

This Week In Torah *Naso* [Part 1]

Rabbinic note: this week we have a somewhat irregular situation with our Torah reading. Thursday night into Friday is Shavuot, the Festival in which we celebrate the revelation of Torah at Mount Sinai. We as Reform Jews observe this as a one-day holiday but traditional Jews do it as a 2-day holiday. That means this Shabbat we will be returning to our regular Torah *parasha*, while our traditional brethren will be reading a special portion from Deuteronomy. Therefore, to keep us all on the traditional Torah cycle, we will be reading *Naso* twice—this week AND next week.

This week in portion *Naso*, we will read the traditional 3-fold priestly benediction. I use it to bless a *b'nei mitzvah*, a wedding couple, a baby when they receive their name, the whole congregation at the end of Yom Kippur services, etc. It is a very special blessing—one that according to God: “Thus they shall link My name with the people of Israel, and I will bless them.”

Let me ask a fundamental question, what is a blessing? From a linguistic and liturgical definition, a Hebrew/Jewish blessing is a formula that acknowledges God as Sovereign and subjugates the worshipper to Divine authority. Rabbi Dr. Lawrence Hoffman writes: “blessings and benedictions are the same genre of prayer that creates a structured awareness.” Our *siddur* has created a spiritual journey for us each time we crack the binding to sojourn which range from acknowledging what is around us, to petitioning for the tools we need to do God’s work in this world, all the way to understanding our sacred mission as ones with a specific and unique Covenantal relationship with God.

The formula in Hebrew is straight forward—*Baruch Atah Adonai...* Blessed are You God... *Eloheinu Melech HaOlam asher kiddishanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu...* Our God who Sovereign of the universe that has commanded us thru the *Mitzvot* to do...” But it is more than a linguistic construct—it has a deep theology imbedded within it. The same Hebrew root for blessing/*bracha* is the same root used for a knee and in the phrase a

swimming-pool. It implies subjugation or “bending the knee” to a Higher Authority; it also infers the need for greater awareness so that one does not get into water above their heads.

For us, there is a deeper sense of doing that comes with reciting these *brachot*. Aware that we are created in the Divine Image [*betselem Elohim*], we are God’s *malachim*--sacred workers doing God’s holy work. This somewhat theistic finitistic [yes, spelled correctly!] approach means that we are the messengers or angels creating blessings or as we read earlier:” ...they shall link My name with the people of Israel, and I will bless them.” We also can discover in that 3-fold priestly benediction that we can see the face of God radiating in another or within us thru acknowledging the presence of God and Divine Grace as well as experiencing both an internal and external sense of peace. Check out the second and third line of that blessing: “*Ya’eir Adonai panav elecha v’choneka...* May God’s face radiate upon you and be gracious unto you... *Yisa Adonai panav elecha v’yasem shalom...* May God’s face be lifted up upon you as you are granted peace.”

What is a blessing? As Jews, it is a literary and theological construct that transforms the ordinary into the sacred by bringing God’s presence into our mind’s eye. It is our way in being God’s partners in the ongoing work of creation. It encourages us to be mindful that God is present and we are living sacred lives.