

The Blessing of a Blessing

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A story is told about a man who makes an appointment to see his rabbi to ask him to make him a Levi. Tactfully, the rabbi says much as he would like to accommodate the request, this is one thing he cannot possibly do. So the guy, offers the rabbi a thousand dollars. Again, the rabbi politely explains that there is no such ceremony or ritual, and no way he can help. This goes on for several days. Finally, the persistent individual offers a contribution of a million dollars to the shul. This gets the rabbi's attention, who begins to think maybe the guy is really not so kooky after all.

"Meet me tomorrow at the mikveh," the rabbi tells him, and "I will see what I can do for you."

Sure enough, the next day, the rabbi said that upon further research he found an obscure document indicating that it was possible to fulfill his request. After entering the mikvah, the rabbi incanted some verses in Hebrew, mixed with a little Aramaic, and pronounced the congregant a Levi.

As the grateful man gleefully handed over the generous contribution to the rabbi, with a little something extra for his services, the rabbi inquired why was it so important to him to be a Levi. "Simple," the man said, "My father, *alav hashalom* was a Levi, my grandfather, and his father before him were all levis, so I have always wanted to be a levi!"

As we all know, one's status as a levi or kohen, is determined by heredity, and is dependent on one's father's tribal ancestry. Passed down orally, by tradition and word of mouth, there is no national registry or archives officially recording these things. Yet, amazingly, DNA research conducted over the past decade has turned up an astonishing correlation of over 80% similarity of some gene for those claiming to belong to the levite clan. A fascinating story in the New York Times a number of years ago revealed that based on genetic testing, the claim of a tribe in Africa to be descendants of kohanim was not so far-fetched, and was probably true.

At one time levites and kohanim had positions of honor, and performed important tasks in the Beit Mikdash, the Temple, which I referred to yesterday. A famous quote by the British statesman Benjamin Disraeli reflected this notion. In response to the anti-semitic ranting and raving of a member of Parliament, Disraeli retorted, "While your ancestors were beating drums on some remote primitive island, mine, Sir, were serving the Lord in the Temple of King Solomon."

With the destruction in 70 CE of the Temple, sacrifices were no longer offered, drastically reducing the role and significance of the priests and their assistants. Yet their revered position was memorialized in several ways. The rabbis who inherited the mantle

of leadership, determined that the honor of the first and second aliyot when reading from the torah would be given to a kohen and levi. The restrictions imposed upon the kohanim dating back to the bible were maintained. This included the prohibition against marrying a convert or divorcee, as well as entering a cemetery, and various other customs.

Some of these practices are still observed, but among most non-traditional Jews they are no longer practiced.

One such tradition, going back to the time of the Temple was when the Kohanim, the priests, who are a sub-group among the Levites would bless the people, as proscribed in the book of Numbers. Some of you may recall being in shul on the holidays when the kohanim would ascend the bema to offer the blessing known as the priestly blessing, *birkat haKohanim*, also referred to as *duchenen*.

Before the kohanim bless the people, they first recite a blessing:

Baruch atah adonai eloheynu melech ha'olam, asher kidshanu bikdsuhat shel aharon vitzeevanu levarech et amo yisrael b'ahavah.

It expresses gratitude to God for commanding them to bless His people Israel, *b'ahavah*, with love.

The last word, *b'ahavah*, with love, was a rabbinic addition to the text. There is much speculation as to why the word was added. The “Shulhan Aruch” tells us that a kohen cannot have any anger in his heart against anyone in the congregation when blessing them. It comes to remind us that leaders of the Jewish people must always have love in their hearts for the people of Israel.

Being a modern egalitarian synagogue, and reflecting the ambivalence in our tradition over the custom, we, as is true of most Conservative synagogues have never before done the *birkat hacoanim*, until, that is today. But today we will make history. For the first time in the history of our congregation, during the *musaf amidah*, the kohanim will ascend the bema, having removed their shoes, having had their hands washed by the Levites, they will place their tallitot over their heads, lift up their hands, form the letter shin, (as Mr. Spock of Star Trek did, a gesture which Leonard Nimoy admits he got from Jewish tradition), and recite the priestly benediction. The mystery is enhanced by the custom of not gazing, glancing or looking at the people reciting the blessing. Accompanying the custom of not looking directly at those who recite the blessing, I have seen in Sephardic synagogues, a beautiful tradition of a father lovingly placing his tallis over the heads of his children to shelter them from the temptation to peek.

Why, and why now, you may ask. A fair question, and I am not really sure how to answer it. In Israel it is done not just on the holidays, but every Shabbat. And so having witnessed the ritual during my many trips to Israel, I wanted to see if we could recreate some of the sense of awe and majesty, of this moment by introducing it today. You can then let me know if you like it or not – (as if I needed to tell you that.)

The Gur Rebbe notes that those who participate in the ritual may quite naturally feel unworthy. They may wonder, who am I to bless this people? The kohanim are instructed to realize that they are merely the conduits through which the blessing descends from God to the nation. They bless the people not by virtue of any personal attributes, but because God commands them to do it. This is why they are instructed to stick to the text, and not embellish it, but to echo the words exactly as provided by the shaliah tzibur. The kohain must not feel unworthy, but must however, also conduct himself with a sense of humility.

Humility is a trait so important in Judaism, that it is viewed as one of Moses' greatest attributes. One of my favorite jokes about how important it is not to feel important is about the prominent rabbi who one Rosh Hashana was overcome with a sense of modesty. He threw himself before the Ark and cried out, "Ribbono shel Olam, I am nothing." The hazzan was equally moved, and threw himself upon the ground, crying out, "Dear Lord, I too, am nothing." At that moment, as they both are wailing away, the shamash, the guy who does all the things the rabbi and chazzan don't want to do, comes up to the bema, also bows down before the aron and the congregation, and proclaims in an equally loud voice, "I am nothing." At which point the rabbi looks over at the cantor and says, "Look who thinks he's nothing!"

So the first insight we learn is that the blessing must be offered with humility and with love.

The kohanim stand barefoot before the kahal, (the congregation), reminiscent of when Moses stood at the Burning Bush and God commanded him to take off his shoes. According to one midrashic explanation, he is told to do so in order to feel the earth beneath him. In other words, to be a leader of the people, it is necessary to feel the hurt and pain of the people.

The regimen and stipulations contain lessons our leaders of today should learn and take to heart.

For centuries the threefold priestly blessing, has been a part of Jewish and Christian liturgy. Some say it is the most famous fifteen words in the whole torah. Perfectly balanced – three lines, culminating in pyramid-like fashion, of three, five and seven words, each line consists of 15, 20 and 25 letters, respectively, and with a proportional increase in the number of syllables as well.

Rabbi Joseph Hertz wrote, "The fifteen words...contain a world of trust in God and faith in God. They are clothed in a rhythmic form of great beauty, and they fall with majestic solemnity upon the ear of the worshipper. The Priestly Blessing was one of the most impressive features of the Service in the Temple at Jerusalem." The description of G. B. Gray captures part of its majesty. "It gives terse and beautiful expression to the thought that Israel owes all to God who shields His people from all harm and grants them all things necessary for their welfare."

It begins with three familiar words:

Yevarecha adonai veyishmerecha, May the Lord bless you and watch over you.

On the surface, it is a relatively clear and straightforward injunction. May God bless you, and may God watch over you to protect you from evil, as well as from illness, poverty and calamity.

Classic Jewish commentaries view this first blessing as referring specifically to material blessing, for our tradition sees nothing wrong with attaining prosperity and enjoying material success. The challenge, is what do we do with what we have, and how do we use our financial resources. This is why tzedekah, giving to others and supporting our synagogues and communal institutions is so important, as a test of what we do with the blessings God bestows upon us.

The classic midrash, Sifre links the first and last word, asking for blessing and protection, rendering a fascinating insight. We ask that God bless us with material possessions, but then we say vishmerecha, meaning, may He guard us, as in May He watch and keep these from possessing us. In other words, may we be protected from being corrupted by the attainment of material blessing, from the harmful effects of wealth.

The sages recognized that money can be used for positive and noble purposes, or like Midas, it can contaminate and destroy. We each know too many instances of people becoming consumed by their wealth. Either their character changes, or they lose sight of what is really important, or they become so obsessed with having more, or with having what others have, that their judgment, values and ability to function becomes distorted.

Rabbi Abraham Twerski puts it this way, “Inherent in the acquisition of wealth is the danger of becoming greedy, and greed is essentially an addiction to wealth. Just as a drug addict craves ever-increasing amounts of a drug, and is never satisfied with what he has,... so does the person whose possession of wealth turns into greed become addicted to wealth, and he lives in constant dread, never content with what he has.”

So one way to read the opening line is: “May God bless you with wealth, and at the same time, may He protect you from being harmed by wealth.”

The second line,

Ya'aer adonai panav alecha, vee'hunecha

May the Lord cause His countenance, or light to shine upon you and may He be gracious to you.

is an equally simple and beautiful image. It asks to be blessed with experiencing the radiance of the divine presence in your life. Or, another interpretation is, May God enlighten you so that you can understand the purposes God has in mind for you.

The light refers to the light of torah, meaning that it is a plea for the blessing of spiritual growth and fulfillment. It thus builds upon and complements the first line. Material

wealth is not enough. In addition to prosperity, we seek spiritual fulfillment. Unlike the first blessing, which asks for wealth, there is no need to ask God to protect us from this, or to watch so that it not be taken from us. The light of Torah is the kind of gift that can and should be shared, for it illuminates and enlightens our world, making it a better place when others partake of it.

The last word of the line, *vee'hunecha*, may he give you grace, *chen*, is meant to mean -- may you be blessed to find grace in the eyes of others, so that they will not be jealous of you, but will rejoice in your joys and share in your happiness.

Combining the beginning and concluding parts of the verse yields -- May you live in a society where people will admire you for your devotion to God and Torah. How beautiful for success to be measured in terms of love of God and Torah, and to live amongst a people for whom this is the criteria of admiration and emulation.

The concluding words:

Yisa Adonai panav alecha, v'yasem lecha shalom:

May The Lord lift up His countenance upon you, and grant you peace.

Imply, in the words of one of our commentators, May God heed the prayers of the people and forgive their shortcomings. Peace comes from the word *shalem*, meaning whole. The *birkat haKohanim* concludes, as do all our blessings with the request for peace. Peace is not just the absence of war. It is the harmony and fulfillment felt by individuals as well as by a society.

This is the whole prayer, and a quick analysis of it. There are two actions by God in each verse, six in all. God blesses and protects, teaching that blessing means protection. We ask God to shine and be gracious, showing that God's shining face results in grace. God bestows and grants peace, indicating that the bestowal of God's favor results in peace.

The blessing itself has no magical power, and yet it is very powerful. The oldest passage from the Bible to be found by archaeologists, attesting to its popularity, it has been discovered in amulets dating as far back as the 7th century, BCE.

Writing in the JPS commentary, Jacob Milgrom writes, "It mounts by gradual stages from the petition for material blessing and protection to that for Divine favor as a spiritual blessing, and in beautiful climax culminates in the petition for God's most consummate gift, *shalom*, peace, the welfare in which all material and spiritual well-being is comprehended."

Although today we will invite the kohanim to bless us, perhaps part of its potency comes precisely because the words are not reserved exclusively for the kohanim.

Rabbi Steven Leder tells the story of having been in Sherman, Texas, as a student rabbi while in rabbinical school. He was known in the community as Rabbi Steven Leder, the pastor from the Hebrew church. One day he visited an elderly member of the

congregation married to a Baptist woman, both of whom were too frail to come to synagogue anymore. As he was preparing to leave, the old man asked the rabbi to bless them. For a few moments, he was at a loss and did not know what to say, and then he decided to invoke the words of the birkat haKohanim. Years later, he reflected back on the experience.

“I learned an important lesson in the kitchen that afternoon. We can all bring blessings to people who need them. Blessings require no great sanctuary, marble, golden ark, or microphone. All a blessing takes, all seeing God takes, is a little time, a few words with two people locked in the silent struggles of life, seeking meaning and recognition amid their faded pictures. That’s all it took, just a little time and a few kind words to say I wished them well.”

The words of the priestly blessing are familiar because they are simple, yet eloquent. Originally it was to be recited by a priest from amongst the people, not a stranger, for blessing requires knowledge and loving understanding of the ones to be blessed. You have heard it many times -- at a bris, a bar or bat mitzvah, in synagogue, at a wedding, usually spoken by the rabbi. But the truth is, anyone can do it, including a parent or loved one.

Rachel Naomi Remen writes about visiting her grandfather’s house every Friday afternoon, after school. He would light candles, and say a few quiet words of prayer. Then, when he finished talking to God, as she put it, he would turn to her, rest his hands lightly on the top of her head, and utter words of blessing. He would begin by thanking God for making him her grandfather. As she quietly stood there, he continued speaking softly, mentioning various things, even telling God if she had done something wrong, how good she was for having told the truth.

“These few moments were the only time in my week when I felt completely safe and at rest. My family of physicians and health professional were always struggling to learn more and be more. If I brought home a 98 on a test from school, my father would ask, ‘And what about the other 2 points?’ I pursued those two points relentlessly throughout my childhood. But my grandfather did not care about such things. For him, I was already enough.”

The memory and description of these Friday blessings is so vivid, you would think this extended over a long period of time. Yet I was shocked when I read that her grandfather had died when she was only seven years old.

Many years later when her mother was very old and unexpectedly started lighting shabbos candles, she told her mother about the blessing her grandfather gave her and how much it meant to her. Her mother, she writes, “smiled at me sadly. ‘I have blessed you every day of your life, Rachel. I just never had the wisdom to do it out loud.’”

Such is the power of asking for a blessing for someone we love. Every Friday evening parents bestow it upon their children. When each of my children begin a new school

year, or a new venture, I place my hands over their heads, and quietly invoke God's blessing over them, as I send them off, in God's trusting and loving care, just as I do every Friday night, with love and devotion.

But again, it is not something to be done just by a priest or rabbi. It can be done by any loved one for someone you care about. Consequently, on this Rosh Hasahana, I am going to conclude my sermon in an unusual way. I invite each of you to turn now to a loved one next to you, place your hands over their head, and invoke God's blessing upon them.

.... And may we all be blessed in the new year.

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