

Birkat HaBanim: Blessing our Children

For Boys or Girls we add:

May God make you like Ephraim and Menashe

יְשִׁימְךָ אֱלֹהִים כְּאַפְרַיִם וְכַמְנַשֶּׁה

May God make you like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel,
and Leah

יְשִׁימְךָ אֱלֹהִים כְּשָׂרָה רַבֵּקָה רָחֵל וְלֵאָה

We then recite the following blessing:

May HaShem bless you and protect

יְבָרְכֶךָ " וַיִּשְׁמְרֶךָ:
you

May HaShem shine a light upon you and be gracious to

יָאֵר " פְּנֵיו אֵלֶיךָ וַיַּחַנְךָ:
you

May HaShem see you favorably and grant you

יֵשָׂא " פְּנֵיו אֵלֶיךָ וַיִּשֶׂם לְךָ שְׁלוֹם:
peace

Alyssa Gray, My People's Prayer Book Vol. 7, pgs. 58; 63

Blessing children arose naturally as a sign of *shalom bayit* (peace in the home), the hallmark of Shabbat. The citation of Ephraim and Manasseh, Joseph's two sons, is particularly poignant. Sold by his brothers into slavery, Joseph had not seen his father for years. Genesis ends with them finally being reunited and Jacob joyfully blessing not only Joseph, but Joseph's children as well, the grandchildren whom he never expected to meet...

"*May HaShem...grant you peace*" This threefold Priestly Blessing with which God commanded Aaron and his sons to bless the Israelites (Num. 6:22-27) constitutes God's own example of an efficacious blessing, so it is particularly apt for Shabbat, when God too observed the primal day of rest (Gen. 2:2-3). In particular, the Priestly Blessing closes with the prayer that God's face be lifted and provides peace, an allusion to *shalom bayit* (Shabbat 23b).

Questions for further reflection:

1) What are the ways you intentionally try to bring peace into your home on Shabbat?

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- 2) How might blessing one's children mitigate any lingering family tension from the week?
- 3) If you could bless your children using your own words, what might you say?

Ellen Frankel, My People's Prayer Book Vol. 7, pgs. 58;63

The sources of these three blessings--Jacob's blessing over his grandsons, Ephraim and Manasseh; an invocation of the matriarchs, Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah; and Birkat Kohanim, the magical Priestly Blessing--are among the oldest words in our liturgy. Even today, when recited by parents, these words take on fresh currency and power.

For some families, however, these blessings evoke pain: the physical or emotional loss of children, the sting of barrenness, the lack or loss of a partner. In some families, children are not blessed but tolerated or abused. In others, parents are not permitted to bless but are blamed or rebuffed. Despite the risks of having children, the tradition teaches us that the blessings beckon more urgently than the risks. And so we bless our children with the words of our ancient forebears, who knew plenty of heartache from their own offspring.

Questions for further reflection:

- 1) How might our family dynamics alter the way in which we give blessings?
 - a) Follow-up: Is Shabbat the right moment/opportunity to try and repair fractured family units?
- 2) For those who have lost children, what are some ways we might welcome our child's memory into our homes and around our dinner tables, our most sacred space, on Friday evenings?
 - a) Follow-up: What do we think that might feel like?
- 3) For those of us who are unable to have children, or alternatively, do not wish to have children, what ritual might take the place of this blessing?
 - a) Follow-up: What in your life do you feel is your greatest legacy? What gives you joy and a sense of fulfillment that you can bless in your sacred spaces?