

Why Religion? Why Art?

Rabbi Melanie Aron

May 29, 2020 (Shabbat service)

It seems a very modern concern, the question of why we need religion given that each of us as individuals can pursue our spirituality in our own particular way, but actually that question comes up in the commentaries on this week's Torah portion.

The portion, Parashat Naso, includes the well-known priestly blessing: May God Bless You and Keep You. . . . These words are extremely ancient; they were found painted on a jar in upper Sinai, in excavations of a site from the 8th century BCE. Also, on display in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, there is a silver amulet from the 7th century BCE with the entire blessing, meant to be rolled up and worn around the neck. Clearly these words were seen as powerful—but what do they actually say?

The priests are told to bless the people in a certain way, saying: “May Adonai, The YHVH, the unique name of God, bring blessings upon you.” In most ancient times, we believe the actual name was pronounced—according to Rashi by all the priests, according to Abravanel only by the High Priest and within the Jerusalem Temple. But whether pronounced or replaced by the word Adonai, the clear meaning is that the blessing comes not from the priests but directly from God. What then are the priests doing—and why are they even needed?

If we think back to the period of the desert wanderings, it was clear that the people had a hard time feeling connected to the God they could not see. Moses and Aaron were important as representatives and as connectors. Perhaps here too it is the priests, reciting the words with open hands, that give people the sense of connection with God's blessing.

This may also be a partial answer to why, if we can be spiritual on our own and if Judaism insists on the direct relationship of each Jew with God, without any mediator, we still need religion.

It is parallel to the Sephardic interpretation of verse 27 of chapter 6 of Numbers, being not an addendum but part of the blessing itself: "And they shall put My name upon the Israelites." Through this ritual and other rituals, God's name is upon us; that is, we feel the connection.

Rabbi Ismar Schorch, who for many years was the chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, uses this question about the role of the priests to talk about the importance of religious ritual in general to the spiritual individual. He writes: "In theory we could accomplish all that on our own, but only to the extent that we could also write immortal poetry or compose great music." He goes on, "Yet when we are moved to give expression to our aesthetic sensibility, we readily turn to the masters, and they do not yield their beauty of wisdom without painstaking effort."

To his mind, religion is to spirituality as the pieces of art and music are to our desire for creativity. While we can do it ourselves, we will not always, or even often, reach the same heights.

Prayers and Torah readings, rituals and practices, are like the prompts that help us write our essays. They do not replace our individual input, but sometimes they can help direct it, and if we are fortunate, help us find it within ourselves.