conducted with pomp and precision. The rendition of the liturgy is smooth. Everything is present: decorum, voice, ceremony...One knows in advance what will ensure. There will be no surprise, no adventure of the soul; there will be no sudden burst of devotion...Nothing unpredictable must happen to the person who prays..."³ This is the very kind of ritual drama that brings that sense of surprise and adventure! I felt it recently, on my Costa Rica Passover getaway. In the hotel shul where I davvened every day, the thing I cherished most was standing with my son Ezra underneath my tallis while the kohen—there was only one (!) blessed the congregation.

But there's another reason I love the priestly blessing...and it has to do with the blessing that is recited before the Kohen recites the benediction. The blessing is: *Baruch Atah Hashem, Eloheinu Melech Ha'olam*, that much ought to be familiar to most of us, and then it says, *asher kid'shanu bik'dushato shel Aharon*, who has made us holy with the holiness of Aaron, *vetzivanu le'varech et amo Yisrael b'ahava*, and who has commanded us to bless the people of Israel b'ahava—WITH LOVE. You see, the essence of this blessing is not that it be some kind of hocus pocus or incantation...It is rather an expression in *ahavat Yisrael*, of love among the Jewish people. That's why people blessing other people is so significant...it's because the blessing is offered with love...and friends, we need more love in our community, in our interactions with our fellow Jews, in our synagogues. It is so essential that the Kohen offer the blessing with love that the Shulchan Aruch, the Code of Jewish Law says that a Kohen that does not harbor love for his fellow Jews or worse, hates his fellow Jews is ineligible from performing this service. Not only that, but such a person must leave the synagogue during the priestly blessing!

Although I am not a Kohen, I do say this priestly benediction on a regular basis—and not just to bar and bat mitzvahs on the bimah. I say it every week as so many other Jewish parents do, to my children just before Kiddush on Shabbat. We are called a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, so at least at that moment we are allowed to say this blessing that is otherwise reserved for kohanim. And I can't think of any blessing that I say that is offered with more love than when I place my hands on my children's heads and say those words.

So my friends, I will take up this issue with our ritual committee, in the hopes that by reviving this ancient tradition, we can not only bring something dramatic into our services, but also to remind us that a congregation without love is like a body without a soul.

Shabbat Shalom

³ Heschel, Abraham Joshua. "The Spirit of Jewish Prayer," *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, pp. 100-101