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Naso 5781 - Priestly Blessings
May 21, 2021

*Yevarech'cha Adonai v'yishm'reicha,
Ya'er Adonai panav eilecha vichuneka,
Yisa Adonai panav eilecha v'yasem l'cha shalom.*

May God bless you and protect you.
May God's light shine on you and be gracious to you.
May God's face ever be turned towards you, and may God bestow peace upon you.

In these last two weeks of violence and strife and tension, of human loss and suffering, not just in Israel and the territories, but with ripples of anti-Semitic violence on the rise across the globe, these words of the Priestly Blessing, found in this week's Torah portion, *Naso*, feel needed now more than ever. These are words you've likely heard before: in Jewish tradition, we use the Priestly Blessing to bless people at nearly every momentous stage of the Jewish life cycle: at Baby Namings and Brit Milah; at Bar and Bat Mitzvah ceremonies; to bless wedding couples under the chuppah. It's also the core of the blessing parents offer their children on Friday nights, around the Shabbat table. They are words of care and comfort, peace and protection. In many ways, this blessing links us to the antiquity of our people and to a sense of longing for love - from God and from each other - and an expression of a need to be loved and cared for.

In their original context, the biblical author - likely descendants of the Priestly class in this case - presents God instructing the *kohanim*, the priests - specifically Aaron and his sons - to offer these words to the Israelites, specifically as words of blessing. It is important to note, here, that though the blessing is uttered by Aaron and his sons, they are only the *channel* for the blessing to pass through on its way from God to the Jewish people. The structure of the blessing, invoking God's name at the beginning of each line, is meant to serve as a reminder that God is the active agent here. Even though the blessing is being said by the priests, only God alone can activate the blessings (or not). It seems to be a reminder that the true power of blessing or protection lies beyond human abilities. Despite the relative holiness of the priests, the structure of this blessing also seems to serve as a reminder to the priest that he possesses no divine power of his own. Indeed, in the eyes of Jewish tradition, no human being is thought of as more holy than any other - we are all created with a spark of the Divine within us.

Though intended as a communal blessing, each line is addressed in the singular. Perhaps, like so many blessings or prayers, the uttering of these words are meant to affect us in some way: they call both the one offering them and the one(s) receiving them to consider the ways in which *they* are capable of bringing peace and protection, care and comfort into our world.

Yevarech'cha Adonai v'yishmareicha - May God bless and protect you. Generally in the Bible, God's blessing tends to refer to material things - specifically: posterity (as in Gen. 28:3, Deut.

1:11); possessions and wealth (as in Gen 24:35); land (Gen 35:12; 48:3); fertility, health, victory (Deut 7:12-16); strength and peace (Ps. 29:11).¹ The notion of protection, or more literally “guarding,” can also be read as a protection from either evil spirits (Ps. 91:11) or from all forms of evil (Ps. 121).

Ya’er Adonai panav eilecha vichuneka - May God’s light shine on you and be gracious to you. Literally, “May God make God’s face shine on us.” We ask God to pay attention to us, to not ignore us - to not turn away from us or hide God’s face. The concept of grace, *chen*, is connected to the idea of mercy, suggesting that God will temper God’s sometimes cold sense of justice with mercy, dealing kindly with Israel. A reminder to infuse even the most difficult decisions with love.

Yisa Adonai panav eilecha v’yasem l’cha shalom - May God’s face ever be turned towards you, and may God bestow peace upon you. In one tradition, Targum Yonatan, there is the notion that this line suggests that God will answer the petitioner’s prayer. But ultimately, it is a prayer for attention. This idea of bestowing peace upon us conveys a sense of not just “quiet” as the root of the Latin word for “peace” suggests, but rather a freedom from all disasters and blessings of prosperity and well-being. Indeed, the root of the word *shalom* suggests a sense of wholeness or completeness. The blessing we ask for is not just one of quiet peace, but a sense of always being able to return to a sense of completeness and well-being, even in the midst of difficult moments in our lives. A notion that peace exists where each element in a given system is valued as a vital part of that system, and where there is no discord between them. This was a sentiment expressed earlier this week, by Rabbi Donniel Hartman, who runs the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, in his analysis on the moral conflicts at the heart of this latest round of war in Israel:

Much of the world, and especially our Western allies, have clearly exhibited this last week, not to speak of the decades since Oslo, support for Israel and a profound understanding of Israel’s complex security rights. That said, we cannot win a moral debate if our moral character is questionable and if we ourselves do not engage in constant moral reflection and aspirational moral goals.

We cannot expect that others morally condone our disproportionate response if they do not believe that we care about Palestinian suffering and truly yearn for a peaceful and just solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

...Furthermore, a commitment to peace does not simply entail territorial compromise and a desire to separate from each other, but a willingness to embrace and respect each other’s right to live, to live a life of freedom and dignity. The absence of such a willingness has created an Israeli moral blindness which is evident for all to see.

[Hartman concludes:]...We need to listen. We need to hear people’s criticism and concerns. We need to believe that they are worthy of a response and then respond both

¹ *JPS Torah Commentary* on Num. 6:24

through the power of our ideas but also with the courage to admit when we are wrong. We need to reclaim the moral high ground, not through self-congratulation but through policies that are worthy of us. When we do so, I believe that our moral arguments will be heard.²

There is also a fourth line of this blessing, not usually included as part of the formal “Priestly Blessing”: “Thus they shall link My name with the people of Israel, and I will bless them” (Num. 6:27). Again, this line seems to emphasize the eternal, covenantal relationship between God and the Jewish people, transcending time and space.

Tonight, as we watch, with bated breath, the early hours and days of a cease fire agreement between Israel and Hamas, we pray for a more permanent peace, in which the humanity of Israelis and Palestinians, Jews and Muslims, is acknowledged and respected by both sides. We pray that voices of reason and healing will prevail. I’ll end tonight with this poem by the renowned Israeli poet, Yehuda Amichai, “Wildpeace” - a different kind of prayer for peace, a denunciation of war, written by a man who was not naive to the many stumbling blocks that lined any road towards peace, written more than 40 years ago, before Israel’s first peace treaty with Egypt. In an interview towards the end of his life, Amichai explained, “At that time peace was only a vision. History has taught us that life is too short to wait for natural peace. Nature has to be helped and protected like wildflowers...that is what [leaders must do] with great courage”³:

Not the peace of a cease-fire,
not even the vision of the wolf and the lamb,
but rather
as in the heart when the excitement is over
and you can talk only about a great weariness.
I know that I know how to kill,
that makes me an adult.
And my son plays with a toy gun that knows
how to open and close its eyes and say Mama.
A peace
without the big noise of beating swords into ploughshares,
without words, without
the thud of the heavy rubber stamp: let it be
light, floating, like lazy white foam.
A little rest for the wounds—
who speaks of healing?
(And the howl of the orphans is passed from one generation
to the next, as in a relay race:
the baton never falls.)

²

https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/why-israel-lost-this-war/?fbclid=IwAR2ZEF5nciAScUNMKBSiBDgUZ_j7xCcnCQ-cZwhrtO3rvC81UjibCGT31As

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/1994/12/09/opinion/wild-peace.html>

Let it come
like wildflowers,
suddenly, because the field
must have it: wildpeace.⁴

May God bless us and protect us.

May God's light shine on us and through us, and illuminate the darkest corners of the world with grace and compassion.

May God's face ever be turned towards us, and may wildpeace spread throughout our hearts and lands.

⁴ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/54294/wildpeace>