

*The Lord bless you and keep you! The Lord deal kindly and graciously with you!  
The Lord lift up His countenance upon you and grant you peace! --- Numb. 6:24-26*

*Bless you:* with possessions. *Keep you:* So that robbers do not come and take your wealth. For one who gives a gift to his servant cannot protect him from everyone else...But the Holy One is both giver and protector. *Deal kindly:* literally, make His face shine upon you, i.e., show you a sunny, smiling face. *Graciously:* rather, may He give you grace so that people will look favorably upon you. *Lift up His countenance:* i.e., overcome His anger. --- Rashi

“If there is no bread, there is no Torah.” (Avot 3:17) --- Sforno

The priestly blessing is written in the singular (e.g., **lekha**, not **lakhem**), because the most essential blessing for the people Israel is unity. Just as at Mount Sinai: Scripture says *Israel encamped* (singular) *there*. The sages explain: They were like one person with a single heart. --- Rabbi Shlomo Leib of Lentchna (d. 1843)

*Graciously* – Lord of the universe! If, God forbid, Your children are not worthy of Your kindness, *deal... graciously* with them as an unconditional and spontaneous gift, just because that is Your nature! --- **Chafetz Chayim** (Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, d. 1933)

*Peace.* Shalom means more than the English word peace: it also means completeness, perfection, harmonious interaction. The prophets of Israel were the first in history to conceive of peace as an ideal. Peace is the ultimate hope of monotheism, with its belief that the world is the product of a single will, not the blind clash of conflicting elements. --- Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

However many blessings we expect from God, His infinite liberality will always exceed all our wishes and our thoughts. --- John Calvin

The only worthwhile blessings that are really ours to have and to hold are a growing mind, a helping hand and a faith that endures. --- Rabbi Bernard Raskas, 20<sup>th</sup> c.

Every Friday night I call each of my children, who all live out of state. I bless them with the traditional blessing a parent gives a child on Friday night. And then I end with the beautiful priestly blessing, found in the middle of this week's portion. I look forward to the day when my grandson will actually get on the phone so I can bless him. The blessing has become central to our liturgy.

I not only bless my own children with these ancient words. Every time I welcome a new baby into the community at a bris or baby naming, I give the baby the priestly blessing. I also bless every bar and bat mitzvah. At a wedding, immediately before the groom breaks the glass, I have the couple bow their heads as I recite the priestly blessing. I say it in both Hebrew and English. At these moments I feel as if I am God's agent, channeling God's energy onto the recipient of the blessing.

Some people may believe it is a rabbi's job to recite this blessing. But the Torah gives the duty to recite it to a limited group of individuals. It is the **kohanim**, the male descendants of the High Priest Aaron, who has been given this obligation. *The Lord spoke to Aaron and his sons saying, you shall bless the children of Israel* (Numbers 7:22-23). My mother was the daughter of a **kohen**. My wife is the daughter of a **kohen**. My cantor is the daughter of a **kohen**. But as for me, I follow my father, who was a plain Israel, an ordinary Jew. It is not my obligation from the Torah to bless the congregation.

Some rabbis see themselves as priests, even if they do not have the lineage. At the end of services, they hold their hands in the traditional priestly way (see Mr. Spock's rendition in *Star Trek*.) But I am a rabbi, a teacher of Judaism, not a priest. In our synagogue we follow the ancient practice of having **kohanim**, men who can trace their lineage back to Aaron the priest, bless the congregation on each

of the Jewish festivals. (I will admit, this is our one non-egalitarian practice in our egalitarian congregation. The Torah gives the obligation of reciting the blessing explicitly to the male **kohanim**.)

Sometimes, particularly on the High Holidays, I have a large group of men who have been trained to say the blessing. But sometimes, like this past week on Shavuot, I had one man who had to be trained on the spot. The **kohen** goes outside where a **levi** washes his hands. He removes his shoes and comes up with a large tallit to cover his head with his back to the congregation. He recites a blessing, "Praised are You Lord our God King of the universe, who sanctified us with the sanctity of Aaron, commanding us to bless his people Israel with love." He then faces the congregation, raises his hands in the special configuration, and listens as the cantor calls out the priestly blessing word by word. There is a traditional melody the cantor uses that adds to the mystery of the moment.

Traditionally, one should avoid looking at the **kohanim** as they recite the blessing. This adds to the mystery and power of the moment. Many congregants turn their backs to avoid looking, but I find that unnecessary. I prefer to face forward, look down, and enjoy the mystery of the moment. The ritual is one of my favorite moments in the holiday service.

Some people in my congregation have challenged me. Why do I include such an ancient, strange sounding, and let's face it, non-egalitarian ritual in my services? What makes the **kohanim** worthy to bless us? My answer is that our ritual needs something ancient and mysterious, to avoid becoming sterile. And the **kohanim** are simply mouthing the ancient words; it is God who is blessing us.

The Torah gives us three beautiful verses that serve as a blessing. I love the moment each Friday night when I bless my children. But equally, I love the moment through the cycle of festivals when the descendants of Aaron the High Priest bless me. --- Rabbi Michael Gold

These three short, beautiful verses, which God commanded Aaron and his sons to use to bless the Jewish people with the gift of God's presence, indeed God's face, are deeply ingrained in Jewish cultural memory. They also pose some important questions about the balance between the value of personal participation and the role intermediaries play in religious life.

The verses of the priestly blessing are certainly among the oldest in continuous liturgical use. Archaeological evidence confirms their use even in the biblical period; their words were etched on silver scrolls found in tombs from the seventh century BCE. By the time of the Second Temple, their place in the ritual was confirmed as part of a series of blessings recited after the morning sacrifice (Mishnah **Tamid** 5:1), and, it is believed by many scholars to be one of the nuclei around which the current liturgical framework of the Amidah coalesced.

Of course, in the ancient temple, many essential daily and lifecycle rituals required the involvement of an intricate infrastructure of **Kohanim** and Levites, but with its destruction, most of these rituals fell into desuetude, leaving ritual far more in the hands of the individual. A huge class of intermediaries was eliminated. Rabbis and cantors took on the role as a substitute system of religious leadership, but in truth, even many of the rituals which are reserved for them by common practice or in deference to civil law are in fact technically valid if performed without benefit of clergy.

Most prayers can be said in private, if need be, and even those rituals requiring a **minyan** require only 10 like-minded Jews and perhaps someone with the requisite skills to lead them, rather than a functionary who is a member of a particular professional group or hereditary caste.

The priestly blessing was an exception, and even today in some synagogues it is still enacted in striking reproduction of the ritual of the ancient temple, if not daily then at least on certain festivals. The **Kohanim**, who must be free from certain types of mental, physical and spiritual blemishes, remove their shoes, since all temple worship was performed barefoot, and the Levites wash the priests' hands, in remembrance of the ablutions that were mandated before carrying out any temple ritual. The priests stand facing the congregation, holding their fingers outstretched, and repeat the words of the ancient blessing to the congregation standing before them.

The role and responsibility of those giving the blessing, is clear; however, what is the responsibility of those who would receive the blessing? Must they be present to receive it? What about those who are out in the fields and are not able to make it to synagogue at all? The Talmud (**Sotah** 38b) presents an unexpected conclusion: those who are behind the priests (even if they are within the precincts of the synagogue) do not receive the benefit of the blessing, while paradoxically, those who are out in the fields, out of earshot, perhaps not even aware that they are being blessed, enjoy its full effect.

It would be an undue hardship for those toiling in the fields to come all the way into town to hear the blessing and then return to their work, and they are regarded as “**anisi**” – blameless due to forces beyond their control. Even an iron curtain would not separate the path of divine blessing. In contrast, those who are in the city, or indeed, in the synagogue, and do not trouble themselves to come for just a few minutes to participate, do not deserve the benefit of the doubt.

The sages realized the significance of this teaching, applying it to those who could not reach the synagogue for other types of worship as well (Rosh Hashanah 35a), but in fact it has even broader implications in our own day. We live in an era of specialization, in which anything from financial management to cooking to childbirth can be “outsourced.” While there are certainly many times when a professional, an expert, or a helping hand is appropriate and even essential, there is a danger in applying this instinct too broadly in the realm of religious life as well.

Sometimes the desire for surrogacy is relatively innocuous. Often I’m approached by those who ask if I can pray for the recovery of someone who is ill: “Rabbi, can you make a **misheberakh** for so-and-so? I know you have no idea who they are, but I don’t really get to synagogue often, and you know how to do it...”

Sometimes, out of sensitivity I’ll take the name and add it without comment. I wish that it were even more often that I could muster the gumption to insist: “Of course I’ll pray for so-and-so. But it would be so much more meaningful if you, as someone who cares so deeply, could be present to pray as well.”

It happens on a more troubling level when institutions or groups offer dispensations to avoid Jewish responsibility or involvement in exchange for financial support. For example, there are any number that offer a **Kaddish** service in exchange for a contribution. A suitably pious surrogate, perhaps even in authentic Jewish costume, will say a memorial prayer daily for your deceased loved one. Perhaps it is effective fundraising, but it sends an unfortunate message that it is appropriate to rely on others to discharge our religious obligations and negates the role that “average” Jews can, and must, play in their own religious lives.

Of course, there is a reason why this approach is so appealing — there are those who have fallen so out of touch with even the most basic Jewish ritual and practice that they feel like their ancestors who toiled in the fields, with blessings totally beyond their grasp, and cannot imagine coming in. Most of us, though, are like the city dwellers, who were obligated to come and be in front of the Priests as they offered their blessing.

We may rely on religious leaders to create ritual experiences for us to embrace, but we cannot live vicariously through those leaders. Despite the urge to let others “be Jewish on our behalf,” we must be physically and spiritually present to experience the full blessing of God’s presence, of God’s face. --- Rabbi Joshua Heller